

literature and medicine

Epilepsy – the making of a painter: Sir (John) Kyffin Williams

This column explores the links and synergies between medicine and literature. What roles can literature play in reflecting and influencing good practice, and what sorts of images of doctoring are to be found in drama, poetry, fiction, biography, electronic fora and film? The editors would be pleased to receive short papers, ranging from 500–1,000 words, on relevant topics. Those interested in contributing should email brian.hurwitz@kcl.ac.uk or neil.vickers@kcl.ac.uk

If Kyffin Williams had not developed epilepsy he might never have become a painter. Kyffin (pronounced Kuffin) Williams was born in Anglesey in 1918, the second son of Henry Inglis Wynne Williams, a banker, and Essylit Mary Williams, both children of Church of England rectors on the island. Kyffin's cousin, known in the family simply as 'cousin Aggie' was Agnes Hunt, co-founder of the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital at Oswestry (*Across the straits* (1973) and *A wider sky* (1991)).

Kyffin was educated at Shrewsbury School and was not noted for any academic bent. After a short period as a trainee land agent, he applied to join the 6th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers in which he served from 1936 to 1941. Though not yet having received a com-

mission, he was invited as a guest to the battalion's 1937 St David's Day dinner at the Anglesey Arms, Menai Bridge:

I went to bed at about 12.30 happy and sober. I don't know when I woke, but I remember lying beside the open window. It was unbearably cold and I was covered in snow. There was a taste of blood in my mouth and my tongue was terribly painful.... I must have lost consciousness, for the next thing I remember was waking up in bed.... My tongue was agony, but I got up, dressed and unsteadily made my way downstairs to breakfast. I don't think I ever got there, because once again I found myself in bed, my tongue was worse and everything was unbelievably vague.

A few weeks later he was taken to see Dr Henry Cohen in Liverpool, whom Kyffin described as:

a dapper and confident neurologist.... He told me that I had had an attack of grand mal epilepsy, that the pupil of my left eye was fixed and I had no reaction to light, and that I had no reflexes in my knees. He prescribed luminal and a foul tasting mixture of belladonna and Irish moss.

A few days after he returned home, in April 1937, he received his commission in the 6th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Six months after the first attack of grand mal he had a second one:

In the morning I felt reasonably well but was found unconscious on the pavement near Pwllheli station while on my way to lunch. I regained consciousness twenty four hours later. Again there was the taste of blood in my mouth and my tongue was unbelievably sore.

In August 1938, on the return from summer camp as the train left Prestatyn, he had another attack of grand mal, and further attacks followed. The last while still in the army occurred while buckling on his Sam Browne belt prior to a company inspection. He was sent to Moston Hall Hospital, Cheshire, for two weeks;

then followed investigations at a military hospital in Oxford, under the supervision of Dr (later Sir) Hugh Cairns. Kyffin describes these as follows:

[M]y first test was the inevitable lumbar puncture. This was followed a few days later by the electro-encephalogram, the first machine of its kind to be assembled in this country. I sat in a wire-netting rabbit hutch and a strange permanent-wave machine hung above my head as terminals were attached to my ether-soaked hair. At the other end of the room a girl pressed a switch, and a large metal hand started to draw a crazy graph on some paper pinned to the wall.

The next day in came my doctor. 'What are you going to do when you leave the army? ...as in fact you are abnormal,' he announced. 'I think it would be a good idea if you took up art'.

Acting on this suggestion, Kyffin enrolled in the Slade School of Fine Art, in October 1941, which by then had evacuated to Oxford to amalgamate with the Ruskin School of Art for the duration of the war.

In his first year at the Slade, Kyffin described his artistic prowess: 'As the worst student there, I was ashamed when I compared my insensitive life drawings with those of seventeen year old girls'. During the war years there were very few male students at the school, but by the end of his third year he had won the Slade Portrait Prize and had become The Robert Ross Leaving Scholar.

In *Across the straits*, he writes that when he first arrived at the Slade 'it was with the sole intention of becoming an art master at some comfortable public school; no intention of ever being a serious painter had entered my mind...'. He did, indeed, become an art master. From 1944 to 1973, he was senior art master at Highgate School and two of his pupils (Anthony Green and Patrick Proctor) later became Royal Academicians (RAs). From 1945

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Fig 1. The Corlan, Snowdonia (oil on canvas). Permission to reproduce has been given by the owners.

Kyffin describes his epilepsy taking on a new form:

...since the grand mal was now controlled by drugs, the illness found a new way through in minor epileptiform attacks which sometimes numbered as many as nine in a single day.... Once in a restaurant I was tranquilly reading the sports page of the evening paper. Hammond, so the reporter wrote, was the batsman to whom he would least like to field at short leg. Of a sudden Wally Hammond leapt from his crease. There was a loud crack as the ball shot towards my eyes, getting larger and larger until everything went black and I came to, to find my head in my plate.

Nevertheless, there were compensations, for sometimes, without warning, in the mountains of Wales or on the London Underground I would hear music. Whole orchestras played symphonies that had never been heard before. With amazing clarity I could pick out every instrumentalist. Furthermore, it was my own music, and I gave myself up to it in an intoxication of sound.

In 1948 Kyffin returned to the Royal Welch Fusiliers as a guest of the colonel, to paint some of the fusiliers in battle dress (www.rwfmuseum.org.uk/nb.html). He became an Associate of the Royal Academy (ARA) in 1970 and in 1974 a RA. At about that time he returned to Anglesey and lived as a tenant of the Plas Newydd estate in what he describes in his autobiography as:

a charming house on the edge of the Menai Strait. Lord Anglesey rebuilt the house for me and ever since he and Lady Anglesey have been concerned for both my artistic and everyday welfare.

After his return to Wales, he devoted his time to painting, almost exclusively in North Wales, where he painted the mountains, stone cottages, hill farms, country folk characteristically in heavily palette knife applied oils, and particularly farmers with their accompanying black and white sheep dogs (Fig 1). For a number of friends he illustrated their books and a history of the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Contrary to the opinion of critics and connoisseurs Kyffin Williams believed that a painter knows his best work. On one occasion, realising that it was essential to be ruthless, he destroyed 50 oils and 200 drawings. He described himself as a:

selfish painter indulging myself in the luxury of pigment for my own personal benefit. I continue to paint selfishly yet know I have to sell pictures in order to live. It sometimes hurts when a picture that means something special to me is bought by an unknown purchaser, to be carried away to an unknown dwelling, possibly to be lost to me for ever...It is unfortunate that I am unable to give my pictures away to people of my own choice.

Nothing gave Kyffin greater pleasure than knowing on whose wall his paintings ended up. A letter of appreciation of

a purchase would stimulate a correspondence, usually illustrated with little sketches, or a card with a water colour. Of his buying public Kyffin Williams wrote:

My mountains and my farm houses were their mountains and their farm houses. They knew my stone cottages and the people who lived in them and they bought my pictures because they represented what they knew and loved.

In *A wider sky* Kyffin describes a fascination:

The whole idea of the Welsh in Patagonia had always fascinated me. It was such a romantic story and being a romantic myself I was always deeply moved at the thought of my fellow-country men so far away from their home land.

As the recipient of a Winston Churchill Fellowship he was able to visit Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego:

It was the greatest experience of my Life...the sky was different, the light was different and so were the birds, the animals and the vegetation ... I am delighted that so much of my record of Patagonia is now in the National Library of Wales.

In 1982, Kyffin was awarded the OBE and in 2000 he received a knighthood. The advice, 'I am sorry you are abnormal, I think it would be a good idea if you took up art' would be regarded as insensitive and inappropriate coming from a physician today, but this advice was acted upon by a most unusually determined man. As a result, Welsh painting has received a great talent.

Bibliography

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