

John Walker



I was born (1950) at my grandmother's house in Dorchester with a congenital inability to conform. Most of my childhood was spent in the fields and woods that surrounded the town, annoying with questions the water-bailiffs, shepherds, cowmen, harvesters and woodsmen who made their livings there or similarly plaguing the mariners, stevedores, fishermen and ferrymen on the Weymouth quayside where my father worked. There and in the backstreet blacksmiths, bakers, cabinetmakers, saddlers, locksmiths and picture-restorers I got to know the nature of raw materials, human or inanimate, and developed a respect for those who made or grew things. Discovering that then as now the evidence of the two thousand year occupation of the site of Dorchester was being shovelled into the backs of lorries and dumped I collected what I could from friendly workmen and developed a lifelong taste for timeworn and discarded things, human or inanimate.

Wide reading fostered the escapist tendencies I still nurture assiduously. In 1961 I was obliged to attend Hardy's school where an interest in everything became more focussed in the possibilities presented by the art room under Ken Batty. Then in Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book* I found a philosophy of making and living for which I was searching crystallized in print. This remains a touchstone for critical judgement. I learnt to throw and to make slipware at Weymouth Pottery with Len Stockley and to make stoneware and porcelain at Fordington Green Pottery with Dave Bowen. Throughout my school career the Museum was the hub of my cultural world. I started to draw and paint under the encouraging and professional eye of Phyllis Sparey; she also introduced me to China tea, the world as depicted by English Romantic artists and the music of Benjamin Britten. My interest in pubs and the people encountered in them began to burgeon. It would be fair to say that most adults with conventional lives despaired of me.

I entered the world of work my future secured by possession of an honours degree (upper second, art history) and soon began making domestic stoneware with borrowed equipment in a tiny workshop behind the *Potter In*, a café in Durngate Street. The proprietors eventually tired of wet clay and powdered glaze getting on and over their customers and set me on a freelancing career which has included working as a clerk (not in holy orders), teacher, telephonist, theatre-set painter, shelf-stacker, book illustrator, gardener and antiques dealer. In-between-times I have drawn, painted pictures and made prints for sale in galleries in England and Ireland. I still hope to attain a *louche* lifestyle and thus to qualify as a proper artist.

With the whole of the outstandingly beautiful county of Dorset to mine for motifs what's so special about the Ridgeway? For me nowhere else does the landscape offer such an easy escape into the numinous, nowhere else offer such opportunities for the translation of observed reality into a two-dimensional image. The light varies from our soft winter grey to a bleaching Southern glare. Plus, of central concern to the English, one is always within sight or sound of the sea.

The ancient monuments inevitably conjure a metamorphosed landscape in the imagination. On a hot summer's day they may evoke a mythic Arcadia where you might not be surprised to stumble on Pan himself. Encountering in a mist the weathered rock of *The Grey Mare and her*

*Colts*, or in face of a wind-threshed thorn-bush or a racing hare, you can be transported to that mysterious unlettered world of our ancestors - those now 'beneath the tumuli on the high hills and under the harvest places'. In this timeless landscape of the mind, in the company of crops and animals, you can feel intimately in touch with that creaturely, elemental, world we inherit from our most remote ancestors. Clearing the mind of what Paul Nash called 'antiquarian associations' 'Whitcombe 1' can be repossessed by folklore as the magical *Music Barrow*; 'Barrow Group R10' reverts to being homely *Bincombe Bumps*, or the monuments, save the factory-chimney memorial to Admiral Hardy, may be enjoyed for their sculptural forms.

It will be evident from my pictures pattern and colour are my delights: the pattern of masonry, of the drystone walls, the patterns that agriculture and sheep sculpt, the unwonted colour harmonies of rusting corrugated iron in a sea of greenery. This patchwork of disparate textures and colours stitched together with stone that so emphatically defines the shape of the land can be readily recast into two dimensions.

The continuous agricultural activity along the ridge is a reminder that this is very much a living landscape shaped by generations of hard work. Consider the labour, no doubt winter work, in the construction of the drystone walls, a reminder that the visual delight of the place has been hard-won, though this aspect is difficult to portray. Pylons and communication masts trouble me; I edit them out of my work. While electricity is essential, both its utility and its mode of delivery have failed to enter our collective consciousness of beauty. It as yet has no resonance for us as do candle- or firelight. Will the inevitable architecture of a pylon ever have the same meaning for us as a field of cereals? I doubt it. Yet felled pylons brought to earth and lying twisted and broken I find do have a resonance, pitiful as a beached whale. I look forward to drawing the Ridgeway pylons in such a state. I find concrete and plastic 'interpretation boards' just as invidious, the 'relief-road' an abomination no civilised country could countenance.