

LECTURE

Kyffin Williams & R S Thomas – Attitudes to Wales and to Faith

Some of you here tonight will probably be thinking that to speak about a poet and an artist in the same lecture is a bit like comparing apples to oranges, especially from somebody who cannot claim to be either an artist or poet. Now, I know that bishops of past generations were great patrons of the arts and indeed employed both poets and artists, but I am afraid those days are long gone – Ichabod, the glory has departed. And as I said when I opened the summer exhibition at the Royal Cambrian Academy one year, when Kyffin was its president, I never ever got more than 20% for my artwork and to the relief of my teachers, gave it up in my second year at grammar school. The only comment I ever got was *“Will never be any good but tries his best”*. So I am no artist and have never tried to write poetry.

So then, why speak about an artist and poet? Well, both were famous Welshmen, one born in Llangefni and the other in Cardiff; both had an enormous affinity and love for Wales, its landscape and history, especially North Wales and they both lived at different times in Chirk, on the Lleyn peninsula, Meirionnydd and Anglesey and they were born within a few years of one another – R S Thomas in 1913 so it is his centenary year and Kyffin in 1918. Both lived into their 80's. R S was 87 when he died in 2000 and Kyffin was 88 when he died in 2006. They of course knew one another, but apparently, did not talk about either poetry or art just about rugby and birds! Both lived frugal lives without benefit of much comfort. Pwllfanogl could hardly be described as luxurious, and R S lived most of his life without fridge, or TV, the electric cleaner was never used because it was too noisy and he ripped out the central heating in Rhiw for the same reason.

More personally, they were people whom I admired from a distance as I grew up in a mining village in South Wales. I never thought that I

would ever meet them, or if at least I did, that I would get to know them but I was privileged to do so as Bishop of Bangor and officiated at both their funerals. Both wanted simple ones. RS got one, in the small Pentrefelin church at the end of the lane in which he lived. There was no music, no hymns and no homily on his instructions. Kyffin would have preferred a simple service at Llanfair yng Nghornwy, but the burial there was preceded by a service at Bangor Cathedral. I had to persuade him that a service of that nature was required.

Kyffin sketched a portrait of RS after the latter's retirement (**need to display the portrait**). "*Look at it*" said RS to me once "*It makes me look very miserable*". I am afraid I gave him little consolation when I said that at times he did appear to be so. All I got by way of a reply was "*Humph*". Ironically, RS Thomas was married for the second time in Llanfair yng Nghornwy, where Kyffin is buried. Kyffin's great grandfather had been the rector there.

As I think of them both, I am reminded of the lines in RS Thomas *"The Echoes Return Slow"*

"But this one, had he ever been anything but solitary"

and of Kyffin's admission that when he was at Trearddur Bay School and Shrewsbury, he was always a loner. Nicholas Sinclair, Kyffin's godson, quotes Kyffin when he says that *'there was a mood that touches the seam of melancholy that is in most Welshmen, a melancholy that derives, from the dark hills and heavy clouds and enveloping sea mists.'* Melancholic might well have been a description of many for RS as well.

Writing poetry and painting are solitary occupations and one thinks of RS spending every morning writing poetry and of Kyffin either in his studio or out walking the mountains sketching and painting. Both were

great nature lovers and RS spent his afternoons walking and bird watching and gaining inspiration for his poetry.

Both RS and Kyffin give the lie to the attack made on Wales by A N Wilson in the London Evening Standard once when he said *“The Welsh are held in universal derision. They have never made any significant contribution to any branch of knowledge or culture. Choral singing, usually flat, seems to be their only artistic attainment. They have no architecture, no gastronomic tradition, and since the Middle Ages, no literature worthy of the name. Even their religion Calvinistic Methodism is boring”*.¹ It simply shows up Wilson’s ignorance, for here were two giants in their respective fields.

RS, of course, was no stranger to art. Mildred Eldridge, his first wife, was a very talented painter and a Fellow of the Royal Watercolour Society (he called her Elsi) and been to the Royal College of Art. I have

¹ Obsessed p.202

one of her paintings **(Kingfishers - show painting)**. As he says in his autobiography, *“The girl he had started to court was a recognised artist with experience of art school in London and also in Italy. Looking at her paintings, he identified with the artistic life. She had already exhibited her work in galleries in London and he too yearned to prove himself in the field”*.²

She was a well known artist long before he became a well known poet.

Eldridge’s great mural, *“The Dance of Life”*, painted for the orthopaedic hospital in Gobowen, has now been loaned to the University of Glyndwr in Wrexham. It consists of six panels painted in oil on canvas, telling the story of humanity’s alienation from nature and the attempt to reclaim a lost, natural wisdom. It has images of plants, animals, birds, the countryside and the sea. As M Wynn Thomas in his latest book on RS, *“RS Thomas Serial Obsessive”* says *“His poetry existed in a complex symbiotic relationship with her painting, and her distinguished*

² *Autobiographies*, translated J Walford-Davies p.45

work as an artist was to help Thomas develop his own distinctive interest in visual art”³.

His wife’s attention to detail of birds and plants helped RS in his observation of the natural world. *“Quite simply, she helped him to look at things”* writes one commentator. He referred to some of his wife’s paintings in his *Selective Prose 1982* on chapels such as Maes yr Onnen and Soar y Mynydd but, ironically, did not possess any of her paintings after her death.

She produced more than 2,000 finished pictures, in oil and watercolour, and regularly exhibited at the Medici and Beaux Art galleries in London and her work as an artist for Athena cards helped finance the household. Her son credits her with resurrecting the art of fine detail natural history studies and she illustrated children’s books, as well as being a sculptor.

³ p.39

RS wrote a number of stirring poems about paintings, following other poets such as Seamus Heaney, Dave Smith, Derek Mahon, W H Auden, Euros Bowen, Christine James, Tony Conran, Gillian Clarke, but as Wynn Thomas points out, RS *“was participating (no doubt unaware and most uncharacteristically) in a popular even fashionable modern trend of writing poems about paintings”*⁴

In his volume entitled *“Between Here and Now”*, he wrote poems about 33 impressionist paintings chosen from a book by Germaine Bazin *“Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre”*. These contain landscapes, seascapes and portraits of various kinds but almost half of them have women as their subject. According to Elaine Shepherd in her book *“RST Conceding an Absence”* *“he found paintings by the impressionists particularly useful in focussing a response to women”*.⁵

⁴ p.264

⁵ p.12

These were artists such as Monet, Degas and Renoir (**show some of these – La Promenade – Monet; Two Dancers Resting – Degas; The Sleeper - Renoir**).

Wynn Thomas says that in these poems RS explores womanhood in an intense way *“belatedly doing what came naturally since from the beginning his own poems had been strong in graphic and painterly qualities”*⁶

Wynn Thomas goes on to argue that his painting poems have been largely ignored simply because there are not many of them in comparison with, for example, his poems about farmers and about God. He writes about art:

*“Art is recuperation
from time”*⁷

⁶ p.264

⁷ Between Here and Now p.41

“Art is a sacrament

in itself”⁸

“Exchanging

progress without a murmur

for the leisureliness of art”⁹

“A doctor

becoming patient himself

of art’s diagnosis”¹⁰

So, he sees art as many things – a leisure time activity but also something sacred and spiritual and revealing something profound about human existence. But again as Wynn Thomas points out, when poems are written about paintings, what is being addressed is the

⁸ p.59

⁹ p.33

¹⁰ p.63

representation of a representation which involves the production of art about the art of art.

And of course, just as one can read a poem and read into it layers of meaning which were either not intended or indeed thought of by the poet, so too it is possible to look at a work of art and see things the artist may never have intended and according to Wynn Thomas, RS frequently does so.

Thus, in *“Portrait of a Young Woman”* (**figure 9 in Wynn Thomas, show Degas’ Portrait of a Young Woman here**), he ignores Degas, the artist’s intention, and says:

*“I imagine he intended
other things; tonal
values, the light and shade
of her cheek.*

To me innocence

Is its meaning”¹¹

And then he says:

“Her young being

waits to be startled

by the sweetness in roughness

of hands that

with permitted boldness

will remove her bark

to show how under smooth a

tree temptation can shelter”.

RS, in his poem imagines how this young girl can rouse sexual feelings

in a male onlooker but implies that somehow she is waiting to be

aroused as well. Wynn Thomas claims that in RS’s poems about women

¹¹ Between Here and Now p.21

*“there is scarcely a poem in which RS addresses a female subject when he is not sexually troubled in one way or another”.*¹²

Toulouse Lautrec’s *“Jane Avril Dancing”* evokes these lines:

*“showing the knees
by which some might gain entrance to heaven”*¹³

**(show this painting from Elaine Shepherd – Jane Avril Dancing –
Toulouse Lautrec)**

In Mary Cassatt’s (see Elaine Shepherd) picture of a young woman sewing, he writes of the red flowers surrounding her: **(show picture –
Young Woman Sewing – Mary Cassatt)**

*“an indication of the arrival
of her period to come”*¹⁴

¹² p.282

¹³ Between Here and Now p.67

It becomes for him a sexual poem.

Of course, I do not know what Kyffin Williams' feelings were as he drew and painted women but I do not get the impression of repressed sexuality (show *Yolanta and Mrs Rowlands*). Kyffin, although unmarried, was totally at ease in the company of women and some of the women he knew were utterly devoted to him. During his last illness, he would never have gone hungry, as casserole after casserole was brought to him. Ironically, RS too was very comfortable in the presence of women and enjoyed their company.

If RS interpreted great art in his own way, he himself did not mind people reading his poems in whichever way they wanted. After one such reading at the University Church in Cambridge, he had supper at which the then Bishop of Ely, Peter Walker, was also present and he

¹⁴ Between Here and Now p.55

was a great lover of poetry. The bishop asked him *“Can you tell me the meaning of this poem?”* and he rehearsed a few lines of one of RS’ poems. *“It is as it reads”* said RS perversely; *“But it can mean a whole host of things”* replied the bishop. *“The poem is the poem”* said RS. *“So there is no explanation then”*, said the bishop; *“certainly not from me”* replied RS.

A number of Welsh artists paid visual tribute to Thomas’ poetry by producing a number of paintings based on a selection of his poems at Oriel Plas Glyn y Weddw in 1995 and reproduced in a book entitled R S Thomas’ *“Inspiration”*. These were famous artists such as David Tress, Donald McIntyre, Tony Goble, William Selwyn, Gwilym Pritchard and Peter Prendergast – and, of course, they interpreted his verse in their own particular ways – some of it in abstract form.

Kyffin, of course, never claimed to be a poet but he did write limericks.

I am not sure what RS thought of them:

“A funny old fellow called Sam,

Said yes I will if I can,

If I find that I can’t

I suppose that I shan’t

A very perplexing old man”

And there are, of course, his limericks about Crawshay Bailey – *“The Boyo Ballads”* published in 1995:

“Crawshay Bailey’s brother Dic

Was at shooting very quick

But in trying to shoot much quicker

Shot Aneurin Jones the vicar.”

Kyffin illustrated these limericks and regarded the illustrated book as a bit of light relief and lunacy. Kyffin admitted that it wasn't the done thing for artists to illustrate such light verse adding "*Awful snobs in the art world, they drive me round the bend*".¹⁵ Kyffin claimed that he liked poetry but always had a headache when reading it.

There is no doubt that RS had a rather difficult relationship with his mother for he wrote about it often enough. He never quite forgave her for not teaching him to speak Welsh and he found her over bearing and dominant. He often referred to his mother's presence as being rather negative and his prose and his poems are peppered with references to her possessiveness.

In his autobiography, he recounts the agonising story of leaving for university and experiencing his mother's desperate sense of loss.

¹⁵ Obsessed p.65

In Ap Huw's testament in *"Poetry for Supper"*, he writes:

"My mother gave me the breast's milk

Generously, but grew mean after,

Envyng me my detached laughter.

My father was a passionate man,

Wrecked after leaving the sea

In her love's shallows. He grieves in me".

His father, a Welsh Merchant Seaman, was for him a figure of love and longing whom he refers to with yearning:

"He drifted

away on the current

of his breath, further and further,

out of hail of our love"¹⁶

¹⁶ Sailors Hospital

His father aroused in him a longing for place, particularly for Wales and Welshness. His father was often absent at sea or in later years was more or less inaccessible because of his deafness. RS tells the story of how, when he was a young boy, living in Liverpool, at the beach at Hoylake, his father directed his attention to the mountains far away to the West – *“That’s Wales”* he said.

Kyffin too believed that he had inherited from his grandfather via his mother *“A certain neurosis that gives an element of melancholia to my portraits and loneliness to my landscapes”*¹⁷

Both Kyffin’s parents spoke Welsh. However, Kyffin observes, *“My mother would not speak Welsh because she thought it was rather infra dig to speak Welsh but my father loved it”*.¹⁸ Kyffin preferred his father, like RS, from whom he learnt sociability and affability because his father loved people and was a bank manager.

¹⁷ Obsessed p.20

¹⁸ Obsessed p.21

When Kyffin's grandfather, a priest, baptised him, it was in English, only the second time for him to have used English in the whole of his career – the first time when Kyffin's elder brother Dick had been baptised. His mother banned the use of Welsh in the house, which Kyffin regarded as brainwashing, for it meant he said *"If anybody outside the home spoke Welsh to me, I would automatically switch off"*¹⁹ Yet he spoke the language fluently and used it extensively.

In fact, Vaughan Hughes in reviewing the book *"Kyffin, His Life and His Land"* in Barn said that had Kyffin not been able to speak Welsh, he would not have obtained the co-operation of the Gwerin – the monoglot Welsh farmers he immortalised in his paintings.

RS Thomas, of course, came to speak Welsh fluently and wrote his autobiography in Welsh but only after learning the language later in

¹⁹ Obsessed p.21

life. He regretted bitterly that he could not write poetry in Welsh and did not regard his Welsh prose writing as making up for it. Kyffin would recite poetry in Welsh and most of his paintings in oil and ink wash had Welsh titles. *“Rhayadr Cwm Glas, Gwastadnant, Fedw Fawr”* and as David Meredith points out in his book, Kyffin once said *“I paint in Welsh”*.²⁰

But just as in RS’s case with his own mother, it wasn’t just the fact that Kyffin’s mother forbade him to speak in Welsh that made for a difficult relationship. He believed his mother had little time for him, and much preferred his brother Dick. His mother had sent him to a wet nurse for the first year of his life, a farmer’s wife in Llanfechell. Kyffin said of his mother in 2005, *“My mother basically was a very affectionate person, but she didn’t think it ever right to be affectionate. So I was brought up without any cuddling or kisses or anything like that. It was very sad for*

²⁰ Obsessed p.22

*my mother. She just could not do it.”*²¹ RS’s mother, on the other hand, smothered him with love and he felt suffocated by it.

Hurt by his mother, Kyffin sought to understand her. RS too, before his death, came to believe that he had judged his mother too harshly.

Kyffin became an artist almost by accident. He had always wanted to join the army. At Shrewsbury from 1931 – 36, he played the bugle in a military band and went with the Officers Training Corps to a camp in Wiltshire. He joined the 6th Battalion of Welch Fusiliers. Because of his epilepsy, however, he was invalided out of the army, much to his regret. The army doctor told him, *“Williams, as you are in fact abnormal, I think it would be a good idea if you took up art”*. He was at home amongst the military **(show Chelsea Pensioner here)**

²¹ Obsessed p.146

RS, of course, was never much enamoured with the military, joining the CND and when he was vicar of Eglwys Fach, was appalled to discover that there were quite a few retired army officers living there who were not used to having a nationalist, a pacifist and a poet as their parish priest.

As he said in the *“Echoes Return Slow”*²² when the English colonised a parish, they regarded their vicars as a kind of chaplain to the officers’ mess. So he writes:

*“I move
to a new partner, polishing
my knuckles, dazzled by the medals
he has left off. Once
in the sand it had been his club
against my fishnet. Here we exchange
insults civilly.”*²³

²² p.52

He continues:

*“And this one with his starched lip,
his medals, his meanness;
his ability to live cheap off dear things.”*

But if Kyffin became an artist because of his epilepsy, RS’s route to ordination was also unusual. His anglicised Anglican mother, who had grown up in her brother’s clerical household, encouraged him in his calling as a priest. He himself admitted that his call to ordination was a bit unorthodox since at the time he didn’t go to church regularly. He wrote in his autobiography: *“His mother saw that her son had no strong objection to the idea of being a candidate for Holy Orders”*.²⁴ He interpreted that wryly as God calling people in mysterious ways.

²³ Echoes Slow Return p.53

²⁴ p.35

And just as Kyffin had hated his boarding school at Shrewsbury so RS hated St Michael's Theological College Llandaff. Kyffin had been unable to make friends at Shrewsbury and because of his smallness, could not participate in rugby. *"I never had a friend at Shrewsbury, not one boy would really have anything to do with me"*.²⁵ Some of his teachers regarded him as stupid. He hated the puerile traditions of the school, the elimination of any vestige of a regional accent, accompanied by beatings if not successful.

Of his time at St Michael's, RS wrote *"He yearned for the life and background of the North. There was nowhere to go for a walk except along a main road. There were no mountains, no open ground. Worse still, the year was divided into four terms which meant that he had to return in the middle of the summer to complete the fourth. Neither the college nor the routine appealed to him at all. After the hostel at Bangor, the buildings are old fashioned, the food uninteresting, the*

²⁵ Obsessed p.43

chapel nothing but some prefabricated hut and the warden effeminate.

*The students did not take the college seriously.”*²⁶

What of their attitudes to faith and religion?

Many of Kyffin’s forebears were Anglican clergy on both sides of the family. As he put it *“There is hardly a parish in this square of Amlwch, Llangefni, Holyhead and Llanfair yng Nghornwy in which we have not held the living at some time in the last 200 years”*.²⁷

His grandfather, Owen Lloyd Williams, was Canon Chancellor of Bangor Cathedral and Rector of Llanrhuddlad. His grandfather married the daughter of the rector of Llanystumdwy John Kyffin and his uncle – his father’s brother, was rector of Coedana in Anglesey. His mother was the daughter of the rector of Llansadwrn so the whole family was involved in some way or other in the religious life of Anglesey.

²⁶ Autobiography p41-42

²⁷ Obsessed p.15

According to David Meredith, Kyffin often mentioned that he was not religious. He said that he was not a believer although he enjoyed singing in the Shrewsbury School Chapel Choir on a Sunday and its atmosphere of security gave him respite. He also enjoyed being dressed in his white surplice and rich red cassock and felt at ease in this ornate and beautifully built place of worship.

Kyffin was once walking with someone along the sea shore when they saw a notice saying that the land between the high water mark and low water mark belonged to the Crown and the land above the high water mark belonged to the Local Authority. Kyffin growled "*I thought it all belonged to God*" and they climbed through the fence regardless.

He considered Christianity as basically a good religion, admitting that he had never really been a true Christian. "*I never really understood what worship was all about*" he claimed. He associated the word

“worship” only with the adoration of women. He said that his school chaplain had put him off the Christian faith during confirmation classes.

He claimed to experience greater emotional and even religious feeling exploring the mountains of North Wales. These were to him far more rewarding than the confines of any church. To him, God’s beauty was all around, to be seen freely and not interpreted with what he saw as prejudice.

There are echoes here of RS Thomas who said that God revealed Himself to him more through the beauty of the natural world than through people. In this poem *“The Moor”* he writes:

“It was like a church to me.

I entered it on soft foot,

Breath held like a cap in the hand.

It was quiet.

*What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over the grass.*

*There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's possession – that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.”²⁸*

And elsewhere:

“God is in the throat of a bird ...

²⁸ CP166

God is in the sound of the white water

Falling at Cynfal ... In the flowers

In the wild hare”.

Kyffin’s faith, in spite of his disclaimers, seemed straightforward and simple whereas RS Thomas’ was an anguished one; so much so, that some people have accused him of being an atheist. He was far from being that but whilst believing in God, did not avoid any of the hard questions that such a belief entails. He said that it was not the being of God he questioned but the nature of God in a world full of cruelty and chance. There was also the problem of his seeming absence and hiddenness – questions which mystics had also posed.

Like many others, he had difficulty with prayer and saw it more as a waiting, listening and receiving from God, seeking to do His will rather than demanding things from God as if one were presenting him with a shopping list of requests.

So he asks and writes:

*“Teach me to know,
what to pray for”.*²⁹

*“I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.”*³⁰

*“Genes and molecules
Have no more power to call
Him up than the incense of the Hebrews
At their altars”.*³¹

²⁹ CP270

³⁰ Via Negativa

"I listen

instead and hear the language

of silence ..."

"The darkness implies your presence ...

It is not your light that

Can blind us; it is the splendour

*Of your darkness"*³²

Awe was the necessary feeling in relating to God according to RS, and forming a relationship with Him was the most important thing in a person's life and the poetry in the latter part of his life was devoted to pursuing this quest for God who at times revealed himself,

"Such a fast God, always ahead of us and leaving just as we arrive"

(Pilgrimages)

³¹ CP361

³² CP343

Or

*"It is when one is not looking that it comes."*³³

And

"His are the echoes

we follow, the footprints he has just

*left".*³⁴

It is obvious the poet spent hours in church seeking a relationship with God and was sometimes rewarded. As he himself said *"If there was no God, there would be no possibility of finding Him"*. Religion to him was *"the response of the whole person to reality, and poetry the imaginative presentation of it"*.

Kyffin did not usually paint religious paintings but he did do some and he says that the first picture to make a real impact on him and to show

³³ CP306

³⁴ CP220

him what art was all about, was *"The Resurrection"* by Piero Della Francesca. Others who had influenced him had also painted religious themes such as Botticelli, Crivelli, Rembrandt. But Van Gogh who was not a religious painter, probably had the greatest influence on him.

Above the fireplace in his living room, was an ornate carving by Jonah Jones on Llanberis slate, of a quotation from the Psalm 42 in Welsh:

"Fel y brefa yr hydd am yr afonydd dyfroedd

Felly yr hiraetha fy enaid amdanat ti".

"As the heart longeth after the water brook so longeth my soul after

thee O God". He would not have had such a verse in his living room had

faith not played some part of his life. It was the late Bishop Michael

Ramsey who said *"sometimes it is enough simply to want to want God"*

but Kyffin was not a conventional church goer.

RS, of course, in spite of his tortuous relationship with God, and in spite of the fact that he felt it was impossible to understand God fully, for what human being ever could, nevertheless felt that *“without him, there was an emptiness of his whole being”*. He returns again and again in his poetry to the quest for God and is regarded by many as the writer of the finest body of religious poems in the twentieth century.

For RS however, God did reveal Himself in Jesus, in as full a way as it is possible for God to reveal Himself in a human person, and that revelation shows Him to be a God of love. Thus:

*“He kneeled long,
and saw love in a dark crown
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
Golden with fruit of a man’s body”.*³⁵

³⁵ In a Country Church CP67

*“Not the empty tomb
but the uninhabited
cross. Look long enough
and you will see the arms
put on leaves. Not a crown
of thorns, but a crown of flowers
haloing it, with a bird singing
as though perched on paradise’s threshold”.*³⁶

After a concert by the violinist Kreisler, who strained every muscle to produce great music, the poet compares this with Jesus’ suffering:

*“who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.
So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns’ halo:*

³⁶ Cross of Jesus C37

....

*The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still ...
it was himself that he played”³⁷*

*“You have answered
us with the image of yourself
on a hewn tree, suffering
injustice, pardoning it”.³⁸*

*“This Christmas before
an altar of gold
the holly will remind
us how love bleeds”.³⁹*

³⁷ CP 104

³⁸ MHT46

³⁹ Res 47

The religious paintings of Kyffin are of Jesus, **(show my three paintings in the chapel here)** so that for him too it is through Jesus that God is revealed, but he also painted churches. **(Show – Llangwyfan, Capel Carmen; Chapel at Dinorwic; The Church and Cottages Aberffraw)**

RS Thomas was not comfortable in the presence of gentry, the military or people who hunted, although his son, Gwydion, claims that he aspired to be a country gentleman. Kyffin was very relaxed in the company of such people. Both men in their different ways were, however, anti the establishment. Kyffin fought long and hard against the art establishment and had some pretty harsh things to say about it.

“At the moment, art is in such a terrible state, it is at some sort of crossroads; there is a conscious attempt by evil minded people to destroy all tradition in art, because they believe that tradition is holding the future of art back. What these idiots do not understand is that art, or the tradition in art, is the outward expression of humanity and they

*are trying to kill humanity and there is no humanity in what is considered to be the new art of today".*⁴⁰

He deplored the fact that public money was wasted on garden sheds and unmade beds which he compared with throwing money into the Irish Sea from the cliff face at South Stack in Anglesey; he derided art exhibitions at the Mostyn Art Gallery in Llandudno which consisted of two flickering television monitors in a large empty room showing similar scenes of inane objects, performing inane acts, empty of meaning. He also despaired of the deteriorating standards at the annual Arts & Crafts Exhibition of the Eisteddfod.

The Wales Art Advisory Committee of the National Museum on which he sat, turned down his advice for purchasing a painting by Gwen John because they felt she was of little worth and he had clashes in the 70's and 80's with the Welsh Arts Council and with Peter Jones, its Arts

⁴⁰ "Kyffin in Venice" 2006

Director. He eventually resigned from the Board of Management of the Mostyn Art Gallery in Llandudno.

When he was asked to be an art judge at the National Eisteddfod at Cardigan, it was only to judge the children's art competition. An artist from abroad was brought in to adjudicate the main work. And in Dr Mike Stephens' obituary in *"The Independent"*, he said that *"The Welsh Arts Council had neglected Kyffin for many years"*.

RS Thomas too clashed with those in authority. Throughout his time as a priest in the Bangor Diocese, Gwilym Williams was bishop and later archbishop. Here was an archbishop with a First in English and a First in Theology who had this brilliant poet in his diocese and the two simply did not get on. When RS retired at the age of 65, he offered to look after his former parish of Aberdaron, without a stipend, whilst continuing to live in the vicarage. The bishop refused, even though RS need not have retired until he was 70.

At Bangor, I came across a record of a diocesan court which Bishop Gwilym, had asked his chancellor to hold. RS had apparently not received a certificate of banns from a young man, on the morning of his wedding, showing they had been called, as was required by law in both Aberdaron and the man's church. RS had ascertained from the groom's friends, however, that the banns had indeed been called in the man's parish and so had gone ahead with the wedding. It was not enough for the bishop, who got his chancellor to come from Essex, and a court was held in the churchyard at Aberdaron one Saturday morning. RS was chastised for not having got the certificate of banns but since he had gone to the trouble of discovering that they had been called, he received only a mild rebuke from the chancellor. I expect the bishop had decided to invoke such a procedure because RS probably flouted Episcopal authority in all kinds of ways.

He once said *“I always thought there was something wrong with a chap’s head if he wanted to become a Bishop”*. (I think, however, the episode shows how pastorally caring RS could be. He could have refused to marry the man concerned but did not. It is worth remembering that, because he has been accused of being uncaring towards his parishioners).

I remember the first time I met him when I was the Archdeacon of Meirionnydd and went to sympathise with him on the death of his first wife. He told me that he had spent his life avoiding people like me but then invited me in to have tea with him. He had never been asked to read his poetry in any church in Wales and I persuaded him, or rather his second wife persuaded him, to read it at Bangor Cathedral when I was bishop. She told me afterwards that the reception I gave after it, at the bishop’s house, had been a kind of healing experience. He felt, as it were, that he had been acknowledged and accepted. (Rumour has it,

that he burned his cassock after retirement. He did, however, attend church regularly.)

Landscape of Wales:

There is no doubt that Kyffin and RS were passionate about the landscape of North Wales and it was this landscape, both confessed, which fired their imaginations. The places which inspired Kyffin's work were the cliffs of South Stack in Anglesey, where RS had spent his boyhood; Eifionydd and the Llyn where Kyffin had spent part of his childhood and where RS spent the latter part of his ministry. Kyffin, however, said that the real foundation of his art began when he lived in Pentrefelin between Cardigan Bay and Cwm Pennant, with Moel y Gadair in front of his house and Llyn to the west. It was the village to which RS finally retired.

Kyffin, of course, was born in Anglesey and spent the latter part of his life at Pwllfanog where he could view the Eryri range. He said "*I often*

*visit South Stack to watch the sea birds and wonder at the primeval convulsions that created the distorted bands of rock. The geology of Anglesey is even more fascinating than its natural history”.*⁴¹ Kyffin plastered oil thickly on canvases, giving his paintings depth and engendering a feeling of awe. He was what Anthony Jones called “*an emotional and gutsy artist – aggressive expressionistic handling of thick piles of paint to make a surface that is churning, restless and dynamic*”.⁴² **(Show – Cloud and Mist Eryri; Dark Mountains, Eryri; Eryri;)** RS too, of course, was a great bird watcher and was interested in geology.

So, he writes:

*“Many creatures
reflect you, the flowers
your colour, the tides the precision
of your calculations.”*

⁴¹ Obsessed p.11

⁴² Kyffin – A Celebration p.42 (Gwasg Gregynog 2007)

Birds in particular, he admitted, gave him more pleasure than human company and he compares waiting for birds to come with waiting for God to reveal Himself to him and moreover:

*“There is a presence whose language
is not our language, but who has chosen
with peculiar clarity the feathered
creatures to convey the austerity
of his thought in song”.*

(Show Head Study of an Egret here).

But as Kyffin told David Meredith in the 2003 programme for Fflic Productions, what he loved to paint were *“the mountains and the sea,*

*the sun on the hills and the heavy dark clouds, the sun breaking through them and the sea bright and the moon red among the clouds”.*⁴³

(Show – Snowdon from Llyn Nantle; Across the Water; Blue Sky with Brown Hill; Sun and Cloud on Lliwedd; Sunset).

As Anthony Jones says *“Kyffin found the heart and soul of Snowdonia, the most ancient DNA of the Welsh landscape, and he put it in the paint”.*⁴⁴

So too RS Thomas says in his *“Autobiography”*⁴⁵

“A glimpse of the blue skies through the bare trees was the same as looking at a stained glass window in a cathedral. Looking on morning dew in the sun was like listening to a heavenly choir singing Glory to God”. The countryside was indispensable to RS’ faith and his description of the countryside, at times, resembles Wordsworth’s.

⁴³ Obsessed, p.22

⁴⁴ Kyffin: A Celebration p.44 (Gregynog 2007)

⁴⁵ p.84

Nicholas Sinclair, quoting Kyffin, says: *“My Welsh inheritance must always remain a strong force in my work, for it is in Wales that I can paint with the greatest freedom”*.

Neither of them, however, were sentimental about nature. One only has to look at some of the dark mountain scenes of Kyffin and the roughness of some of his seascapes to realise he knew all about the force of nature **(Show – Stormy Sea; Stormy Sea under a Dark Sky; Stormy Sea)**.

So too, in his own autobiography, RS says:

“The sea is like a mirror – and through it you can see all the beauty and glory of the creation; the colours and the images of the clouds, with the birds going past on their eternal journey. But on using the sea as a window, an endless war is to be seen, one creature mercilessly and

*continuously devouring another. Under the deceptively innocent surface there are thousands of horrors, as if they were the creator's failed experiment".*⁴⁶

*"And in the book I read:
God is love. But lifting
my head, I do not find it
so".*⁴⁷

So too in his poem 'The Minister' he wrote:

'Love's text is riddled by the inhuman cry of buzzards.'

Nature, beautiful as it was, was also red in tooth and claw and humans could be more cruel than any animal.

⁴⁶ Autobiography

⁴⁷ CP297

It was this violence and suffering which caused him to ask questions about God's part in it for either there was another force at work, thwarting God's will or else God was somehow responsible for it. It is a question philosophers and theologians have asked from time immemorial.

People:

Kyffin said of himself that he cared deeply for people – he was in his own words “*obsessed with them*”. He was at home with them and, as I have said already, had he not had an affinity with the locals, they would never have allowed him to portray them. He seemed always amazed that people in Wales liked his art and were prepared to buy it and was genuinely humbled by that fact.

People often said that RS did not like people. His hawk-like face and wintry smile gave the impression of aloofness and remoteness. He could be offhand and pretend not to understand English when

directions were asked for by tourists in Aberdaron. Known as the ‘Ogre of Wales’, some of his poems also seem to hold farmers in disdain.

*“Docking mangels, chipping the green skin
From the yellow bones with a half witted grin
Of satisfaction, or churning the crude earth
To a stiff sea of clods that glint in the wind –
So are his days spent, his spittled mirth
Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks
Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week.
Dreams clustering thick on his sallow skull,
Dark as curls, he comes, ambling with his cattle
From the starved pastures”.*⁴⁸

*“Stumbling insensitively from furrow to furrow
A vague somnambulist”.*⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Out of the Hills

And he speaks of them as being tough and materialistic, measuring one another by the acre or pound; men who had turned their back on their cultural inheritance and gone to trade in Welshpool, Oswestry and Shrewsbury.

“Negligible men

From the village, from the small

Holdings, they bring their grief

Sullenly to my back door,

And are speechless.”⁵⁰

And of Iago Prydderch

“Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire.

There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.”

⁴⁹ They

⁵⁰ They

In “A Priest to his People”, he writes:

*“Men of the hills, wantoners, men of Wales,
With your sheep and your pigs and your ponies, your sweaty females,
How I have hated you for your irreverence, your scorn even
Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church
Of country Clergy
And yet their skulls,
Ripening over so many prayers,
Topped into the same grave
With oafs and yokels.”*

Yet, when one looks at Kyffin’s portraits of farmers closely, I am not sure how flattering they are. **(show here Farmers below the ridge, plus next plus next)**. The overcoats have been used for a long time, they are usually tied with string, the caps are a bit skew wiff and the figures look a bit vacant. Perhaps, like RS, he was depicting what he saw, and I am not sure that anyone took offence at Kyffin’s portraits. RS says that in

these poems, he is speaking for farmers and describing how they might feel but his poetry about people and about God, express all his feelings and a kind of love/hate relationship with both. There is a total honesty in describing what he actually saw and felt.

Jackie Davies, I discovered after writing this lecture, wrote a dissertation on both men, for a fine arts degree in 2004, and she suggests that both men use pared down language in their art. Kyffin – a minimal palette of colours and RS economic in his use of words yet at times overflows with love in his poetry, a love, according to his son, he was unable to express in his relationships. *“I never saw my parents touch one another and there was no double bed in the house, and yet his poetry to her showed the depth of his love. He was austere and self-contained and yet full of love he was unable to express except through his poems about her”*.

Both RS and Kyffin, of course, depict farmers battling against the elements where the winters are raw and figures bend as they push against the winds, working hard to earn a living. RS said that the farmers probably never read his poetry and I suspect that, in the end, most farmers depicted by Kyffin, would not have been able to afford to buy pictures by him.

They both depicted a bleak landscape where farmers struggled to survive but the author Nigel Williams' words about Kyffin apply to RS too. *"There are people who look with all their eyes and make sense of it for others"*. That is what these portraits and poems do.

It is worth remembering that RS was much loved by most of his parishioners in Aberdaron (none of us can be loved by everyone) and was always there in their hour of need, in spite of the fact that he had no small talk, and then in a poem *'They'*, where he has been less than flattering about farmers he says –

*“From the standpoint of education or caste or creed
Is there anything to show that your essential need
Is less than his.*

*Don't be taken in
By stinking garments or aimless grin;
He also is human, and the same small star,
That lights you homeward, has inflamed his mind
With the old hunger, born of his kind”.*

There is a tenderness, a love even in those lines, which need to be put alongside his harder strictures. RS could be vitriolic in his views about his fellow Welshmen, whom he felt had kow-towed to the English and allowed them to take over parts of Wales to earn money.

“An impotent people

Sick with in breeding

Worrying the carcass

of an old song”.

Kyffin seems to have felt none of that vehemence.

Both of these men were prolific in their output, almost obsessive.

Kyffin had to paint and was drawing during his last illness and RS worried about not being able to write poetry in old age but carried on producing it. David Meredith entitles his book on Kyffin ‘*Obsessed*’.

Kyffin himself said that *“what was important was obsession. Having a talent meant you could do something easily. Obsession meant being moved to do something and doing it, if your obsession is great enough”*.

Wynn Thomas’ latest book on RS Thomas is entitled ‘*Serial Obsessive*’ since the poet returns again and again to the same themes – Wales, God and love. RST sums up the attempts of both when he says *“the*

creative act of any artist is an echo of the original creative impulse and actions of God". "I have" says Kyffin "a constant desire to create".

Echoing Coleridge in his *"Introduction to the Penguin Book of Religious Verse 1963"* RS says *"The nearest we approach to God, is as creative beings. The poet, by echoing the primary imagination, recreates through his work the forces of those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer to the primary imagination, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action."*

Great art does that as well and *'If poetry is that which arrives at the intellect by way of the heart'*, as RS puts it, the same can also be said of art, which is why both these great artists, in their different way, appeal to so many people and why Wales is so very proud of them.