

A R Sturrock 1885 -1953

Introduction

Alexander Riddell Sturrock, always known as Alick was born at 26 Craigmillar Park in the Newington district of Edinburgh on 10 June 1885. Although he lived for much of his life in the city, Alick's roots were deep in the Borders countryside. His mother's family, the Riddells, had farmed at the Rink, a substantial farm by the Tweed between Selkirk and Galashiels since before 1850 and before that in the vicinity of the hamlet of Riddell. His father Alexander, who had come to Edinburgh to follow a career with the British Linen Bank, was the son of the Minister of the Original Secession Church at Midlem, near Selkirk.

Alick was the youngest of four children of Katherine and Alexander Sturrock and attended George Watson's College, leaving school in 1902 at the age of 17 to take an apprenticeship with a firm of lithographers. However, he soon began to take night classes at the old School of Art at the Mound. Later he attended the Royal Scottish Academy Life Class, where fellow students included the Dumfries born painter, Eric Robertson, A B Thomson and D M Sutherland, before enrolling at the new Edinburgh College of Art¹. It was at this time too, that he would have got to know Cecile Walton and Dorothy Johnstone and would have first met Mary Newbery.

In 1909 Alick had his first work accepted for exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy, *The Valley of the Ettrick*, a work, which recalls his Border roots and set his course as a painter of lowland landscapes. As his friend W O Hutchison wrote, "For him the wild and untamed had little attraction, his interests lay rather in the cultivated straths in and around the farms and in the homesteads of the pastoral lands."²

In 1911 he became a member of the Society of Scottish Artists and in 1912, Alick along with his Art School colleagues Hutchison, Robertson and Sutherland, as well as David Alison, J R Barclay, H A Cameron, W M Glass, J G Spence Smith, J W Somerville, exhibited as a group at Doig, Wilson and Wheatley's gallery on George Street. In 1913, the group probably minus David Alison but with Cecile Walton exhibited again, this time at the New Gallery in Shandwick Place.

In 1914 Alick won a travelling scholarship. He spent some time in London, where he admired Turner's work. He was also able to venture out into the countryside, "I had a long day's walking in Surrey and discovered that England has counties as paintable as Scotland."³ He then set off for the continent, finding "Venice more wonderful than I expected"⁴ and enjoyed Florence "especially the charming

¹ I am grateful to Ann Jones, archivist at Heriot - Watt University for references to Alick Sturrock in the College of Art archives

² Royal Scottish Academy Annual Report 1953

³ RSA Archives Letter to RSA 22/3/1914

⁴ Letter to RSA 13/5/1914

landscape and the villages in the neighbourhood.”⁵ It was while in Florence that fellow student G H (Harry) Paulin produced a fine bust of Alick. The trip also took in Munich, Paris and Amsterdam.

First World War

No sooner had Alick returned than war broke out and he joined the Royal Scots, rising to the rank of captain and being seriously wounded at Arras in 1917, after which he became involved in camouflage work. Friends such as Sutherland and Hutchison also joined up.

Letters from D M Sutherland to his mother during the war show that Sturrock, Sutherland and another friend Carrick kept in touch. Indeed, on one occasion Sutherland and Sturrock found themselves in the same hut in France and although Sutherland was a little put out that Sturrock was senior to him “Of course everyone recognises the absurdity of it. However, apart – I am very glad to see him and to revise old associations”.⁶ On another occasion he asked his mother to visit the Sturrocks as he had just heard that Alick’s father had died by the Ettrick.⁷ (On a fishing holiday at Tushielaw Inn)

It was while he was back in Britain in the last year of the war that Alick met up again with Mary Newbery, the younger daughter of Fra Newbery, the celebrated Head of the Glasgow School of Art. It had become the custom for painters such as the Glasgow Boys to spend the summer months painting in some attractive spot and later they would take their families on such vacations. E A Walton would stay at Wenhaston in Suffolk and Fra Newbery spent the summer in nearby Walberswick. Walton’s daughter Cecile (1891 –1956) and Newbery’s daughter Mary (1892 –1985) were just a year apart and became close friends. When Cecile married Eric Robertson in 1914, Eric’s friend Alick Sturrock was asked to be best man. When Cecile heard that Alick Sturrock was doing military work near where Mary was working it was Cecile who alerted Alick. They were married at Corfe Castle on 21 October 1918, where the Newberys had retired.

The Edinburgh Group

The War over, seven of the pre-war artists formed themselves into the Edinburgh Group. Dorothy Johnstone was added to the painter members and Mary Newbery became the applied arts member. They exhibited together at the new Gallery in Shandwick Place in 1919, 1920 and 1921. It was a close-knit group for, not only had Alick married Mary but Hutchison had married Margery Walton, Cecile’s sister and Sutherland was to marry Dorothy Johnstone in 1924.⁸

⁵ Letter to RSA 14/4/1914

⁶ NLS Acc 6599 D M Sutherland to his mother 31/3/1917

⁷ *ibid.*, 16/9/1917

⁸ For more information on the Edinburgh Group see John Kemplay *The Edinburgh Group*, 1983 and *The Two Companions*, his study of Cecile Walton and Eric Robertson, published in 1991

Their first show was well reviewed by E A Taylor in *The Studio*. Of Sturrock's work, Taylor wrote, "To find the same joys that Mr Sturrock interprets, one must seek them amongst the wide expanses of open country; for it is there on the great plains of moorland with their windswept skies that he finds his happiest inspiration. Simplicity and a charming colour harmony are perhaps his principal keynotes. An artist with a happy outlook he is in sympathy with all new movements, and one thing is certain about his work-there is no searching after popular insincerities."⁹

In 1921 Frederick Quentin writing in *The National Outlook* wrote, "Half Edinburgh goes to Shandwick Place secretly desiring to be righteously shocked, and the other half goes feeling deliciously uncertain it may be disappointed by not finding anything sufficiently shocking". E A Taylor, writing in *The Studio* drew attention to the individuality of Alick Sturrock's work, "there being a straightforwardness about his art which provokes no other comparison as to style, save with that which by his keen appreciation of Nature he has made his own". Taylor also noted that there was considerable improvement in the applied arts sector, "The principal exhibits being painted furniture, gesso work, and decorative drawings by Miss Mary Newbery (Mrs A R Sturrock)".¹⁰ In the 1922 exhibition¹⁸ of the 79 exhibits consisted of applied art by Mary Sturrock.

While there is no one Edinburgh style John Duncan was a strong influence in particular on Eric Robertson and Cecile Walton. Both Cecile and Mary were in admiration of Jessie King, who taught Cecile to draw with pen and ink. The influence of Charles Rennie Mackintosh is very clear in Mary Sturrock's flower painting.

Gatehouse of Fleet

In 1921 E A Walton, who had spent some summers at New Abbey took *Durweston* in Ann Street Gatehouse and invited Cecile and Eric from July to September. It was from the foot of the garden that Walton painted what is thought to be his last picture *The Clock Tower, Gatehouse*. The house, which later became part of the Cally Estate Office, was quite an artistic meeting place during the Walton family's stay. Among the visitors were Charles Oppenheimer, E A Taylor and Jessie M King, W S MacGeorge and Harry MacGregor¹¹. However, it was Eric and Cecile, who brought Edinburgh to Gatehouse, he painting the Fleet estuary and the Boreland wood and paving the way for Alick and Mary Sturrock.

⁹ *The Studio* 1920 **79** 88-98

¹⁰ *The Studio* 1921 **81** pp 196-197

¹¹ Information supplied by John Kemplay

In 1924 Alick, who to some extent took over the mantle of E A Walton, showed four pictures at the RSA, one of which was entitled *The Mill Pond, Gatehouse* and another *The Estuary of the Fleet*, the subject chosen by Eric Robertson a couple of years before. It therefore seems likely that the Sturrocks stayed in Gatehouse in 1923, possibly at Rutherford Cottage, Anwoth. Intriguingly, the minutes of the Gatehouse Golf Club for 31 July 1925 stated that the Secretary had received three pictures one from Mr Sturrock Edinburgh and two from Mr Hamish Paterson Edinburgh "both artists of repute."¹² The Sturrocks must have liked the town for in 1926 they bought a property in Hannay Street from the estate of the late Alexander Campbell, the local blacksmith and here they would live for the next seven years.

The local children knew Alick as Captain Sturrock, recalling his wartime military career. From 1928 to 1930 he was also captain of the Gatehouse golf club and it was in the former year that the Cally cup, presented by Miss Murray Baillie of Cally was first played for. During the time that Alick Sturrock was captain of the Golf Club, committee meetings were held in his studio. At a special meeting held in the studio on 15 May 1928, "Mr Sturrock intimated that he would present a picture to the male and female sections of the club for competition during the coming year. The committee thanked Mr Sturrock for his generous gift."¹³ He remained on the committee till 1933. We also see him in the centenary photograph of the Anwoth curling club taken in 1930. The captain of the club at that time was J Faed Sproat, son of John Faed's friend George Sproat.

Alick Sturrock is often remembered as someone who encouraged young artists. Each year he gave a prize at the local school for a flower drawing. The school log book records that on 24th June 1932, "Mr A R Sturrock adjudicated on drawings for his prize today (sloe, marigold, snowdrop)."¹⁴ *The Galloway News* reported that the winners were William McMurray and Edie McMurray. Doris Hood and Mary McClymont were highly commended.¹⁵

Flowers were the principal subjects of Mary Sturrock's work at this time, painting in a manner, which is strongly reminiscent of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's flower painting but becoming more naturalistic over the years. It was on a visit to Walberswick in 1914, where the Newberys had found Mackintosh and his wife lodgings that Mackintosh concentrated on flower painting and it was Mary who told him the Latin names.¹⁶ Mary was also an embroiderer, her mother Jessie Newbery having established the first class in that subject at the Glasgow School of Art in 1894. She was also a potter and, like her friend Jessie King she did ceramic painting. Years later, long after Alick died, Mary was much sought after as a source of information on Mackintosh.

¹² Gatehouse Golf Club Minute Book 1921-1943

¹³ *ibid* 15/5/1928

¹⁴ Ewart Library Gatehouse school log book 24/6/1932

¹⁵ *Galloway News* 2/7/1932

¹⁶ *Artists at Walberswick* p 65

Alick Sturrock built a large wooden studio in the garden of *Victoria Cottage*. It is here that he would work on his canvases based on his preliminary pencil and oil sketches done in the countryside, surrounding Gatehouse. When he was finishing *Bridge Over the Fleet*, a view from behind his house, he received a visit from Joyce McGlashan, the Free Church Minister's daughter. When she admired the work, he promised it to her for a wedding present. She thought no more of it but three years later, when wedding plans were announced, Alick appeared at the manse with the picture.¹⁷

Alick Sturrock's themes and colour range was limited: dark greens, greys, fawns and mauve predominating. Terre Verte was a favourite colour as a later caricature shows. To some extent influenced by the brothers John and Paul Nash, for him the composition was all-important and the ancient trees surrounding Little Boreland on the outskirts of the town provided many interesting subjects. As one commentator said, "He caught and simplified the rhythm of upflung foliage against the arch of the sky and tumbled cloud with a superb economy and assurance." The Sturrocks also found the Boreland wood a favourite picnicking spot.

In 1929 *The Glasgow Herald*, reporting that Alick Riddell Sturrock, Gatehouse of Fleet, had been elected an Associate Member of the Royal Scottish Academy noted, "Latterly he has made his headquarters at Gatehouse of Fleet, in a picturesque district of Galloway, where he has found plentiful material."¹⁸ From the 22 pictures shown at the RSA during the Sturrocks' time in Gatehouse most were local subjects but Dorset pictures of 1928 and 1930 show that he also visited the Newberys at Corfe Castle.

Alick's nieces remember visiting Gatehouse, although *Victoria Cottage* was too small to house the whole family. A letter from Fra Newbery to his daughter Elsie, shows that the Newberys also visited Gatehouse. Headed "Boatgreen, Sunday", the letter gives an insight into the local artistic community and Newbery's thoughts on one of his star pupils:

"My Darling Elsie
Paisley for "pleasure" and Gatehouse for gaiety. From the mansion to the cot. But having hearts in both. Alick met us in Kirkcudbright and from the same train with us, but not in the same carriage, stepped Jessie King newly come from Ireland via Castle Douglas. Husband Taylor and Merle, a big fat heavy looking girl were on the platform. We are booked to go back to the artistic folk some day this week"¹⁹

¹⁷ Information supplied by owner's family

¹⁸ *The Glasgow Herald* 21/3/1929

¹⁹ NLS Acc 6577 Fra Newbery to Elsie Lang nd. However, the text indicates that the letter was written in 1927. For more information on the Kirkcudbright artists see Patrick Bourne, ed *Kirkcudbright 100 Years of an artists' colony*

It was while the Sturrocks were living at Boatgreen that Dorothy Sayers stayed at the Anwoth Hotel, a stone's throw from *Victoria Cottage*. Her husband Atherton Fleming had been a regular visitor to the district before their marriage in 1926. It was in May and June 1928 and again in 1929 that they came to the Anwoth. Atherton Fleming was a fine photographer and amateur artist and a friend of James Paterson's son Hamish. Together Dorothy and her husband got to know many of the local artists. Although *The Five Red Herrings*, dedicated to Joe Dignam, landlord at the Anwoth, was written during a lengthy stay in Kirkcudbright, much of the action including the murder of the artist Campbell takes place in Gatehouse.

The book begins with the words; "If one lives in Galloway, one either fishes or paints."²⁰ Alick Sturrock was both painted and fished. One of the characters in the book was secretary of the golf club and Alick was, of course captain at the time. Just as Dorothy Sayers painted the local scenery in words so Alick Sturrock recorded some of the same scenes on canvas, notably the Clints of Dromore, which she describes as "Scarred and sheer and granite-grey, the gate of the wilderness and guardian barrier of the Fleet".²¹ Another feature, described by Dorothy Sayers was the granite crusher at Creetown "surrounded by great clouds of stone-dust, with a derrick sprawled across the sky and a tug riding at anchor."²² As Alick had shown *The Granite Crusher, Kirkmabreck* at the RSA exhibition of 1930 perhaps Dorothy Sayers had seen this work.

Return to Edinburgh

In 1934 Alick Sturrock sold *Victoria Cottage* to Mrs Ingles, widow of the Minister at Glenluce and he and Mary returned to Edinburgh, first to 2 Mansfield Place and then 13 South Grey Street. However, the record of paintings shown at the RSA suggests that the Sturrocks returned from time to time to Gatehouse, before, during, and after the Second World War.

On his return to Edinburgh Alick was elected to the Board of Management of Edinburgh college of Art. He was elected a full member of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1937 and from 1938 to 1947 he was the Academy's treasurer. He retained his interest in golf, becoming a member of the golf club at Kilspindie in 1937 and continued to fish. A press photograph shows him welcoming fellow artists including Hamish Paterson to the golf club. Another shows him with Charles Oppenheimer. His love of fishing is summed up in a letter from Lilliesleaf to Hastings at the RSA, "Carrick and I had a perfect day on a loch about 7 miles from here. A gentle breeze and fish rising all day - we did not catch as many as we should but it did not matter. We were very happy in such peaceful country."²³

²⁰ Dorothy L Sayers *Five Red Herrings* Chapter 1

²¹ *ibid* Chapter 27

²² *ibid* Chapter 2

²³ RSA Archives Sturrock to Hastings, assistant secretary RSA nd

Alick Sturrock liked to send humorous postcards to friends and family. One delightful example shows him fishing with David Alison, Head of Drawing and Painting at the Edinburgh School of Art and the sculptor Alexander Carrick. The Carricks had a cottage at Midlem and the Sturrocks stayed here and elsewhere in the village and at Lilliesleaf renewing his acquaintance with his family roots. He continued to visit Dorset, his diploma picture being *Westwood Farm, Dorset*. He also liked to paint around Orton near Penrith, while scenes about Edinburgh continued to provide inspiration.

Second World War

Alick Sturrock was particularly active in the Academy's educational schemes and maintained a close link with the students and younger painters, serving on the diploma committees at the Art college. His friend D M Sutherland was Head of Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen and W O Hutchison was Head of the Glasgow School of Art. In September 1939 Hutchison wrote to him about the possibility of the School doing work on camouflage.²⁴ A month later he wrote to him about the possibilities for artists during the war, expressing his concern that all decisions were taken in London.²⁵

Alick apparently got little support at first from the President of the Academy for he wrote to Hutchison, "I have received such a letter from Pirie this morning that I am struck dumb with its appalling attitude of "do nothing"- "art is useless in wartime."²⁶ However, Pirie put him in touch with Admiral Benson and plans were made to decorate the enormous canteen building. The work involved many artists including Hutchison, A B Thomson, Anne Redpath, Mary Armour and Mason Trotter, who was then living at Ravenshall near Gatehouse. Hutchison did a broadcast for the BBC on the project and a fully illustrated article in *The Studio*, written by Hutchison, describes Alick Sturrock as the prime mover of the project.²⁷ At the end of the war Alick wrote to the Commander in Chief's office at Rosyth on behalf of Hutchison and himself, "I think we will both look back on our connection with the Royal Navy and our visits to Rosyth with the happiest memories."²⁸

The Final Years

Alick Sturrock took an active part in the Society of Scottish Artists and from 1946 to 1948 was President of the Scottish Arts Club. He was one of the principal subjects of Hutchison's two fine portraits of club members, one, which hangs in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and the other in the club. He continued also to paint in Galloway. *Galloway Estuary* was exhibited at the RSA in 1951 and *Skyreburn Bay* in 1952. We know that he stayed near Gatehouse in 1951 as he

²⁴ Glasgow School of Art Archives W O Hutchison to A R Sturrock 23/9/1939

²⁵ *ibid* W O Hutchison to A R Sturrock 10/10/1939

²⁶ A R Sturrock to W O Hutchison 17/10/39

²⁷ *The Studio* **124** 1942 pp99-101

²⁸ RSA Archives (Rosyth) Sturrock to Captain Coltart 13/6/1945

wrote from The Old School house at Anwoth, "Meantime I am living in a delightful cottage with no telephone and no wireless and all is peace".²⁹

In the winter of 1952 Alick Sturrock became acting secretary of the RSA and in March of the following year he was elected Secretary but sadly he died two months later on holiday at St Abbs. As W O Hutchison, who by then had become President of the Academy wrote, "Mr Sturrock lived a full life." However, as Hutchison mentioned in his obituary notice and as those who knew Alick Sturrock recall, it was his support for younger painters that is particularly remembered.

²⁹ RSA Archives Sturrock to Margaret Foster, assistant secretary, RSA 12/9/1951