

Pen Picture of a Great Artist

Sir John Lavery's Kilkenny Connections

BY MRS. ALICE McENERY

ON Sunday, May 22, the Kilkenny Archaeological Society came to Kilmoganny—such a big gathering, it was like a Hunt Meet. After an interesting paper on Kilmoganny read by Mrs. W. J. Phelan in the village, off we went to Castlehale or Howel, as it used to be called. The Walsh Clan took over here and I learned more in 25 minutes about this historical spot than I had acquired in the 25 years I have been living here. Mr. Walsh wound up with a delightful surprise by giving me a beautiful little print of the old Castle Howel, which I will treasure always. Then we all came down to finish the day at Rossenarra.

Before I knew where I was I found myself conducting an impromptu Cooks' tour round the house. Most of the pictures in the house are by my step-father, Sir John Lavery. Many of them are little sketches that he did on his travels; he painted as other people play golf, or smoke or read or do gardening because he loved it. Painting was his greatest joy, only commissioned portrait painting was work to him, the rest was play, the breadth of life. Sometimes he tried going on a holiday without his paint box, invariably after two days or so the paint box was wired for, and when it arrived he was happy again.

His long suffering family knew it meant standing in the snow for hours or swinging a golf club without a ball to hit, or sitting motionless on a horse; often posing as several members of a crowd for crowds will not wait indefinitely for an artist to finish a picture, but there was always the family to fill the gaps. My step-father John Lavery, said that no landscape was complete without figures—the human interest. My mother and I never knew who, or where, we

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would be next; she was always most co-operative, but I was not so patient and was often heard to say wearily "Oh! mother is it not a pity we married an artist." All the same looking back it was a lot of fun—so vital, so varied an outlook inspired us all.

As I went round the house with the members of the Society, I realised, as never before, how versatile an artist John Lavery was; within the four walls of this house we have pictures of his, done in clear, strong colour in tones of one colour, portraits of men and women, landscapes, seascapes, interiors, groups and pageants in many countries and continents. It struck me that he surely used the talent and the time that God gave him to the full. He practically died with a brush in his hand, rising from his sick bed to paint his doctor, Dr. Jim Magennis, and his nurse.

He died here with us very peacefully, away from war, and one of the last things he said was 'So much to do, and so little time to do it.' He was 84 years of age.

John Lavery was born and baptised a Catholic in a North of Ireland farm, and he died in a South of Ireland farm, and his body was carried to the little Chapel in Kilmoganny on a hay car. May his soul rest in peace.

I think the best example of my step-father's work that I possess is a picture that hangs in the hall of my mother as a young widow, with me as a child, painted before my step-father married her about the year 1908. It is a very sombre picture, showing much Whistler influence, a study in black, but it is romantic and beautiful and not easily forgotten.

In the diningroom there is a fine study in white of a Moorish woman. It is forbidden to paint Moslem women, but our gardener, yielded to a bribe, and his wife proved well worthy to be immortalised. All the placid beauty of a people who believe "Haste is of the Devil," is written in her calm and gentle face; all the time she posed for him she kept her eyes cast down like a cloistered nun. He painted her that way and called the picture "The Moorish Madonna."

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My step-father was official painter to the Navy in the 1914-18 war, for which dangerous job he was Knighted. His portrait of Admiral Beatty (who was Admiral of the Fleet at the time the German Navy surrendered at Scapa Flow in 1918) hangs in the diningroom. John Lavery's pictures (a record of that time) are in the Imperial War Museum in London.

There is a self portrait done from a mirror reflection of the artist as a young man, and a schoolgirl portrait of myself with a very handsome Pekinese dog hanging in the dining-room. There are also several other paintings by my step-father in the house.

At Rossenarra there are also two small early pictures by Jack Yeats, whose work is in top fashion just now and a Sargeant drawing of my mother.

One of the first pictures by Sean Keating (now President of the R.H.A.) hangs in the drawingroom. It was awarded first prize by my step-father, who acted as adjudicator in a competition for young artists many years ago, and time has shown how right he was in giving Sean Keating first place. My step-father bought the picture after adjudication.

We finished up with a portrait of a little girl by Harrington Mann, an American artist, now dead, who had a rare and special gift for painting children. There are also a couple of little drawings by Joseph Crawhall (Glasgow School, like Lavery) whose work is very much valued today. He worked mother from memory. He died young.

There are three pieces of sculpture by Rodin, two bronzes and a marble. There is a trout in Connemara marble by Albert Power.

There is a life mask of John Lavery in the house which I forgot to show the visitors.

It was a labour of love to show and talk about John Lavery's work to such a kind and appreciative audience as the Kilkenny Archaeological Society proved to be.