

To Malta in the foot-steps of my grandfather H M Bateman 1887-1970

My grandfather was arguably the most innovative cartoonist of the early 20th century. As an artist myself I have, for years, pored over his sketch-books and cartoons but only recently have I really started to appreciate his other work - the serious paintings.

Whilst he was a household name as a cartoonist he was completely unknown as a painter. As well as his cartoonist buddies at the London Sketch Club – Heath Robinson, Fougasse and others - he was also friends with such eminent painters as George Clausen, Lucian Pissaro and Philip Connard. He had a lifelong ambition to become a ‘real artist’ like them and at the age of forty, and at the height of his fame, he decided to retire from cartooning and pursue this aim, as he’d hankered to do since his early art school training. He took his painting equipment out into the English countryside and also began to travel abroad in search of inspiring subject matter.

A genius in his own field of cartoons he struggled modestly for the rest of his life to master the art of colour and light, continually experimenting with different techniques. It’s extraordinary that a man who had expressed such extremes of emotion, even violence, in his use of line could produce paintings of such gentle serenity as *Fishing Boats, Mgarr*.

When I decided to go and paint in Malta and Gozo last year I had a strong ulterior motive: grandpa had spent his last five years there and I had recently come across a number of his paintings of the islands, unspoilt as they were in the late 1960s. The pictures were unsigned, un-dated and gave no hint of location. Clearly he had little or no expectation of them ever being exhibited.

I planned to identify the specific scenes he had painted and to see how they looked now – maybe paint them myself. It involved considerable sleuth work but I was aided and abetted by some very enthusiastic Maltese and Gozethans. The folder of images I took with me was passed from hand to hand until someone recognised the view in question, with a sudden expression of delight.

On my first morning in Gozo, before breakfast, I climbed the steps behind the hotel, built on the site of The Royal Lady Hotel where my grandfather had lived out his days. There I saw a man mending fishing nets, sitting on the ground exactly as grandpa had painted fishermen 40 years before. I asked if he had, by any chance, known an elderly English painter, seen about Mgarr in the late nineteen 60s. He thought not, but then something jogged his memory - at the age of 14, he had been walking home one evening when he came across the body of a man with a little white beard, lying in the lane. We have always known that my grandfather had quietly expired, aged 82, whilst out walking.

It was a powerful connection to make within hours of my setting foot on the island. Later he showed me the view of St Anthony’s Church from his roof, exactly as grandpa had painted it from the roof of The Royal Lady.

I met others who had known him: boat-builders who had chatted to him, out painting every day; his doctor who recalled the impromptu cartoon of the two of them, drawn

on his prescription pad. Most rewarding of all was the response to the paintings themselves, which have been hailed in Valetta as a rare and precious record of a bygone era on the islands: the brightly coloured houses, the fleets of extravagantly painted fishing boats and the donkey carts, now all but gone.

Lucy Willis February 2012

Exhibitions:

H M Bateman: The Malta Years
Abbott and Holder, 30 Museum St, London WC1A 1LH
Tel: 020 7637 3981 Email: gallery@abbottandholder.co.uk
May 11th - May 31st 2012
www.abbottandholder.co.uk

Lucy Willis: Malta & Gozo in her Grandfather's Footsteps
Curwen & New Academy Gallery, 34 Windmill St, London W1T 2JR
Tel: 020 73234700 Email: gallery@curwengallery.com
May 10th - 30th 2012
Lucy Willis talk May 19th 2pm
www.curwengallery.com

H M Bateman: The Man Who Went Mad on Paper
The Cartoon Museum, 35 Little Russell St, London WC1A 2HH
Tel: 020 7580 8155 Email: thecartoonmuseum@btconnect.com
April 11th – July 22nd 2012
www.thecartoonmuseum.org.uk