

Nevill Johnson | *Paint the Smell of Grass*

Dickon Hall and Eoin O'Brien

November 2008

NEVILL JOHNSON

Paint the smell of grass

Dickon Hall
and
Eoin O'Brien

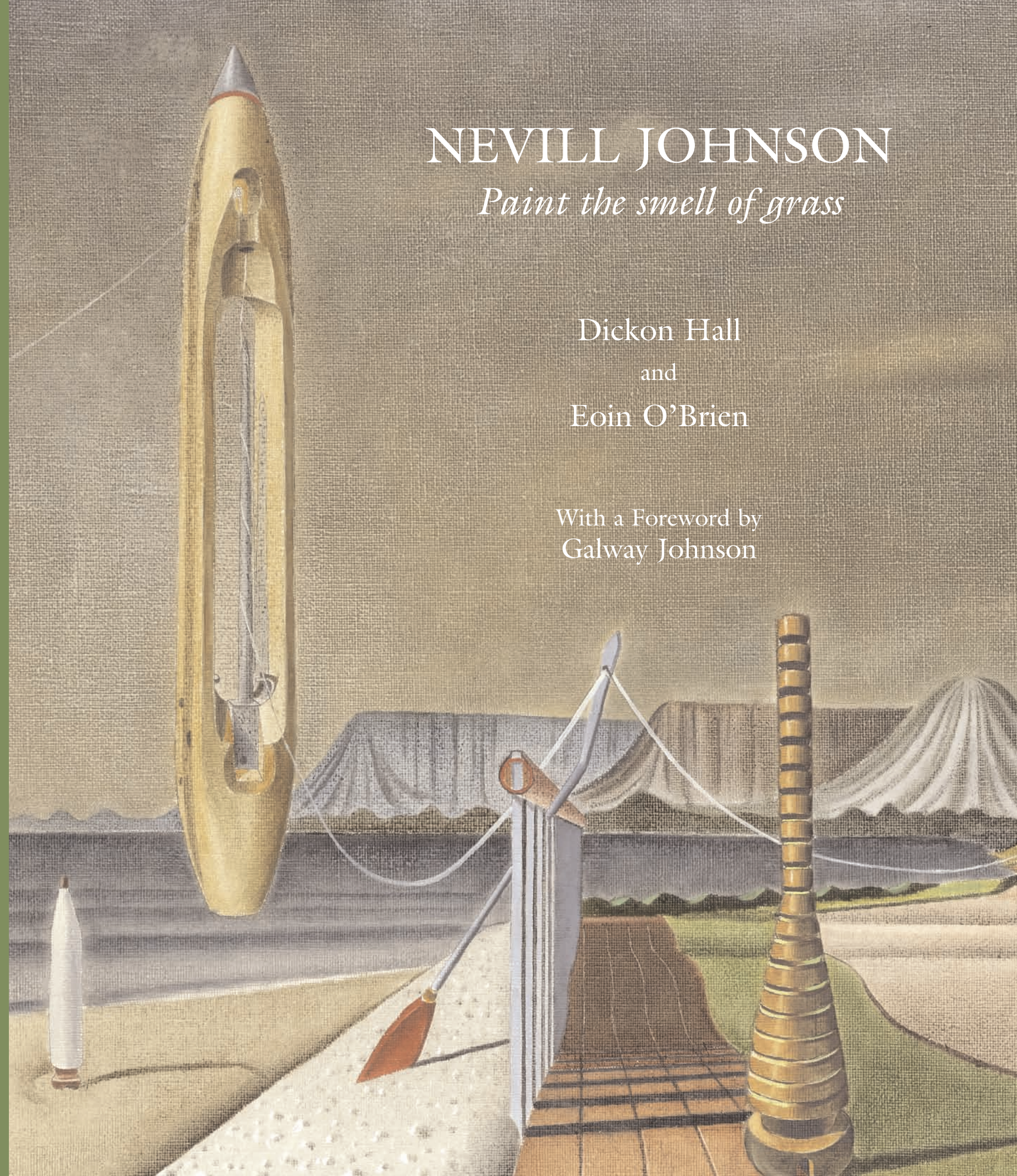
With a Foreword by
Galway Johnson

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NEVILL JOHNSON

Paint the smell of grass



Self Portrait (detail)

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A Voice Crying (detail)

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Dickon Hall and Eoin O’Brien

Foreword

MY FATHER Nevill Johnson was one of the small group of painters whom Victor Waddington gathered around his gallery in South Anne Street in the late 1940s and early 1950s and who were to dominate Irish painting for most of the rest of the century. And while the others of the group are well known today: le Brocquy, Campbell, Dillon, O’Neill, Middleton, it is surprising how rarely Nevill’s name comes up. He was no less a painter than the others of the group, no less a participant in his way in the Dublin life of those days. And yet he left little obvious trace and few people are familiar with his works. Perhaps his English origins made it more difficult to localize him, categorize him. Probably also his painting was not so easy to appreciate, presenting as it does a more universal language with little local referential.

Although he knew most or all of the artists, writers and patrons of that Dublin, he participated little in their social lives. He would have enjoyed drinking with Paddy Kavanagh or Brian O’Nolan but would have left when the crowd grew and became noisy. Not that he was shy or awkward, but he had little liking for social chat and a great impatience with posturing. It was surely to escape the bullying and tyranny of bourgeois convention in middle-class England that he came to Ireland and Dublin where he found a people far less impressed by authority and a space to develop in relative freedom.

As children, my brother Karl and I were never close to Nevill. He was not one to demonstrate much affection, at least in terms understandable to a child. He could be scathingly critical, did not suffer foolishness; indeed I was in awe and fear of him well into my twenties. And it was only later that we drew closer gradually and I began to enjoy his company and conversation and to understand him to some extent. He was a complex man with extraordinary gifts that made him difficult to approach, but which rewarded the effort. He was curious about the world around him, not only in artistic terms, but also intellectually. He enjoyed science, but hankered after a *ghost in the machine* – reading people like Arthur Koestler and Rupert Sheldrake as well as more mainstream scientists like David Bohm and Edward O. Wilson. Because I was a physicist, he asked often about new discoveries and theories: we had a running debate about the limits of the scientific method and my reductionist views. He rarely listened to music, but when he did it was jazz – at one period in his life he spent a lot of time dancing in the clubs of Soho. He was never a gambler but he found great pleasure in playing cards, poker, with acquaintances in the local pub of wherever he was.

When my son Rory went to London as a student in 1996 he and Nevill became close in a way that I never had. He writes of this time together. “I was very fortunate to get to know my grandfather Nevill when, as a rather overawed and shy 17 year-old, I moved to London to start university. We quickly became warm friends and, over many lunches in his favourite Churchill Arms pub in Notting Hill Gate, we discovered a wide range of shared interests – science, religion, books, poker, Beavis & Butthead (at that time, his favourite television programme), our friends, a dislike of authority. The Nevill Johnson I came to know was great company: generous, self-effacing, inquisitive and quick to humour. Very occasionally I was the subject of a cruel put-down over some minor comment or other, which I always felt reflected the almost impossibly high standards he held *himself* to. Although he would probably recoil at the suggestion, the stories and reflections Nevill shared with me left a profound and lasting impression: his rejection of the family firm as a young man, symbolised by his throwing a newly-tailored bowler hat under the wheels of a bus; his long-anticipated trip (by motorcycle and sidecar) to a big Picasso exhibition, only to turn back for home on the steps of the museum; the happy period during which he cultivated a wild and secluded farm in Wilby. In his constant tension with himself, and with society around him, Nevill helped me to understand that the value of ideas and relationships far outweighs the empty titles conferred by institutions, and that our life goals need not be those defined by convention.”

The authors Eoin O’Brien and Dickon Hall both knew Nevill, first through his painting and then in later years by seeking him out where he lived in Notting Hill Gate in London. They collaborated on this book using archival material and his works which include not only painting but also lithography, photography, film, writing and a journal from 1964. The result is a picture of a profound and committed painter who was also an intelligent articulate observer. The authors have done well indeed to present such a complex subject in a remarkably clear and accessible manner.

In the first part of the book Dickon Hall looks at the painting: how it developed from its early beginnings in Belfast in the 1940s and how the themes relate to the post-war context. He follows the trace of the painter to Dublin and Victor Waddington, and then as he returned to England and London where he died in 1999. Throughout the narrative Hall shows a depth of understanding of the painting and writes about it in very intelligible manner. He brings out the relationship between the person and the painter – how Nevill was driven, indeed possessed, by a *need* to paint and how he dealt with that compulsion, indomitable and undeniable.

In the second part, Eoin O’Brien draws widely on Nevill’s writing, part autobiography part poetic, to present a broader portrait of the man. This was not an easy task despite ample material. The writing in these works is articulate; it is perceptive and intelligent, indeed intellectual. But perhaps by its very polish it somehow manages to maintain a distance between the reader and the

author. O’Brien has worked round this by correlating passages to complement his personal understanding of the man. The result is a striking portrait of the life-long struggle of a man with his creative force, something that is his own, yet also in some ways a strange beast that inhabits him allowing him little respite to pursue the ordinary life most of us content ourselves with.

The portrait they develop, despite the difficulty of the subject, is close to my own understanding of him and, I feel, does justice to his creation and his life. I hope that *Paint the Smell of Grass* will lead to a better appreciation of Nevill and his contribution to modern art in Ireland.

I was struck by something Chris Agee wrote about Seamus Heaney because it expresses so well the way I see Nevill and his painting: he says of Heaney ¹ “*There is a strong sense, too, that each poem is one uniquely fitted piece of the jigsaw from a radiantly inward geography that he appears able to mine inexhaustibly. The surpassing coherence and extent of this psychic excavation, especially as it relates to interlocking patterns of imagery and tonality across his whole oeuvre, is another of the things that sets him apart quite dramatically.*”

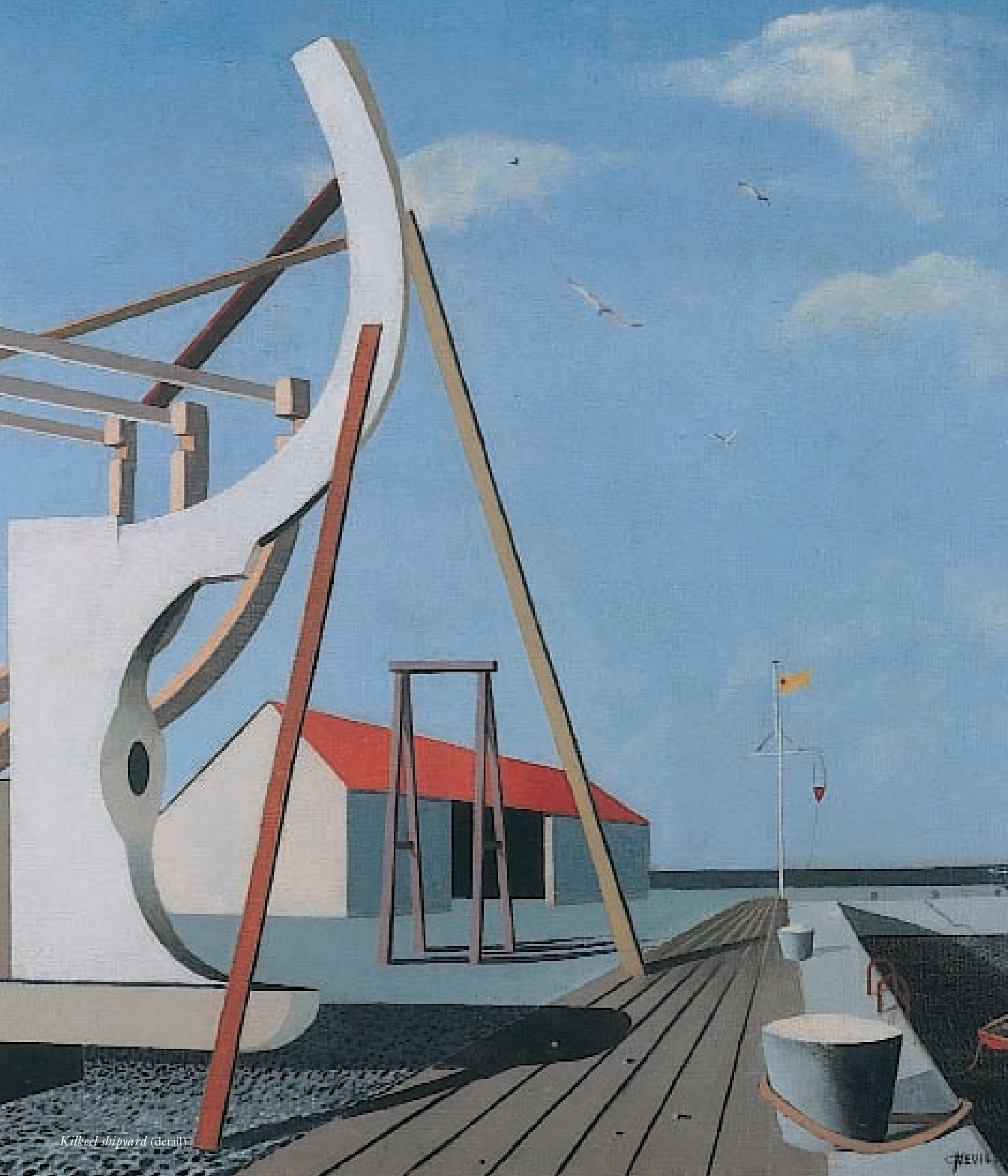
Galway Johnson

Kerry, May 2008



Galway, Nevill, Rory and Jessica Johnson

¹ ‘Heaney’s Blackbird’ Chris Agee, *Irish Pages*, 2005.



Kilkeel shipyard (detail)

NEVILL JOHNSON

DICKON HALL

I. The Belfast years 1934–1946

NEVILL JOHNSON never pursued any formal study as an artist. At Sedbergh School, he had apparently been keen to go to an art college, but this was far from his father’s view of the shape which his future should take. Apparently he drew constantly and his early letters home from school were done as drawings. A doctor who was a family friend suggested to Johnson’s father that he might encourage this talent, so his interest seems to have been quite advanced at this stage if as yet unformed.

Perhaps it was simply a chance acquaintance when Johnson came to Belfast in 1934 that led him to a more serious attitude towards any potential career as an artist. Working for Ferodo, a company making brake linings, appears to have allowed him the time to pursue a part-time life as a painter, as well as developing the ability to explore his identity in a less familiar society than that he had left behind in England. It seems to have been within a couple of years of his arrival in Northern Ireland that Johnson had met and become sufficiently friendly with John Luke to be able to paint alongside him, and presumably to have some sort of informal advice from the slightly older artist.

It indicates a certain respect for Johnson that Luke permitted this. He had by this stage returned from a successful period of study at the Slade School in London, still fresh from



Nevill Johnson with his parents on the Isle of Man

the reflected glory of the great figures that had studied there in the early twentieth century, such as Augustus and Gwen John, William Orpen, Stanley Spencer and David Bomberg. Luke must have returned to Belfast with a formidable reputation after his three years at this legendary art college, and in the mid-thirties was at arguably the peak of his powers, with his technical and imaginative powers in perfect balance before more arcane matters began to dominate in the post-war years. Despite his friendship with a number of other Belfast artists, Luke seems to have been such a private man that it is remarkable to think that he allowed an English businessman to share his studio.

It also suggests that Johnson already possessed a good level of competence, and that his ideas of progressing to Art College had not been unrealistic. Certainly Luke must have been a great help to Johnson, even if no real teaching went on between the two, for his influence is marked in Johnson's work up until the second part of the 1940s, and Johnson was using tempera, Luke's preferred medium, in paintings up until the 1970s. The small number of early drawings by Johnson that survive from the early 1940s demonstrate great technical skills and share qualities with Luke in their linearity and modeling. He spent years studying perspective and also used a scientific prism to view his paintings, an exacting and ambitious apprenticeship that indicates why he and Luke held each other in such high mutual regard.

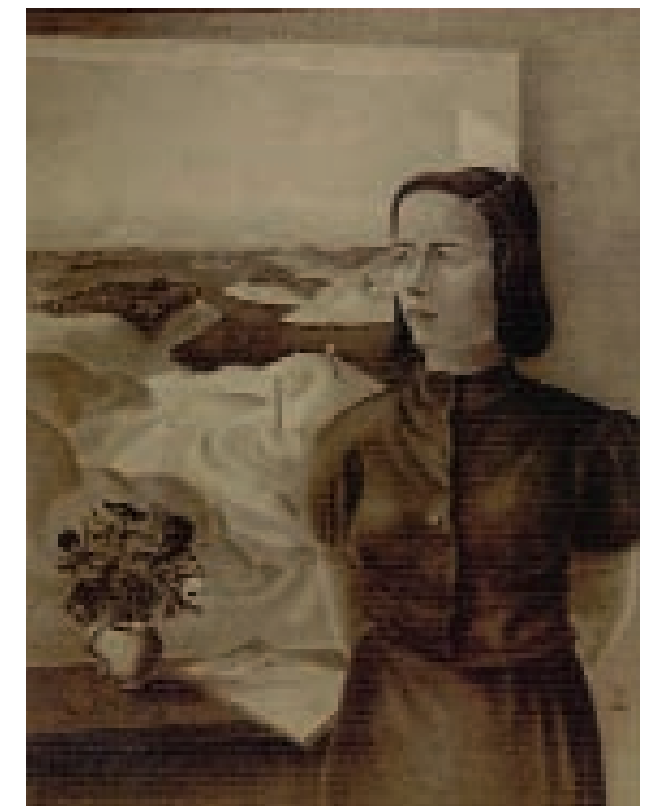
However their closeness is easy to exaggerate. They both travelled to Paris in 1936, along with another painter, Charles Harvey, where they saw work by the stars of the day, the Surrealists, as well as by Picasso, and it seems almost certain that they also managed to see the famous International Surrealist Exhibition held in London at the New Burlington Galleries in the summer of that year. But for Luke none of these artists seem to have had a very lasting impact. A surrealist element has been detected in the extreme formal stylisation and the arcane subject matter of Luke's later work, but in reality this seems to derive from his own private mythology and interest in the art of the renaissance. Luke never refers to surrealism, nor does John Hewitt in his writing on the artist. Certainly their temperaments were at different ends of the scale and it was probably this and their vastly incompatible lifestyles that let the distance between them grow after Johnson moved to Dublin.

Luke was Johnson's closest friend among the painters then living in Ulster and certainly the one for whom he had most respect. But by this time certain things seemed to be fixed that remained constant in Johnson's life from now on. He preferred to mix in places such as the Club Bar, off Bradbury Place, with poets, writers and pub folk rather than painters, and he spent little time visiting galleries, preferring to use reproduced images in the small number of art books he owned to see the works that most inspired him. The painters he admired most had already made an impact, Picasso, Braque, Dali, Tanguy and de Chirico. Despite the fact that he moved on a regular basis, from England to Belfast, around Northern Ireland, to Dublin, to London, to

Suffolk and back to London, he seems to have hardly travelled abroad after his 1936 journey, even to see works of art. Johnson was a man who painted and drew because it was the most immediate and effective way for him to distil, examine and express his ideas, his emotions and his visual response to what was around him. He was never part of a group, never interested in the art world or in galleries except as a way of having his paintings seen and selling work so that he could survive and keep painting. Art was not something precious and detached from life for Nevill Johnson, it expressed the heart of life, and he despised those contemporaries of his who had lost this integrity and who produced art for the art world.

So few of Johnson's paintings from this period survive that any idea of his earliest work is based on a handful of known works. There is within these, however, a consistency that makes generalisations perhaps slightly less risky. No exhibition catalogues survive before 1946, yet as Johnson had received commissions for paintings and sculptures prior to this date it seems likely that he had taken part in some group exhibitions during the war and had made a certain reputation amongst artists and Belfast art lovers. Throughout his life Nevill Johnson seems to have been absolutely steadfast in his rigorous approach to his own work. Even when it was financially impractical, he refused to paint or sell work that was not of the quality he knew he could achieve or that was not of genuine personal importance to him at that time. Neither now nor later did he paint for money or for the sake of calling himself an artist.

It is interesting and not far-fetched to imagine Johnson in the late 1930s and 1940s feeling his way into his art. He lived in Botanic Avenue and Bradbury Place, close to Queen's University, mixed and drank with the bohemian sets in Belfast at a club at the Bradbury Place end of Donegall Road, all unusual features for an English businessman. His marriage to a French girl, Noelle, who was a teacher, probably set them slightly apart as a non-local couple. The process of freeing himself from his background must have been a slow one, although once he had done it he never went back. As ever his reading and his thinking went hand in hand with his painting, and there were the first workings out of the artistic and personal intellect that drove almost six decades of creative work.



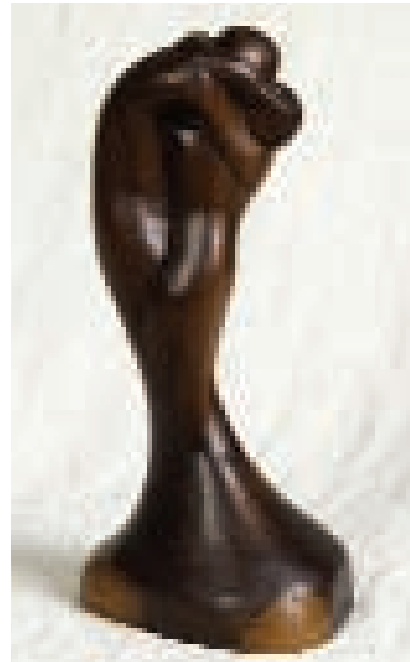
Noelle Biehlman



Nevill and Galway Johnson

His conflict with authority was expressed first in his relationship with his father. Nevill and his brother Tom both seemed to have found him difficult, and their mother, with whom Nevill could be close, divorced him, so it is likely that Johnson's father was a difficult man. Thus was constructed a dialogue with authority that the artist played out in his relationships with the church and the state. It is intriguing and revealing that in spite of this attitude Johnson remained proud of an apparent family connection with Stanley Baldwin, a link that he documented in a family tree. His middle name was Baldwin and he claimed to remember visiting 10 Downing Street when his namesake was Prime Minister.

Unexpectedly, the church dominated this early time in Northern Ireland. Johnson's own battered and thumbbed-through copy of the King James Bible still exists and he was being trained for entry into the Roman Catholic Church when he lived in Kilkeel with his family. Although none of them now survive, Johnson completed a number of stone

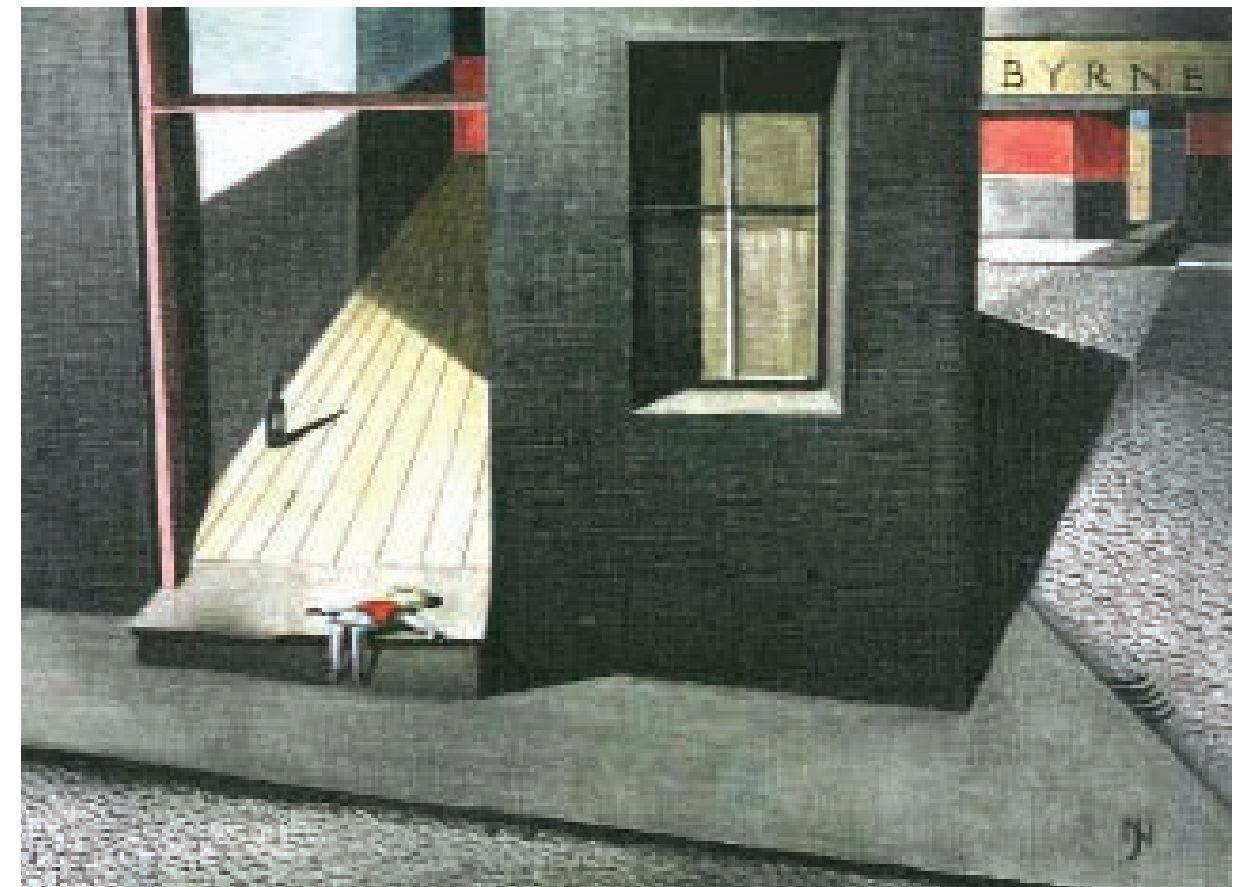


Couple

carvings which seem to have been subjects of religious inspiration. In his autobiography, *The Other Side of Six*, he refers to a carving of the burning bush which was commissioned for a church in Whiteabbey, Co. Antrim, but it does not seem to have survived (although the location of the church could be misleading as Johnson laid many false trails in this book). Galway Johnson mentions a wrought iron altarpiece which his father made which, again, has disappeared.

Nevertheless he rejected the church. The intellectual Johnson perhaps could not accept the faith that his emotional and spiritual nature were drawn towards. It may simply have been his attitude that the church was an organisation that was greedy and dishonest and a force behind social ills. From the 1940s his work contained many attacks on organised religion and he described himself as an atheist, but there is a sense in his paintings and writings of the voice that is crying in the wilderness but unable to find a spiritual answer that he could honestly accept. His paintings of the 1940s and 1950s are dominated by landscapes that are bleak and barren in their absence of faith and God's grace. But it seems to have been this struggle that formed the character of his early paintings.

These earliest paintings, such as *Byrne's Pub* and *Shipyard, Kilkeel* all are distinctive within Irish painting of that time. Technically there are echoes of John Luke's work, but their angular

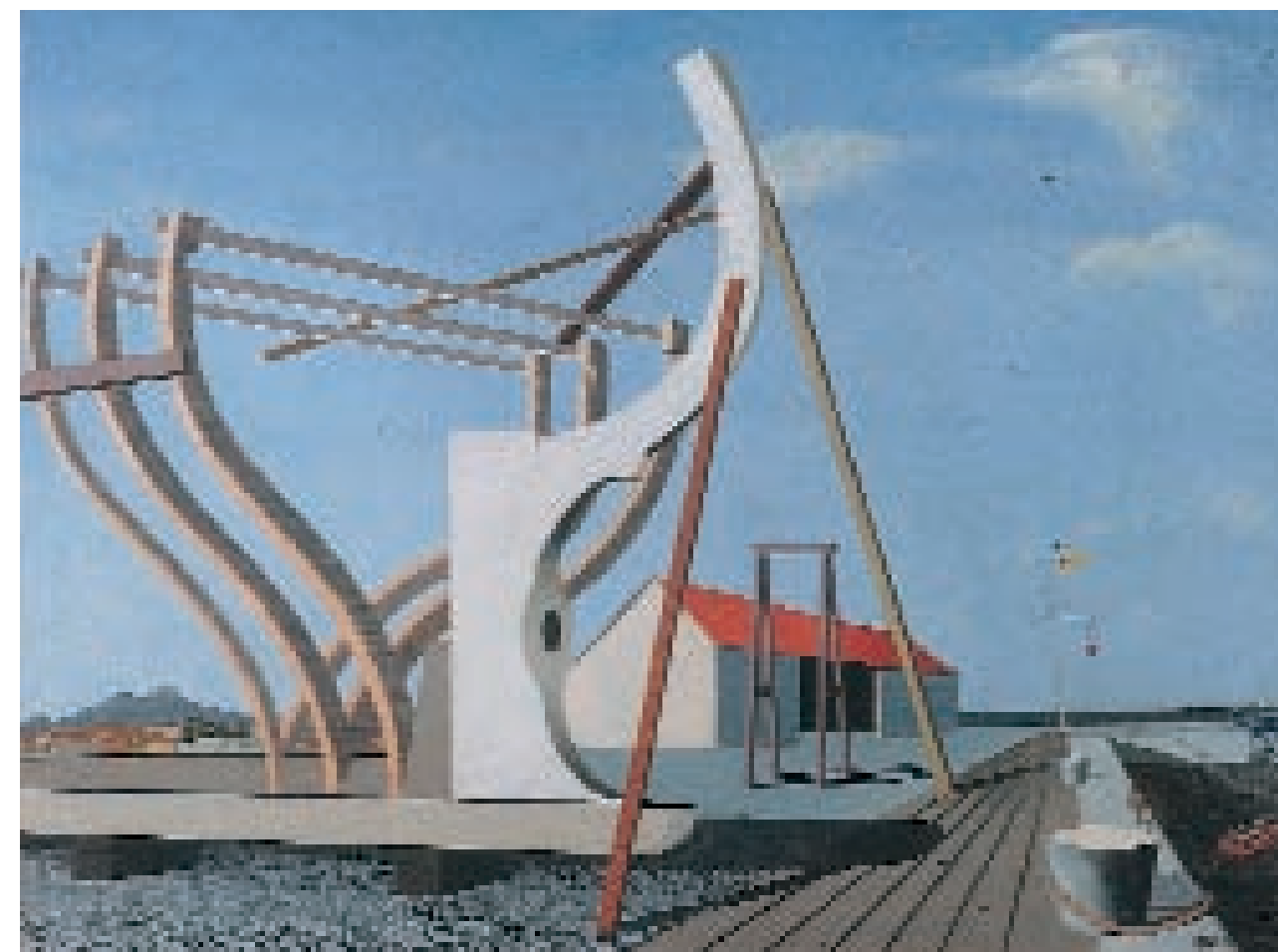


Byrne's Pub

geometric stylization, deliberate artificiality and dramatic use of perspective to create space within the picture are quite different, and closer to Edward Wadsworth, whose work Johnson almost certainly saw in London in 1936. They also indicate an interest in cubism, particularly *The Fortune Teller*, with its faceted planes, but as with many artists such as Metzinger and le Fauconnier, they do not analyse and restructure the image in any depth, but adapt a still representational object in an illusionistic space using a superficially geometric manner. The 1950s were to see Johnson use his study of cubism to break down pictorial space and his use of collage reveals a thorough grasp of the innovations of Picasso and Braque.

In subject matter, too, these three paintings are unusual and they demonstrate three areas that Johnson continued to explore in his work. His love of cities, particularly Dublin, was balanced by an anger at the social injustice that was so evident and the destructive nature of urban life, seen most dramatically in his photography of the early 1960s. *The Fortune Teller* shows the wit that comes through so strongly in Johnson's work, but ideas of magic and its redemptive and regenerative power remain as a strong element in his work of the post-war era. Finally, the rather barren scene at Kilkeel, stripped of the people one would expect to see there, prefigures the ravaged apocalyptic wastelands that dominate Johnson's work until the 1960s. Johnson writes of memories of a family picnic at Kilkeel on the day that Hiroshima was bombed, in his autobiography, contrasting the idyllic peace of family life in County Down with the potential evil of mankind and the horror of global events. All these works demonstrate Johnson's use of dramatic perspective, and this was almost an obsession in his early studies as an artist, working from books until he had the control evident in all these works.

Shipyard, Kilkeel was exhibited in 1944 at the 'Annual Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts' sponsored by the Belfast feis, on loan from Mr and Mrs J.W. Lutton, the first record we have of Nevill Johnson exhibiting work. The fact of it being on loan suggests that it might have been a commission, as was another of the earliest extant examples of Johnson's work, *Linenscape*. This tempera painting is an imaginatively surreal rendering of the local shoreline, placed along it the individual parts of the mechanism of the linen looms which had contributed so greatly to the economic prosperity of Ulster and which, ironically, could not have failed to remind Johnson of the source of his own family's fortune. The cliffs and mountains of the north Antrim coastline in the distance are draped with crisp linen. Its clean, high-pitched colours, tightly-finished surface and cleverly arranged composition are all likely to have drawn something from Johnson's friendship with Luke, but *Linenscape* is a complete and individual work. It uses the inventive freedom which surrealism bestowed on this next generation of artists without simply borrowing its imagery and jokes. It also demonstrates an interest in mechanics; Johnson's desire to understand how machines worked led to a number of later inventions which the artist patented. This enlightened commission perhaps hints at Nevill Johnson's charm and his understanding of



Kilkeel Shipyard



Winter Landscape



Landscape

how to deal with businessmen. Just over a decade later, he painted a commission for Cyril Lord, whose carpet factory was near Donaghadee, on the north Down coast, close to the Johnson's home in the boathouse at Ballyhalbert. This contained particularly oblique references to the factory and many of Johnson's own concerns. Northern Ireland did have particularly enlightened art lovers at this period, such as Zoltan Frankl, the eminent Belfast based collector who owned *Clown*, an early painting now in the collection of Trinity College. But despite these early successes and encouragements, Johnson still led his double life as artist and businessman.

Perhaps it was thanks to a connection with his French wife Noelle, that compatriots of hers also living in Ulster, Paul Terris and his wife, invited the Johnsons to leave Belfast during the blitz to live at their house, Knappagh Farm in County Armagh. Soon John Luke was also invited to this refuge, although this seems to have been the last period during which the two were close. Luke returned to a more and more reclusive and eccentric life in Belfast and soon abandoned easel painting in order to devote himself to working on large public murals, which took an increasing physical toll on him.

In contrast, Nevill Johnson's exhibiting career was about to begin. In 1946 he showed six paintings and a stone carving in a group show at the newly opened, and short-lived, Magaffin Gallery, alongside Olive Henry, Max and Gladys Maccabe and Aaron McAfee, the former being then probably the best-known and most proficient in this line-up of local talent. Some of these works are known, others can be confidently identified. Already the germs of much of Johnson's work over the following decade are in place.

The titles alone betray his interest in religion, both in direct references (*Mater Doloroso*, catalogue number 8), or with obvious thematic connections (*Easter Landscape*, catalogue number 7). The former is a direct attack on Johnson's foremost target at this time, following his breaking off relations with the church. A girl stands outside a cathedral, cradling an empty space filled out by the shape of her absent baby. According to Johnson, his attack on the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Catholic Church towards unmarried mothers led to Victor Waddington having to withdraw the work from the Royal Hibernian Academy; the hold of the Church was so great in Ireland that the art world had to give way.

Easter Landscape draws on religious iconography, the cross standing in a barren wilderness, to express his sense of the post-war world. A development from the Kilkeel landscape, this is the world of the atom bomb, bereft of spiritual comfort, where either we have turned away from God or where our actions have made God abandon us. Nothing grows, natural colours have become artificial and hallucinatory. What is left of life are the biomorphic or anthropomorphic forms reminiscent of human life that appear in the MacGaffin exhibition in *Two Shells and a Stick* (catalogue number 12). Johnson collected driftwood from the shore at Kilkeel and seems to have particularly selected pieces that suggested the human figure. These were exhibited as sculpture at

Waddington's, and they also were included in the paintings of the time. It is almost eerie now to see one piece of driftwood that is still known, which was painted as if striding across a desolate shore sixty years ago. They suggest that whatever apocalyptic event has stripped the land of the vegetation, colours, sky and animal and human life that are familiar to us, they have now mutated into these skeletal forms. The earth has lost its beauty, its humanity and its spiritual nourishment. This is the existential inner landscape of the post-war being. As Johnson's thoughts unfold in his painting it becomes clear that it is humanity that has caused this.



Europe (detail)

II. The Dublin years 1947–1958

*“It is often, I think, difficult to detect whether we make decisions or accept them:
whether we are willing or willed.”*

PLACE RECURS as a constant theme in *The Other Side of Six*, Nevill Johnson’s autobiography. It is a book that is full of poetry and sensations rather than facts, but we are taken from his childhood home to holidays on the Isle of Man, to the “Presbyterian facades” of Belfast, the rural austerity of Armagh, the freedom of Dublin, the primitive peace of Ticknock and the bohemianism of the studio in Convent Place, a list of places that is remarkably evocative of the period. While some of these moves were forced by physical necessity, we can also see a process of unselfconscious stages in Nevill Johnson’s development as an artist and in his career.

Belfast was an introduction to a less straitlaced lifestyle, and painting at night beside John Luke, while the retreat to the country seems to indicate a need for more peace and space to work and a growing independence as an artist. The end of the war marked a change in Johnson’s life in almost every way, all of which is in some way encapsulated in his move to Dublin; it becomes synonymous with the next decade of his life.

The key to this break was the figure of Victor Waddington, whose small gallery in South Anne Street spawned the galleries that dominated Cork Street over the last decades of the twentieth century. The dominant painter in Dublin in the 1940s was Jack Yeats, who shared an exhibition with William Nicholson at the National Gallery during the war. The generation that had been in the ascendancy in the pre-war years was dominated by two important groups with contrasting backgrounds and ambitions; well-travelled modernist painters led by Mainie Jellett, Evie Hone, Mary Swanzy and Norah McGuinness on the one hand and, on the other, the Orpen-taught

academics such as Sean Keating, Leo Whelan and James Sleator. Simultaneously, Paul Henry's later paintings had created a dominant interpretation of the west of Ireland. In the late 1940s and 1950s a new, mostly untrained and much more diverse group of artists came to prominence, led by Louis le Brocqy and a number of Northern Irish painters. Of these latter, most would have credited Waddington with having given them the emotional and financial support to devote themselves to painting.

George Campbell, Gerard Dillon and Daniel O'Neill were friends whose work shared an idealised romanticism, but stylistically there was little similarity between their work. Dillon was inspired in his naïve manner by the picturesque simplicity of life in the west of Ireland in much the same way as Christopher Wood's art had developed in Cornwall in the 1920s. O'Neill had travelled to France and come under the influence of Georges Rouault, Maurice Vlaminck, Amedeo Modigliani and Maurice Utrillo, and was also influenced by illustrations and reproductions he had seen of the Italian primitives. Campbell was the most advanced of the three, with some elements of cubism forming his mature style. To these three Waddington added Colin Middleton, whose painting had developed alongside his work as a designer and who had been about to abandon painting when Waddington wrote enthusiastically to ask him to exhibit; the dealer's support gave Middleton the confidence to work towards a maturity that outshines his early surrealist work, but he felt betrayed by Waddington when he moved his gallery to London.

Nevill Johnson was the fifth of Waddington's group of Northern artists. Immediately different by virtue of not being from Ulster, he was also from a very different social background, had a career in business and was highly intellectual. In many ways he was closest to Colin Middleton, born the year before him, whose painting materials he had bought when Middleton left Belfast to live at John Middleton Murry's agricultural commune in 1947. Johnson later claimed to have finished and signed with his name at least one canvas on which the other artist had begun work. It is interesting that around this time Middleton produced a small number of paintings and drawings of Ballyhalbert, where Johnson had been living, so that they perhaps spent more time together than either later recalled. Johnson's approach to painting and the universality of his work is quite different from these others, with the exception at this time of Middleton.

It shows remarkable confidence and judgement for Waddington to take on five self-taught artists who had little previous exhibiting history and turn them into the group who were to dominate Irish painting in the post-war era. O'Neill, Dillon and arguably Middleton also painted their best work under his auspices.

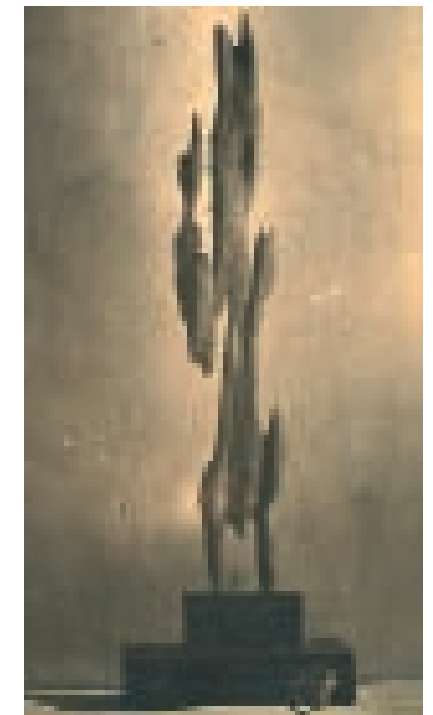
Nevill Johnson's first contact with Waddington appears to have been in 1945 or 1946. According to *The Other Side of Six*, the dealer agreed to buy outright the paintings he had brought down from Belfast. For over a decade now, Johnson had struggled to maintain a business career while studying and working as an artist. Victor Waddington provided the first practical steps

towards his being able to work full time and, no longer tied to Belfast by his job, to be able to live in Dublin. Dublin seems to have marked for Johnson a new spiritual home as a painter and it committed him to painting. This is the first of a pattern of moves that marked a point of no going back. It was also at this point that his first marriage broke down, so that although his wife and two children also lived in Dublin, he was by 1947, when he first exhibited at Waddington's gallery, a full time painter with no domestic ties. Moving to Dublin seems to be inextricably bound up with this sense of a very definite new beginning in every area of his life, much as Belfast signified a halfway house between his previous life and his future life as a painter. Dublin too was to play its part as a catalyst in Nevill Johnson's life before it was also exhausted of possibilities.

Many of the paintings that are first recorded as being shown at Waddington's were painted in Ulster, however, and while Johnson was still employed by Ferodo. The fact that he exhibited only seven paintings compared to the three other exhibitors, Campbell, Dillon and O'Neill, who exhibited around a dozen each, is a reminder that until recently Johnson had not been able to devote his time to painting. It also indicates the painstaking technique he had developed and applied to each work.

His seven paintings are dominated by barren landscapes populated with driftwood. Johnson's work is a world away from his co-exhibitors; while he depicts the reaction of the helpless individual to the catastrophic effects of war upon humanity across the world, Campbell showed *Nun in a Busy Street*, O'Neill *Peter and the Princess* and Dillon *Over the Hills with the Hens*. Yet, despite the difference in the scope of Johnson's paintings and their more obviously modernist influences, they do seem to have been met with appreciation and some understanding, and the seriousness and coherence of his approach was noted by the critic of the *Irish Tatler and Sketch* writing about the exhibition.

A Voice Crying exemplifies the paintings of this type. *A Voice Crying* is the artist's voice, full of anger at God and mankind, as well as despair. The unnaturally green land is stripped bare of any vegetation or life, the purple sea seems almost toxic. This is the earth after an event of proportions only imaginable after Hiroshima and the Holocaust. The biomorphic forms of the driftwood, which had been washed up from Lough Neagh, seem to represent either what has survived of human life or what has evolved to replace it. There are echoes of the French surrealist painter Yves Tanguy.



Sculpture – Driftwood



A Voice Crying



Kilkeel

Johnson's own comments on his work are rare, but a letter exists written in 1998 to the owner of *A Voice Crying*. He writes that this 'voice crying' "indicates fear and desolation in a land of war, lies and violent rhetoric. Other figures are of desiccated bones and some created shapes expressing the hopeless isolation." He also comments on his method of working on the painting, using terre verte as a ground and then carefully drawing in white all the details, before building up the colour with layers of glazes. These glazes he made himself by evaporating linseed oil in a lead bath on his windowsill and then adding a solution of gum dissolved in spirit with the pigment.

In *And the Sixth Day* two menacing pieces of driftwood threaten either each other or any other life; in both pictures, small forms cower. It is a world of desolation. Such biblical titles, following Johnson's disillusion with the Church, suggest that this is a creation which God has abandoned; there is also cynicism in the title *The Year of Grace* 1945, a year in which the damage of the war can finally be seen in full. His anger begins to be focused at the leaders of society, the 'establishment', as represented by organised religion, the armed forces, the political establishment, targets to which he returned over the next half century.

These images fuse a broader vision of the physical post-war world with a metaphor of the spiritual and emotional desolation of Johnson himself, a man who had just walked away from his family, the Church, the security and social identity of a job. A further blow was the death of Johnson's mother, and the painting *Daffodil* was recalled by the artist as a painting about this loss, a lyrical and nostalgic image of a light curtain blowing gently by an open window. A daffodil sits on the ledge and a glove rests beside it. Its elegiac mood is different from most of the other works of this period.

Alongside the seriousness and intellectual rigour of these works runs another strand, that of the homo ludens. Wit and humour is as much a part of Johnson's work as anger and social comment, and at times in the future it became more dominant. It is a part of Johnson's surrealism as much as it provided a tool for him to express other ideas. The driftwood in these paintings is executed with an exactness that takes on a quite different mood in the context of each picture. These found objects were even exhibited as sculpture alongside the paintings.

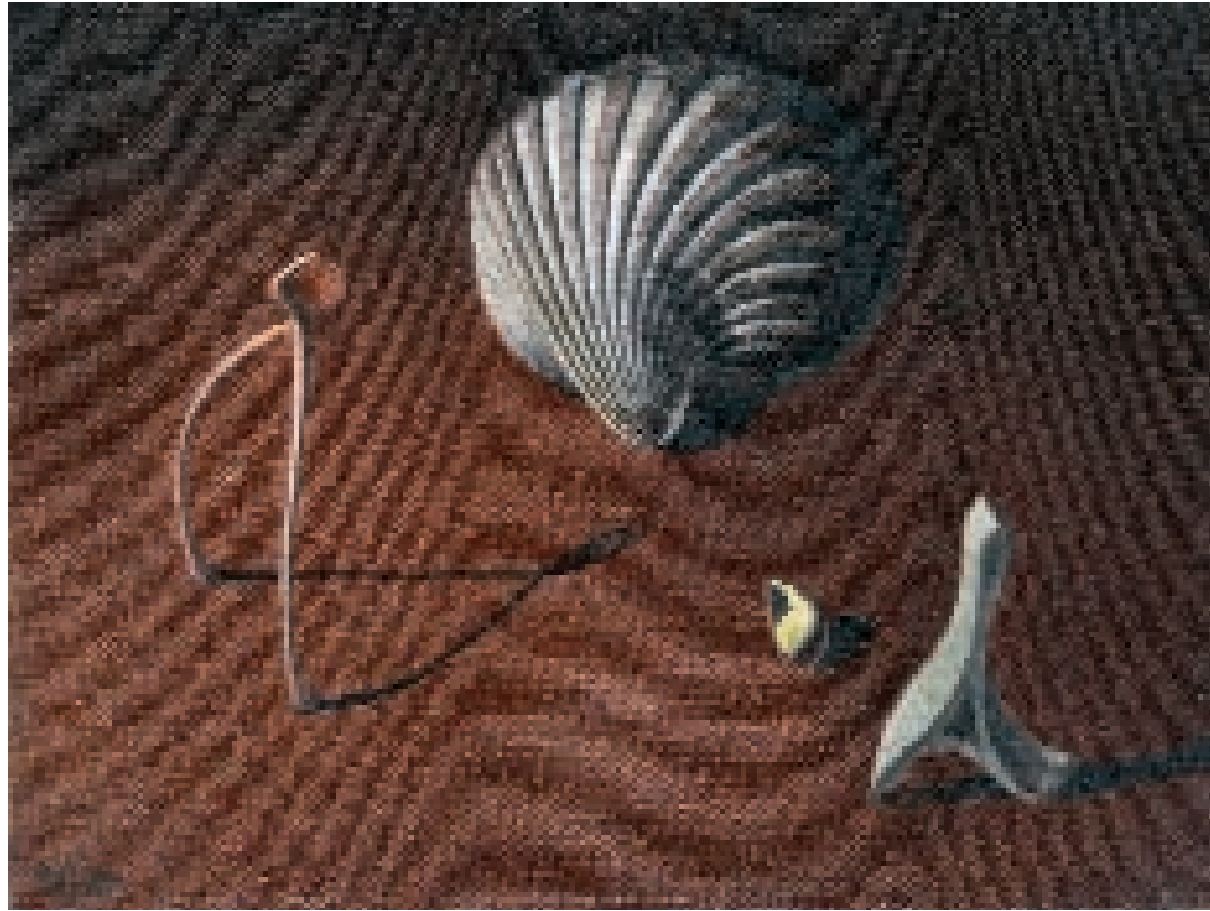
There is also a typically surrealist humour in *Wishbone and Shell*, a small canvas included in the



Daffodil



The Year of Grace



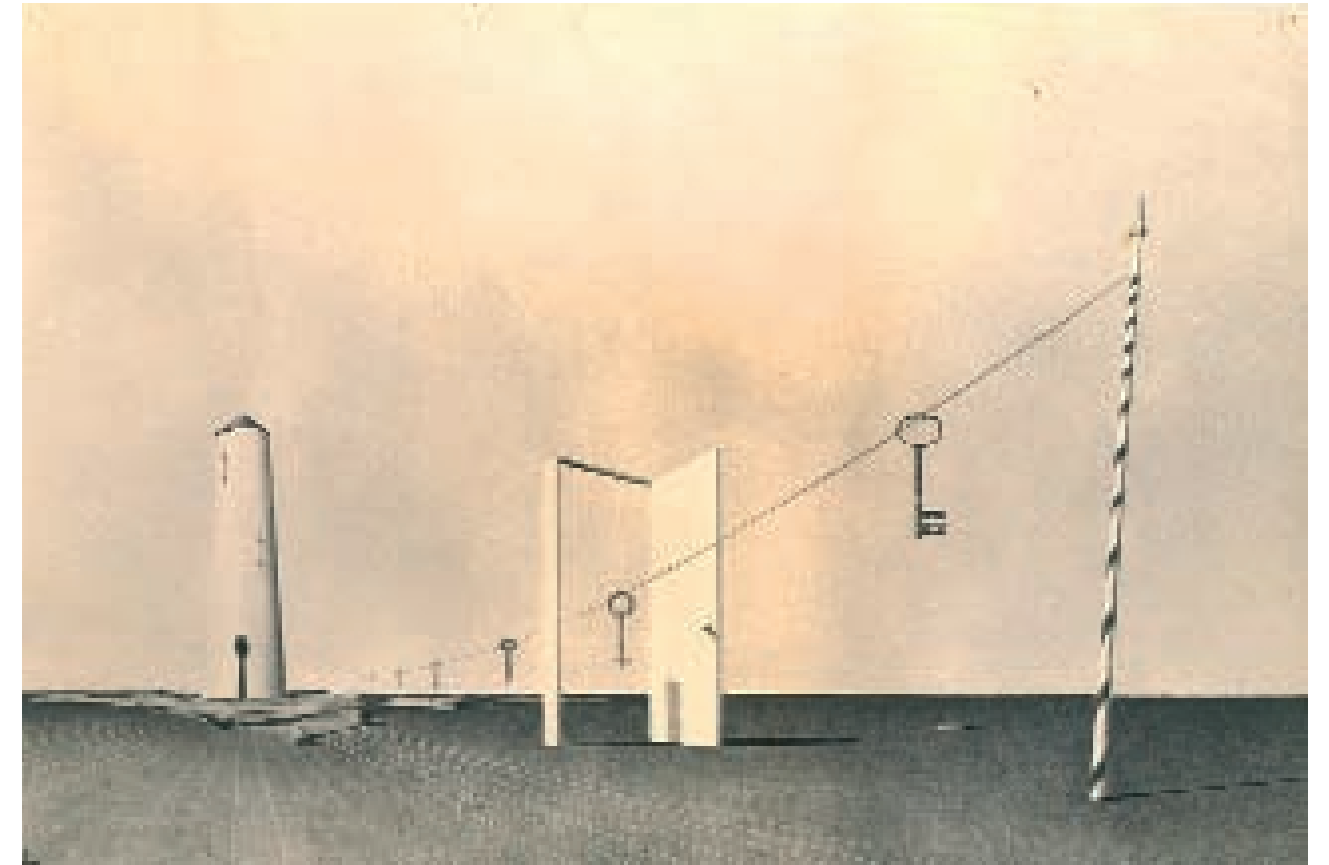
Wishbone and Shell

1947 exhibition for which a very detailed preparatory drawing exists, which is a simple arrangement of a shell, a wishbone and another small piece of bone. Unlike the larger paintings, there is no context, but the arrangement of such different objects depicted with such solidity creates a tension between them that we can only understand in human terms. Johnson is not only playing with these objects, he also plays with his audience, manipulating our responses to images that are highly real while also suggesting a strange world parallel to our own.

It is often difficult to identify Johnson's paintings with certainty in these years. He re-used titles over the decades so that works are often mis-dated and a number of pictures clearly were sold privately and never exhibited. Photographs exist of paintings which do not always tally with the works recorded in the catalogues Johnson kept throughout his life.

Victor Waddington organised an exhibition of the same 'Four Ulster Painters' at Heal's Mansard Gallery in May and June 1948 and again Johnson included a much smaller number of works than the others.

Keys harks back to works such as *Kilkeel Shipyard* in its dramatic perspective and in its tightly finished treatment of a subject which endows it with a certain otherworldly atmosphere. It is a



Keys

form of surrealism with echoes of Salvador Dali, but it eschews Dali's excessive theatricality and the painting has a detached and almost classical treatment that is a hallmark of Johnson's very particular voice. The stripped-down vocabulary of Johnson's surrealist language reveals the sophistication of his visual intelligence even at this early stage of his career as a professional artist. Despite occasional false dawns surrealism in Ireland never really developed into a coherent movement. John Luke's interest lay always in the Renaissance, Basil Rakoczi's work contains elements of magic and the irrational and Patrick Hennessy's intense realism occasionally touches the surreal without any apparently consistent interest in this direction. Colin Middleton described himself as "the only surrealist painter working in Ireland", and he also owed much to Dali and de Chirico in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but while he too adds some of his own touches to this rather generic surrealist manner, Middleton seems to be more caught up within the style, which forms part of his early experimentation with a number of modernist styles. Johnson, however, while he is influenced by the styles and narrative of surrealism, has a distinct voice which has adapted aspects of surrealism at this time for its most coherent expression. One could find the aspects in some paintings by Johnson from the early 1940s; *Linenscape*, *Byrne's Pub*, *Kilkeel Shipyard*, *Mater Dolorosa*, *A Voice Crying*, all show a clear line of development. The artist's feeling of being set outside and against the established view of things has found an appropriate style and as his vision clarifies this style is honed towards the pared down and elegant paintings of the late 1940s. It is a surrealism that has the quality of wit which H.R.F. Keating noted, writing in 'Icarus' in 1952, but whose strangeness increasingly suggests isolation and danger.

Europe 1945 is a painting from the same mould as *Keys*. It was exhibited as *Europe 1948* in his 1950 exhibition, but Johnson's own photograph of the painting records it with the former title, which also seems to clarify its meaning. Skeletal lizard driftwood crawls along a barren plain beneath post-atomic clouds. A road sign, where there are no roads left, is both a reminder of the human civilisation that seems to have vanished and also a signifier of the human figure. This standing form is a mockery of our dehumanised culture, but all that remains of it.

The most dramatic of the paintings of this period is probably *Crucifixion*, painted in 1946, which Johnson exhibited at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1949. Already in 1949, Waddington's group of Ulster painters have begun to dominate the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Dublin's avant-garde academy. O'Neill, Campbell, Middleton and Dillon also showed works, in some cases more than one, and it is interesting that they are in general the most expensive works for sale. *Crucifixion* is priced at £47-10. O'Neill's *Nude with Blue Skirt*, now in the collection of the Ulster Museum, was £55 and Middleton's *Woman with Roses*, £52-10.

The respected Dublin critic Edward Sheehy considered *Crucifixion* Johnson's "most impressive picture yet". We seem to be watching from behind a human-like figure on a cross; it



Europe

could also be a tall, etiolated creature whose arm is supported by a crutch. Mocking and contorted driftwood creatures crowd around this ambiguous form on an empty but seductively smooth plain, perhaps a dried-up river bed.

In mood and meaning, these paintings recall T.S. Eliot’s evocation of a sterile and de-spiritualised world.

“This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man’s hand
under the twinkle of a fading star”¹

In April 1950 Johnson exhibited twenty recent works at Waddington’s and noted in his catalogue that eleven of these had sold, mostly to Dublin collectors, with one going to Limerick, one to Belfast and two to London. Catalogue number four, *Landscape, Rock Pool*, was purchased by the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art and it remains, quite remarkably, the only work by Johnson in a museum collection in Dublin. (It is equally remarkable that the Ulster Museum only has a late acrylic painting by Johnson, although Down County Museum now owns the important *Shipyards, Kilkeel*, painted while Johnson lived in Northern Ireland).

The paintings in this show cover a range of styles and moods and seem to point both backwards and also forwards to the next body of work Johnson was about to exhibit. *Fortune Teller* and *Clown* (the latter purchased by Zoltan Lewinter Frankl, the Belfast collector, are angular, stylised, colourful and representational in a way that is reminiscent of Johnson’s paintings of the earlier 1940s, such as *Byrne’s Pub*. *Belfast* is a flat geometric formal treatment of part of a terrace of two-up, two-down houses that typifies the stern and unforgiving Victorian ethos of the city. Johnson always remembered with a shudder the “pew brown façades and lip-pursed ardour of Belfast”.

The formal qualities of *Belfast* are developed in *Landscape with Rock Pool* and *Cocotte*. While surrealism was the predominant mood in Johnson’s painting in the later 1940s, Johnson’s equal interest in cubism informs the paintings of the 1950s, used in a way that elucidates his own thinking in this period. In this way, Johnson’s surrealist voice becomes more complex and detached at this time. The barren mood of *A Voice Crying* becomes less emotive and angry in *Rock Pool*, which could almost be a more detached and playful treatment of the same idea. *Cocotte*



Landscape Rock Pool

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 1925

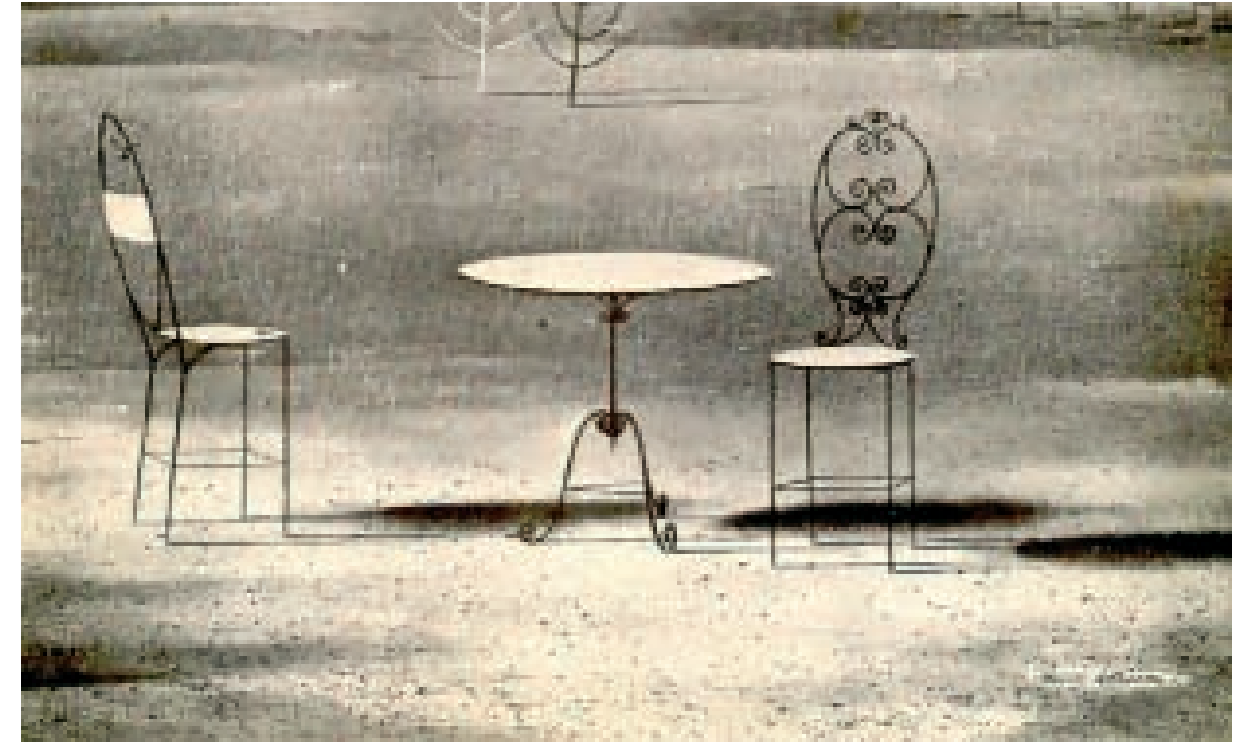
too, is Johnson as homo ludens, taking a child's game and allowing it to dominate a landscape and endowing it with a biomorphic relationship to the moon that just fits within the picture space.

This increasingly individual and controlled voice is consistently present in the seven paintings Johnson included in 'Five Irish Painters' at the Tooth Gallery in London in the summer of 1951. Paintings such as *Toi et Moi*, *En Passant* and *La Durance* have a more sophisticated treatment of pictorial space which becomes more obvious in the 1950s. The first two of these paintings are simple and elegant suggestions of absence and allow us to imagine the human relationships at which they hint.

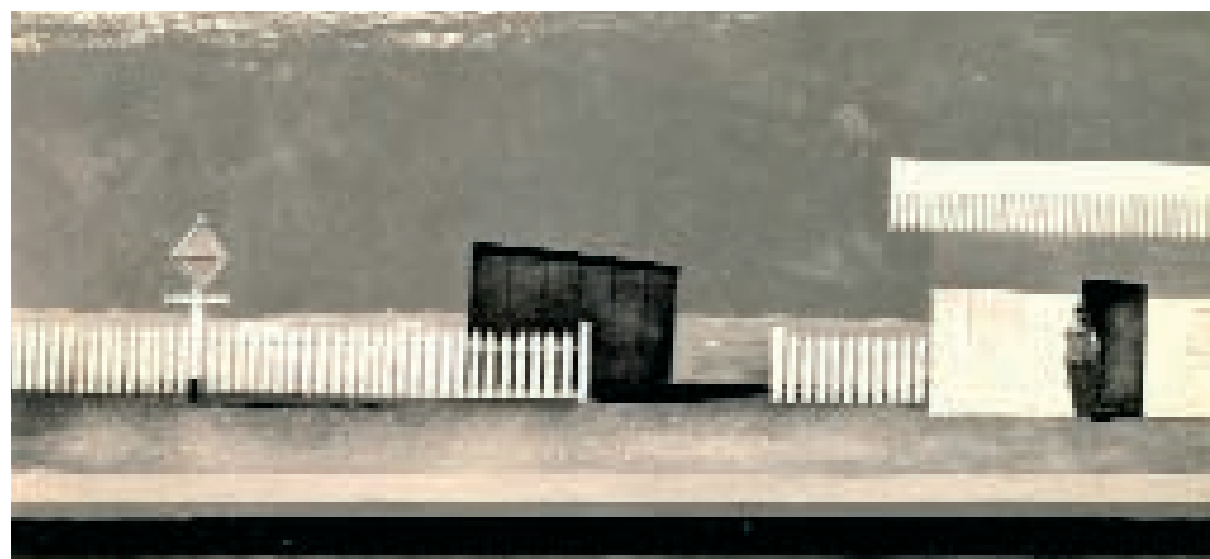
An extremely difficult family holiday to the south of France in 1949 or 1950, camping near the River Durance appears to have inspired a number of these paintings. His marriage broke down at this time and he travelled home alone. The single figure waiting on the empty station platform of *En Passant*, the two empty chairs in *Toi et Moi* that face away from each other while two trees in the distance stand close together, as well as the barren and stony river bed of *La Durance*, all suggest the isolation and torment of this period of Johnson's life.



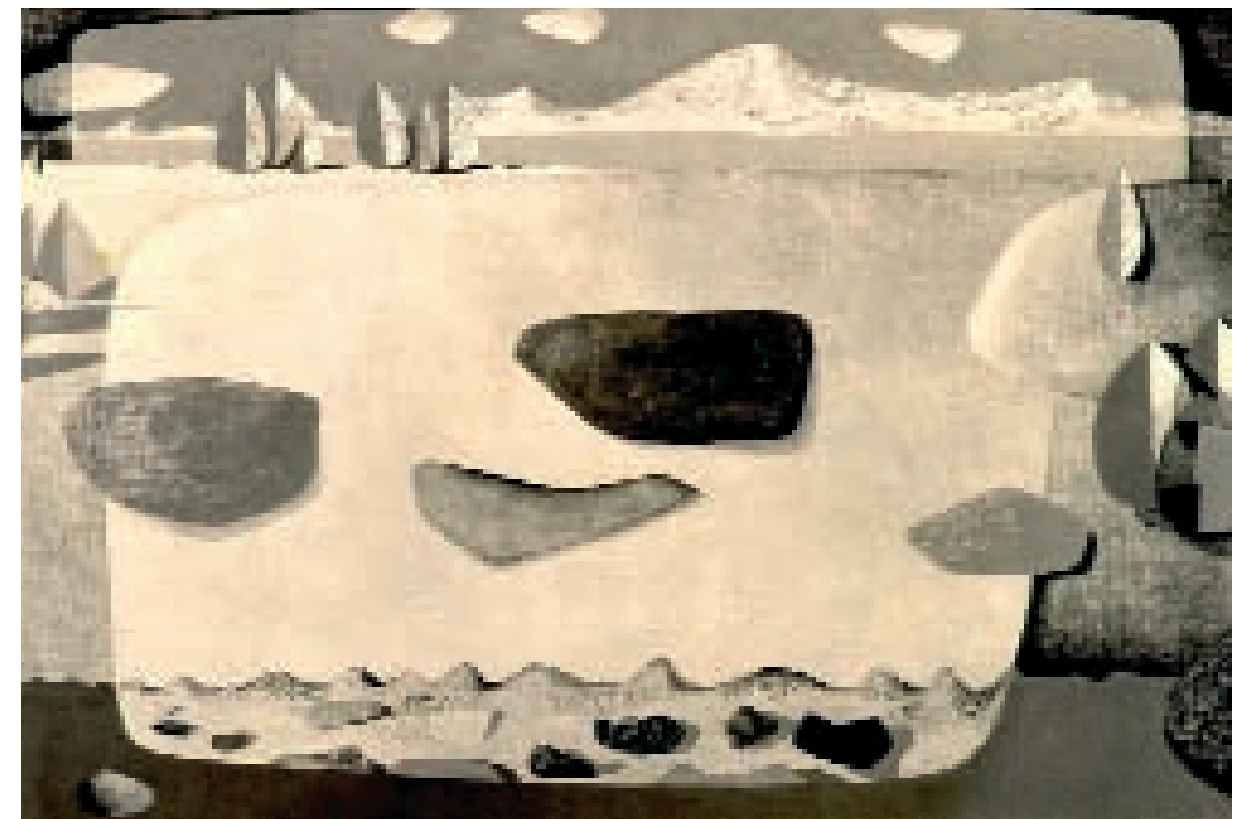
House by the Canal



Toi et Moi



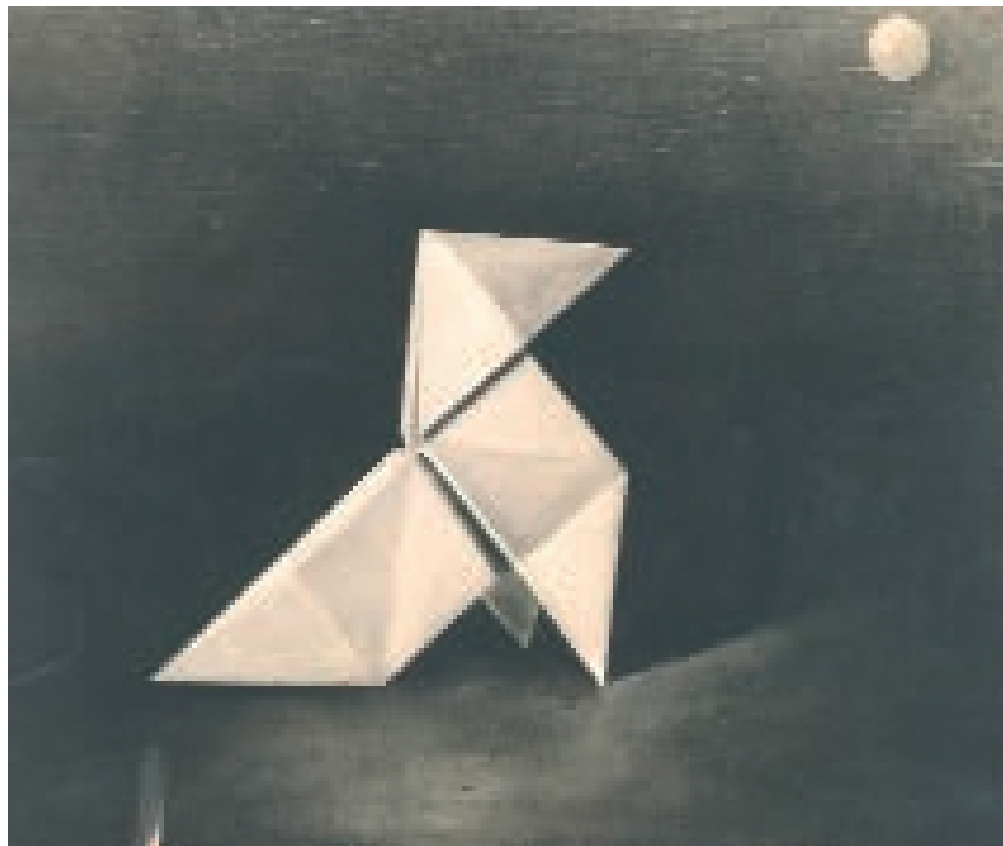
En Passant



La Durance



Belfast



Cocotte



Bird in Hand

The third almost suggests collage, which Johnson does not seem to have used until the 1970s. They both suggest illusion and destroy it. Stones and shells seem to sit on a ledge but also are placed on other planes that shift our perceptions of the space. The sky in another work of the time, *Monkstown Whorl*, is pulled apart as if it were a piece of material, for the sun to shine through.

The professional progress which Nevill Johnson had made in the years he had spent so far in Dublin was remarkable. Much of the work he exhibited well into his time in Dublin was probably painted in Ulster, or at the time he moved south, but there had by 1950 been a striking shift towards a more formally complex and intellectually ambitious manner of painting, which then dominated the increasingly dark paintings of the 1950s. His standing amongst the Dublin art world was rising and the critic of the *Dublin Magazine* wrote of his 1952 exhibition that it “shows such phenomenal development since his one-man show of last year that...I feel that Johnson can be numbered amongst that first half-dozen important modern painters in the country at the moment.

“I am not suggesting that his line of development has changed: he is still concerned with the creation of a personal symbolism. But whereas formerly his detachment, expressed through an extreme austerity in execution, deprived his work of depth, a considerable proportion of his more recent pictures show him to be a painter not only of imagination, but of feeling. In other words his intellectualism has become fused with emotion and his imagination tempered with feeling. A picture like *Harlequin* or *À la Recherche*, though basically formal creations, contains at the same time an element of poetry which raise them far above the limitations of abstraction. They are satisfying, not merely architecturally, but emotionally. *Lot’s Wife*, though nearer to abstraction, has an impressive dignity of form. Some of the less ambitious pictures, the gay and strongly-coloured *King*, or the direct and simple *Cat*, show Johnson’s newly acquired freedom in his approach to paint.”

It is revealing that the most observant and acute writing on Johnson’s work dates from this period in Dublin. Johnson always recalled his life in Dublin with pleasure, “day to day living passed unhurried, inexpensive, and a light-footed sanity prevailed.” His success with Waddington’s and at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art was increased by high profile London exhibitions such as that arranged by Waddington at Heal’s and particularly at Arthur Tooth and Sons, a gallery which exhibited contemporary British artists, such as Henry Moore, as well as nineteenth century European painters. In hindsight it prefigures Waddington’s interest in the wider market for paintings outside Ireland, but it must have promised much for his Ulster artists too. Johnson’s work was also included in an exhibition, *Contemporary Ulster Paintings* held in Edinburgh in 1951 by the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council. He was represented by the painting bought by Zoltan Lewinter Frankl and most of the exhibition was indeed drawn from this remarkable and wide-ranging collection.

In moving to Dublin, Johnson to a degree abandoned the middle classes and the concomitant security, and found a world of outsiders with whom he felt a sense of liberation. As he wrote,



Still Life with Falling Leaves

“There existed a fair degree of inequality in Dublin in the fifties. The poor remained poor, observing their stations; secure in the knowledge that poverty lay ahead, well-defined.” He recalls a small and dingy bar in Dublin where he was first treated with suspicion and gradually accepted in a strange euphoria of sympathy and solidarity. In having no obligations, perhaps, Johnson could choose friends according to his own conscience, and it seems likely that alongside his anger is a sense of guilt at having been part of the class of officers, politicians and businessmen who held themselves apart from the underclasses they had helped to create.

In this we can perhaps see the starting point for one of the most remarkable of the many diverse projects Johnson pursued throughout his life. It was probably in 1952 that he began to photograph on a systematic basis the Dublin he later described as *The People’s City*. It was a city of slums decayed from Georgian grandeur, of a freewheeling spirit that just survived the poverty, disease and lack of opportunities that was all it offered the inhabitants of the areas that Johnson visited. It was a city of markets, carts and pubs that seemed to have avoided the mechanisation that had irrevocably altered other European cities, that almost recalled the Paris Ernest Hemingway had written of almost half a century earlier. It was also a city dominated by the



Bird



The Cottage

church; Johnson's wandering priests and nuns are strange images, unworldly, surreal, slightly mocked yet always subtly powerful.

In this world Johnson must have been an equally confusing figure. His sympathies clearly lay with the subjects of his photographs, yet he was by upbringing, bearing and accent a figure of the establishment; even worse, the British establishment. However he explained the presence of himself, his Leica (purchased with a grant from the Arts Council) and his assistant, Anne Yeats, it is clear from the photographs that he must have calmed any concerns and perhaps even began to fade into the background and record an unselfconscious life going on around him. The notebook exists in which he divided the city in a grid and then noted the route and the photographs he had taken according to this grid.

A lot of these photographs are of children, at ease and showing off, intrigued by the stranger, playing in groups and unaware of being watched. They are sometimes dominated by their surroundings, more often in control of the familiar streets that form their playground. The grime and decay of their surroundings adds a layer of pathos beneath the energy, confidence and enthusiasm of childhood. One image of a girl and her even younger brother on the steps of a gaunt Georgian doorway that gapes behind them suggests the inescapable poverty that will swallow them up.

Graham Greene, from a similar generation and background as Johnson, visited Dublin in 1923, wrote "It is the poverty and expensiveness of Dublin that first impress visitors. The houses are dilapidated, the roads unswept...But the most impressive thing about Dublin is its expectant but apathetic air. Everyone is idle but waiting."²

Many of the adults he photographed cannot be seen outside the context of this cycle of poverty, yet Johnson always evokes the "maverick undertow" of the Dubliner, "buttressed by piety, capped and shod by wit and crafty indolence". In the same way, despite the ruthless honesty in Johnson's recording of the city, his own love of its visual appearance, its light and atmosphere is almost always there.

As with his paintings, Johnson's social anger and his sense of humour co-exist within these photographs. His eye is always struck by the surreal, particularly in junk shops or religious statuary, and by strange juxtapositions, such as the two gauntly black nuns like crows passing a boarded-up tobacconist's shop watched by a curious group of seated girls and a rather dismissive pair of standing boys.

Photographers such as Perry Ogden have commented on Johnson's technical skill with his Leica, particularly as he does not seem to have had any experience as a photographer. It seems inexplicable that Johnson never returned to photography in any substantial way in the future. Little seems to have happened with these photographs at the time, but a selection were eventually

² Graham Greene – 'Impression of Dublin', 1923, published in 'Reflections', ed. Judith Adamson, Penguin, London



Two women, Parnell Street



Lower Dommick Street



Coal and potato store, Marrowbone Lane

published in book form in 1980, *Dublin: The People's City*, which was awarded a prize at the Leipzig Book Fair. One set of negatives was purchased by RTE, whose plans to create a reel of them to use as a film with music came to nothing. The other is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, although its path there seems a little unclear. The best tribute to Nevill Johnson as a photographer occurred in 2003, when a selection of the images was reprinted and exhibited in Dublin at the Lemonstreet Gallery.

This was perhaps the high point of Nevill Johnson's love of Dublin. He had achieved a measure of security through his art and his teaching. This latter activity was a mixed blessing; while there were a number of amateur lady 'Hollyhockers', he also had a number of serious pupils such as Anne Yeats and Cecil King, a businessman who subsequently became a successful abstract painter. He had also become involved in the theatre, designing and painting stage sets, of which some photographs survive.

Perhaps one of the most interesting events for Johnson at this period was an exhibition by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, held in 1951, in which Johnson exhibited alongside Thurloe Conolly and Louis le Brocquy. Although he was never personally close to either of these, they were perhaps closer to him as artists than the Ulster group he had initially been shown alongside in the technical and intellectual ambition of their art and also in terms of their relationship to international painting in the 1940s and 1950s.

The ambition of his work takes Johnson beyond any of his contemporaries in Dublin; the closest comparison is with Louis le Brocquy at this period. Johnson's subject matter had altered from the unpopulated wastelands of the immediate post-war years. Whereas before there had always been the suggestion of human absence through objects that took on human significance, figures now begin to dominate. One can speculate whether the number of photographic images of people in their environment that Johnson took at this time engendered a sympathy with the individual that had previously been encapsulated by a wider and more anonymous common humanity. Perhaps also he saw the broader expressive possibilities which the human form opened up.

These paintings have a common atmosphere that runs through them. Even the more diverse examples, of nurses and nuns, while they have a strangeness that is almost difficult to take seriously, have an unsettling air. In *The Stranger*, exhibited in Johnson's 1952 one-man exhibition, a mother and child sit in a bare room, the child touching her mother's leg but turning to look out at the landscape beyond, where a stranger is approaching from a distance. The fragmentation of every form into various geometric arrangements, the muted palette and the simplicity of content follows on from a painting such as *Landscape with Rock Pool*. Passages of the surface are smoothly and evenly finished (the folds of material of the mother's skirt are even reminiscent of the cliffs in *Linenscape* almost a decade earlier), but we can see a slightly rougher and more opaque surface in parts which prefigures the increasingly worked surfaces of the next few years.



The Stranger

The stripped-down space, the edgy and insecure domestic environment and the suggestion of some unsettling narrative could be compared to le Brocquy's paintings of the early 1950s, particularly his series of family paintings and figures in interiors. The world in which le Brocquy places his families and prisoners is stripped and abstracted to essentials but remains illusionistic, whereas Johnson suggests an artificiality in the world as we perceive its structure. No form is solid, our perception is only ever our perception, not necessarily the truth.

The theme of the family was particularly prevalent in post-war Europe, presumably because the idea of domestic security disrupted and under threat not only mirrored fact for many families across Europe and other continents during and after the war, but also provided a clear and striking image of the broader conflict and its psychological and spiritual aftermath. Keith Vaughan and William Scott painted versions of the subject in the early 1940s that might well have influenced

le Brocquy, who was closer to mainstream English art than Johnson and spent part of this post-war period living in London.

Johnson himself used the image of the circus family to express this alienation. The wandering acrobats, jugglers, clowns, animals and camp followers of the circus had overtones of the dispossessed families and groups wandering across post-war Europe, but they could also be read in terms of the place of the artist in relation to society. Like the circus folk, the artist is an entertainer who remains on the edge of society, certainly in part because he rejects its way of life and its values and judgements. In 1952 Johnson exhibited *Harlequin*, and a series of paintings of circus performers dates from this period. They are reminiscent of Picasso's treatment of the subject in the early years of the century in the poetry and physical strength with which the performers are endowed. But while Picasso suggests their solidarity against the world, Johnson not only places them in a bare, hostile world, they are also isolated from each other. Either there seems to be a deliberate avoidance of contact or they threaten each other. Their highly abstracted treatment constructs them as a monumental series of geometric shapes. In one painting, a massively angular acrobat seated on a jagged chair holds a girl with his large and solid arm. She looks towards another acrobat who returns her gaze; he is lithe and elegant but small and vulnerable beside his rival. These works are romantic, yet resonant with feelings of alienation, fear, longing, uncertainty and isolation.

In 1953, Johnson painted his second version of *The Family*. It is one of the most detailed treatments of his circus series and also one of the few that present the circus family as a unit. Vaughan, le Brocquy and Scott all showed the family in a domestic setting. Johnson's have their circus tents behind them, but they have no fixed, permanent room in which to exist. Formally, they are treated in quite a different manner, broken down into simple geometric shapes which are repeated throughout the canvas, with occasional individually identifying passages. They are faceless, as are nearly all Johnson's circus people, and at times almost become lost in the densely worked and gritty surface of the painting, a surface that suggest Johnson had perhaps been looking at the work of Francis Bacon. This family is arranged as if for a photograph; the muted greys and off-whites as well as the loss of detail, almost suggest a very old and faded sepia photograph. There is power in these forms and also immense pathos. The boy holding his father's hand balances on a stick-thin leg; a tiny girl almost vanishes into shadow on the extreme right. The painting is a moving reminder that at this time Johnson's two sons were living in Dublin but at a remove from him.

Interestingly, *The Family* is perhaps further away from le Brocquy than most of Johnson's other circus and figure paintings of the time, when the two seemed to be working along closer lines. It is probably one of the latest of these paintings. Johnson did exhibit a painting of the same title in

1947, which has caused some confusion. This second version was first exhibited at a varied group show at Waddington's in the summer of 1953, before moving on to an exhibition organised by John McGuire alongside his presentation of a collection of Irish Linens. It also featured that same year in an *Exhibition of Contemporary Irish Art* held in Bray.

The catalogue for this exhibition mentions that Johnson had been given one-man shows in Dublin, London and New York. Unfortunately no information seems to have survived from the last two, but the fact indicates a success and stature that makes the present ignorance of his work remarkable. It seems to be about the mid 1950s that he began to exhibit less with Waddington who, as co-sponsor with the Irish Government, organised a number of exhibitions of *Artists of Ireland* in the 1950s, touring various venues in the USA. A catalogue for one of these survives, and the artists then included Thurloe Conolly, Hilary Heron, le Brocqy, Patrick Scott and Patrick Swift, as well as Johnson.

He notes a brief return to Belfast when he stayed with George and Mercy McCann, perhaps his closest artist friends, when Stanley Spencer, whose niece lived in Northern Ireland, was staying with them too. Johnson was unimpressed by the English painter and his work, and it is remarkable how uninterested in most contemporary or older art Johnson remained throughout his life. The influences that had any effect came early; John Luke, Dali, de Chirico, Yves Tanguy perhaps above all the surrealists, as well as Braque, Juan Gris and the one enduring influence, Picasso. Johnson possessed few books on art, rarely visited galleries or museums or travelled abroad to see exhibitions, and very few of his friends were painters. For him, painting seems to have been a way



Mountain Child



The Family

of relating to the world, a way in which he could pursue, clarify and express his own ideas. He had no interest in being an artist for its own sake or to make money from it.

For these reasons, once self-doubt and frustration began to dog him in Dublin, one can see why its effect was so dramatic. Financial reward, status or reputation meant nothing if his painting did not achieve its intentions for him and progress seemed blocked.

In the meantime, in the search through the works of the last decade for a key to unearthing some spiritual meaning and regenerative power in the world, Johnson sought a way to introduce a concept of magic into his painting. John Berger wrote “To some extent all art derives its energy from the magical impulse – the impulse to master the world by means of word, rhythm, images and signs. Magic first led man to the beginnings of science. And now, modern science confirms, if not the practice, at least some of the concepts of magic...Magic offered a blueprint of a unified world in which division – and therefore alienation – was impossible...Magic may be an illusion, but it is less profoundly so than utilitarianism.”³

In *The Other Side of Six* Johnson notes his interest in the ideas of Rupert Sheldrake, who “writes of time and space-denying chreodes bearing atavistic messages from a deep primeval code through morphogenetic fields which determine our behaviour – and write our songs.” He makes a connection with these latent powers, magical or occult (in the sense of latent or unknown) and making a good drawing or looking back at a painting.

Two large, ambitious and presumably related canvases that date from the second half of the 1950s try to fuse magic and science and create this unified world. One was commissioned by Cyril Lord, whose carpet factory near Donaghadee, on the coast of north Down, looks out over the Copeland Islands. The painting looks out over a stylised arrangement of small jagged islands, one larger one with what appear to be ruined buildings, with a large cogged wheel in the foreground, on which sit a small box with windows, a beach ball and a large red cone, these acting as two symbols of the factory and its seaside location. The cone is inscribed with magical symbols and it is the force that dominates and unifies this unsettling and dehumanised landscape, in which even nature seems to threaten.

The fragmentation of form and the disruption of the illusion of space that marked other paintings of the early 1950s is used here in a much more advanced form, so that it seems to battle with the cone to control the landscape. Johnson’s omnivorous intelligence was also fascinated by science in all its aspects and he saw in this attempt to break down form a search to find a visual parallel in paintings for the unfixed molecular structure around us. We tend to settle comfortably into a single view of a world that is never fixed, and these paintings seek to make us



Composition

³ John Berger ‘Success and Failure of Picasso’, Penguin, London, 1965, p. 99

consider the actual truth of all we know and instinctively feel about what is around us and how we relate to it.

These two paintings are unlike anything else created in Ireland at the time, in terms of their density of idea and image, and their extremely complex formal language. Yet when we look back about fifteen years to *Shipyard, Kilkeel* there is a clear line of development and a firm sense of purpose and personality. The paintings are extremely colourful after the grey tonality of Johnson's work in the 1950s, but two of probably the last paintings from his Dublin period return to the bleakness and emptiness of *Landscape with Rock Pool*. *No Vile Men* and *Magdalene* also recall the religious overtones of earlier work. The former was exhibited in the 1956 Exhibition of Irish Living Art, depicting a rough and rocky wasteland with the floating remnants of mushroom clouds. The latter is dated 1957; a wandering figure passes a dried-up landscape. Perhaps it is a self-portrait. Certainly it was at this point that Johnson became once more a rootless, unsettled figure.

It seems to have been around 1957 that Johnson first returned to England, to London and then Warwickshire and, although he came back to Ireland for a short time about two years later, this was really the end of his time in his adopted homeland. There were, as he admitted in *The Other Side of Six*, personal reasons for this return, but it also seems to have been underpinned by a growing lack of faith in his own work and a realisation that Dublin had become too cosy an environment, with its "easy acclaim". Certainly one can feel that the pub world, Jammet's, Waddington's and the Irish painters around him had become claustrophobic rather than liberating, as a decade earlier they had appeared to him. Johnson had even found success in related fields, carrying out a large decorative design of bicycles for Brown Thomas, the Dublin department store owned by John McGuire, for whom he also designed a wooden tray.

As a neutral country during World War Two, the Irish Free State had been in the fortunate position of being able to continue its cultural life much as it had done before, with a small influx of interesting figures who were refugees or avoiding conscription. Indeed, as money could not easily be spent outside Ireland, it was focused on the local economy, and art was the beneficiary of this. But as the war ended and figures drifted away to London or Paris, cities which had recovered enough from the war to reassert their cultural dominance, Dublin must have seemed increasingly provincial. This sense of isolation was perhaps exacerbated by Johnson's one-man exhibition in Washington in 1957, ironically arguably a high point of his professional career, but at the same time an event which might have given him the distance to consider the direction of his work and his life. Johnson chose what he described as "exile in my birthland". This decision was not the 'nervous breakdown' which has been described as the reason for his decision to leave Ireland.

There remains the difficult question of how the art Nevill Johnson created during his time in Ireland should be viewed within the context of art in Ireland. In some ways Ireland formed him as an artist. It provided a fluid identity, a social context, time and sufficient financial freedom to



No Vile Men



Foreign City

learn his trade and practise it, and there is no question that much of his best work was painted in the 1940s and 1950s.

Very little of his mature work draws on Ireland as a subject, either in terms of place or people, although in his photography he left, in my opinion, the most rounded and eloquent visual portrait of Dublin that exists. Perhaps it needed an outsider to carry this off. Arguably, most Irish painting does not simply draw on its country and people and traditions as subjects, it becomes confined by them. A painter of purpose can take what is closest to hand and give it a resonance that any human being can understand and learn from. This is not a simple judgement as many Irish painters needed their native land to find the spark of invention within them. Gerard Dillon might be an example of this as, although much of his painting of the west of Ireland becomes sentimental, occasionally there is a broader poetry that he achieves.

Part of Nevill Johnson's importance in Ireland, in my opinion, lies in his refusal to be seduced and diverted by the soft charms of his adopted land away from making serious comment on what was happening outside it. His painting was driven by the passion for visual invention and communication that was in him as a boy, but he matched this with a reason to use this passion, a sense of moral



Magdalene



Bird

outrage against the establishment, a concern for the situation of others across the world, a loss of faith and a spiritual centre in his life which he sought to fill, a quest that his art documents.

His influence on his contemporaries is difficult to pin down. As a teacher he left behind a certain legacy in the work of Cecil King and particularly Anne Yeats. His sophisticated response to cubism and surrealism did not have the broad legacy of decorative cubism in Ireland, instead emphasising content with more contemporary relevance in a style that was more equipped to convey the questioning and existential probing of this period. He was certainly one of the leaders of the group that formed around Victor Waddington in the post-war era, which re-energised Irish art in the 1950s and began to make it more outward-looking. Hardly a notable exhibition of contemporary Irish art seems to have been held in Ireland or beyond that did not include Johnson, so that one cannot doubt that he was regarded as amongst the elite group of artists in Ireland at that time. In 1956 he was even represented in the exhibition *Fifty Years of Irish Painting*. The process of being adopted as an ‘Irish artist’ was well underway.



Dark Head

But Johnson did not leave the mark in Ireland which the quality and originality of his work would lead one to expect. Clearly in part this must have been because he left when still in his mid forties. As an Englishman, too, he was always perhaps something of an outsider and his work has little immediate reference to Ireland. Also, in the context of Irish painting, his art was difficult then and became more so in later years.

There has been little wide knowledge of Johnson’s painting. Much of it has been dispersed too widely to be easily found, few paintings are in public collections, there has never been an attempt by any museum to gather and exhibit his work and any scholarship that exists regarding Johnson is limited and often inaccurate or misinformed. So it has been difficult to gain any sense of his work or his place in Irish art.

It seems important that work was created in Ireland which communicates beyond its immediate surroundings and that this should encourage Ireland to claim at least part of Nevill Johnson’s legacy. Otherwise the painting produced here over that period begins to look rather thin and limited in scope and ambition. He remains one of the few artists of this period working in Ireland who can be described as a painter and not just an Irish painter.



Figures in a landscape (detail)

III. Wilby and after 1959–1977

ENGLAND IN THE LATE 1950s was a very different world from Ireland, but these differences were to accelerate as the decade moved into the sixties. Ireland's wartime prosperity must have contrasted with England in the 1950s, a period of economic recovery and social re-evaluation without the euphoria of the immediate post-war years. It was still the old Britain in many ways, but it was also on the cusp of a radically new era and the art world became a mirror for many of these changes. Nevill Johnson's return to England was a result of events but also a precipitator of change, throwing him into a world that must have been slightly reminiscent of the Ireland he had inhabited. Dublin bars gave way to the more cosmopolitan and edgy world of the Mandrake Club, the Caves de France and the wider Soho bohemian community that has become so closely identified with the writers and painters of the 1950s.

Nevill Johnson found shelter in the house of the remarkable Cedra Castellain, then Cedra Osborne. Among her other lodgers were the forever linked painters Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, very much part of the Soho milieu. It would be intriguing to know what contact they had with Johnson who refers in his diaries on a number of occasions and with great sadness to MacBryde's death in the 1960s. The two Roberts were both established in the London art world and Colquhoun in particular has come to be seen as an artist who to a degree epitomises the mood and style of the period.

Around this time Johnson destroyed much of the work in his own possession, according to his own words. This was not the first time; he had acted in the same way just before his move to Dublin had precipitated a new rush of work, and in later years he was to discuss this process of destruction with Eoin O'Brien. We will never know how much work was destroyed in these swoops, but it explains why so much of the work we know Johnson painted and exhibited in the 1940s and 1950s seems to have disappeared.

It also seems to return us to the idea that these changes of place forced Johnson into a new beginning, shedding a number of skins with each move. It demonstrates the genuine level of dissatisfaction Johnson felt with his work and also his determination to confront this and to produce work that reflected that inner struggle. There was no work left on which to fall back to sell, exhibit or justify his position as a painter.

This time, as well, things were different. Johnson's slow-burning crisis in the late 1950s drove him to the point at which he not only destroyed existing work, but also stopped painting entirely. He wrote of it as the lowest ebb he had reached and its implications were severe. He had no work and no money, and despite his experience in business he had no urge to return to this life. He worked as a milkman, as a night-time exchange operator in a hotel and was also employed for a period as a painter and decorator. He must have hoped that this period of "analysis, experiment and reappraisal" would lead him back to painting, but for this period he endured poverty and the constant boredom of jobs that did nothing beyond feed him. He wrote of his frustrations with the indignity of poverty as well as the inhibitions it brings.

In terms of judging Nevill Johnson as an artist, we do have to take into account this refusal to paint when he has no clear sense of how he can find a means of expression. None of his work was done without serious intent. None of it was done for money, out of habit or for its own sake. A remarkable diary exists that Johnson seems to have begun at a time when he could sense the need and the purpose of painting returning. It dates from 1962 and is the only detailed diary as such that he seems to have preserved. It remains a record that transcends the personal and individual and becomes an honest description of an artist returning to his own work after a long period of inactivity and self-examination. *The Other Side of Six* is a poetic but controlled account that disguises much and avoids many difficult and intimate subjects. There is no editing in this diary, as it does not seem intended to be read, although there is a dramatic structure that suggests perhaps an eye on the possibility of publishing a version of this at some later date.

It marks the second major stage in Nevill Johnson's life as an artist. From the mid-sixties he seems to have worked without a stop until his death three and a half decades later. After these bleak years a decision to paint was made, and from now on the questions only revolved around the nature of his work, not whether to pursue it.

The diary coincides with the time Johnson spent at Wilby in Suffolk. An inheritance, received after his mother's death, had enabled him to buy a number of small cottages and some land there, a place that had remained relatively untouched by the modern world. He felt his luck was changing and began to gather the strength to "break through the paper bag" and start painting again. Wilby was to provide a resolution to his personal life, in that it precipitated the end of one relationship with an Irish lady living in London and provided a solid foundation for the beginnings of a life with Margaret, who was to become Johnson's second wife. Her dislike of the



Ballywilliam

extremely simple and self-sufficient country existence they shared led to a return to London in the later 1960s, but Wilby left an indelible mark on Johnson’s work, which only becomes clear in the work of the 1970s. In these diaries, images, thoughts and moods that one associates with later work appear in Johnson’s descriptions of his everyday life; Wilby, this point in Johnson’s life and everything associated with it, re-define the psychological landscape that his work will explore consistently over the next decades.

The writing begins in London with preparations for the move to Suffolk and a brief view of the life he had led since the late fifties, but its tone is lifted by the hope of this new beginning and above all a feeling that the moment to return to painting is approaching. But we can also feel how much the art world and contemporary art have changed. He records a trawl around the galleries of Mayfair, presumably trying to find somewhere that might be interested in his own work. The list already includes the Robert Fraser Gallery and the Kasmin Gallery (where he saw David Hockney’s work). The change from Dublin and Waddington exhibiting O’Neill, Middleton and le Brocquy must have been stark. Intriguingly, he does not mention Victor Waddington, now firmly established in Cork Street, despite the fact that he does not seem to have ever fallen out with Waddington and indeed the decision to part company seems to have been Johnson’s.

The sense of urgency to paint again quickened and on March 15th 1962 there appears a momentous note: “my first painting for 6½ years.” That same year a variety of work followed, pen and ink drawings, collage, pastel and monotypes. There are many conflicting stories of these years in the first half of that decade that emanate from Johnson himself, and as few works seem to have survived and nothing was exhibited it is difficult to establish a clear picture of these works. We can only work in broad strokes.

Throughout his time in Ireland, Johnson’s work was predominantly and almost uniquely painted in oil on canvas or board, with some use of a gesso-prepared surface and various mixes of tempera. The ‘English’ period is almost defined by its experimentation amongst different media. Much of his painting from the sixties onwards was in acrylic; he drew constantly and exhibited ink drawings and wash drawings regularly; he also painted gouaches and more occasionally watercolours. Gouache and acrylic seemed to have provided him with an opacity of texture and an accompanying solidity of form that suited the more abstract and evenly fragmented structure of these later paintings. They also suited the increasingly clear and bright colour of this work.

Collage became arguably the medium that allowed Johnson the visual and intellectual freedom that pure painting could not accomodate. His collages range from paintings on a board which has been overlaid with paper so that this layering becomes almost invisible, to works which hark back to the synthetic cubist collages of Braque and Picasso, interpolating stolen images with illusionistic textured or trompe l’oeil cut-outs, around painted passages and coloured planes. He



Hismosis



Deportation

exhibited them above all in the 1970s and their visual sophistication and control of effect was often held in balance by a daring and wit that perhaps best expresses Nevill Johnson's personality as a mature artist.

As with photography and collage, printmaking revealed Johnson's willingness to work hard at a new medium, as well as his eventual ease with these acquired skills. A series of monotypes from around 1965, of landscapes peopled with acrobats, looks back to the circus families and travellers of the 1950s in their subject, but they treat the figures in terms of an arrangement of abstract forms that have a close formal relationship to the landscape around them. While there remains an element of the pathos of the earlier paintings, these works also introduce the humour that is to be increasingly present in Johnson's paintings and drawings. His tentative return to confidence as a painter is surprising as these monotypes and the etchings Johnson made in the same period (work which alone would establish him as an artist of note) indicates a clear and confident establishment of a change in the mood and style of his work. The application of this painting style, however, can only be fully judged by Johnson's first exhibition held after this long break from showing publicly.

It is interesting that on at least two occasions in the 1960s, Johnson continued to exhibit work in the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. He included three paintings in 1966, including *Red Landscape* and *Morning Figure*, and two in 1968, *Foliation* and *No Title*. His contact address is given c/o the Dawson Gallery, a continuation of the Waddington Gallery insofar as it was run by Leo Smith, who had worked for Victor Waddington, and then taken over by Smith's assistant, John Taylor. This does contradict suggestions by Johnson that he did not exhibit during his period of 'reappraisal' and it is also interesting that having looked seriously at the gallery scene in London, he still preferred to exhibit in Dublin. Here there was undoubtedly still interest and familiarity with his work, but it is unlike Johnson to keep a foot in a safe camp. As none of these works are illustrated it is difficult to know in what manner he was then working, but one small surviving painting from this time suggests a much more pared down and more abstract style.

His first one-man exhibition for probably fifteen years took place in December 1970 at the Collector's Gallery on the Portobello Road in west London, not far from where Johnson was living at that time. It was successful and the artist's ledgers record various sales, some to friends, but a number to new collectors. This group of thirty-one paintings looks forward to the next three decades of exhibitions in a number of ways. Most obviously, all the larger paintings are in acrylic. While there are references to London (*Holland Park Encounter*, *Communication in Kensington Gardens*) the time spent in Wilby has brought a gentler tone to many of the titles. *Siesta*, *Landscape with Cows*, *Country House*, *Landscape with Birds*, *Figure in Autumn Landscape*. Whereas before the landscape was scarred by atomic explosions and conflict between humans, it now provides an escape from human activity. Living and working in the Suffolk countryside,



Morning Figure

enjoying the peace and anonymity of a life surrounded by animals and birds and few humans, and more conscious of a kinship with the men of past generations who had planted and maintained the land as he did, the absence of hope in many of the barren post-war landscapes had been replaced by a spiritual respite. Johnson now senses our place in some sort of harmony with the renewal of the natural world.

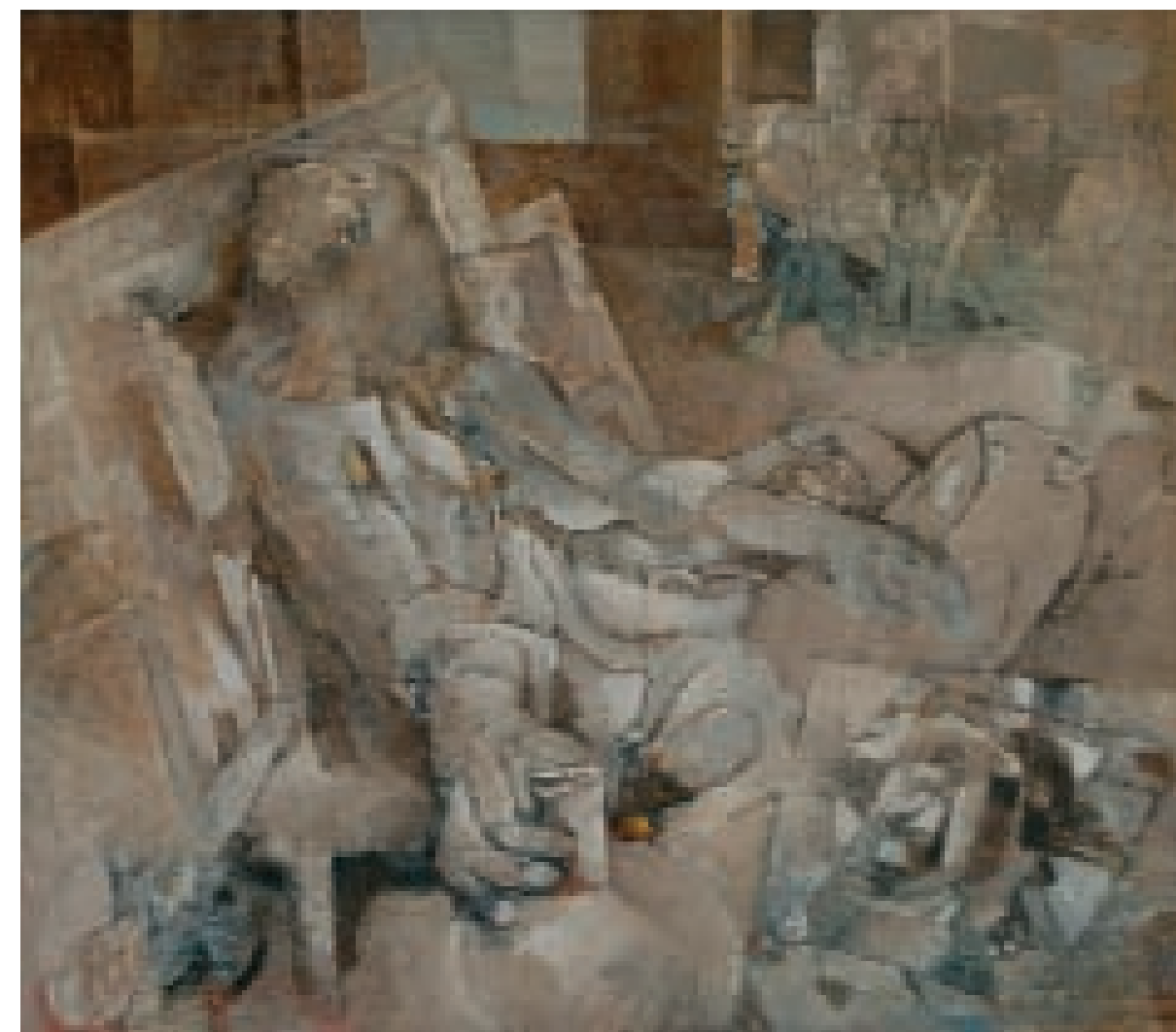
But whereas this softer and more lyrical, almost nostalgic atmosphere becomes apparent in the paintings of the later 1970s, these paintings are highly abstracted, linear and mechanised. Johnson's interest in physics and, more generally, in analysing the structure of human life is even more apparent here than in the last paintings from his time in Dublin. Understanding how our psychological nature is established, as well as the molecular and mathematical structure of the world we see around us and our interaction with it, all informed Nevill Johnson's approach to painting at this time. As such complex and uncertain material could never be replicated on its own terms on canvas, board or paper, he sought in his work to create a visual equivalent to suggest this fragmentation and as such to also describe the confusion and alienation of the human being in an increasingly dehumanised world: "concrete, glass and steel are cruelly inorganic...We humans are dwarfed, bullied and chivvied around these monstrous structures, our stature denied, our pride ignored...the quality of life is muffled and eroded. We have become onlookers – spectators of a system beyond our reach and touch."

Johnson has by the late 1960s established a visual vocabulary that he used through to the apparently non-referential paintings of the 1990s. Most striking is his extremely complex rendering of space. This is done without any imitation of a three dimensional space, a development of the 'stage set' worlds he created in *Cocotte* or *House by the Canal*, for example. *My Father's House* was a title Johnson was to use on a number of occasions, perhaps in reference to his attitude towards the Church, his failed relationship with his own father or referring to the passage that begins thus in the Bible, perhaps suggested merely by the ambiguity of its implications. The painting sets up an interrelated series of planes that overlap and pull us in and out of the picture space, suggesting levels of recession but without offering any static point at which the painting loses its dynamism. The rhythmic drawing that works between these planes is a mixture of more lyrical, cursive description of figures with awkward and tentative linked geometric and circular shapes that, in other paintings, suggest a strange and contorted machine.

Other titles Johnson was to continue to use included *The Machine for Saying Yes* and *The Machine for Saying Hello*, the former first appearing in the 1970 exhibition. Unsettled by the increasing mechanisation of life in the late 1960s, Johnson saw even basic human contact reduced to the action of machinery, eroding the magic that he had tried to express in the previous decade. The romanticism that Wilby was to bring to his painting in the 1970s is a small element within

this exhibition, but equally present are potentially threatening figures that suggest difficulties in communication. *Bossman* is extremely difficult to read beyond the hands at either side that reach out towards us. *Confrontation*, *Storm over Garden*, *Wasteland* are unsettling. In another, less abstract, work of the time, a man leans back with a drink, his head turned towards a group of figures who have just entered the room.

The isolation and threat of *A Voice Crying*, *The Stranger* or *Toi et Moi* has become less literal and less dramatic by 1970 but the everyday world that Johnson presents remains tense, complex and mysterious to us. His world is his own, but there is undeniably something of Beckett within it. Despite his stylistic closeness to the most rigorous analytical cubism, it is difficult to find any context for Johnson's painting in London in the early 1970s. The influence of America had instigated the non-referential Situation painting of the late 1950s and pop had dominated the 1960s. Francis Bacon was the painter to whom all contemporary painters looked in Britain at that



Untitled



Silent Encounter

time, but despite a not dissimilar mood shared between his work and Johnson's, there is no comparison to be sustained with him. There is a closer link with the paintings of Michael Andrews, who drank in and painted the Colony Room club in the 1950s and 1960s and might have met Johnson here or in another Soho drinking spot.

Johnson was to remain on his own as a painter and his greatest supporters and collectors were often from outside the world of art. The introduction to his next exhibition, at the Archer Gallery on Grafton Street in central London in 1972, was written by Dr Owen Franklin. Johnson himself included three thoughts that are an interesting guide to his sense of himself as a painter at that time.



Metropolis

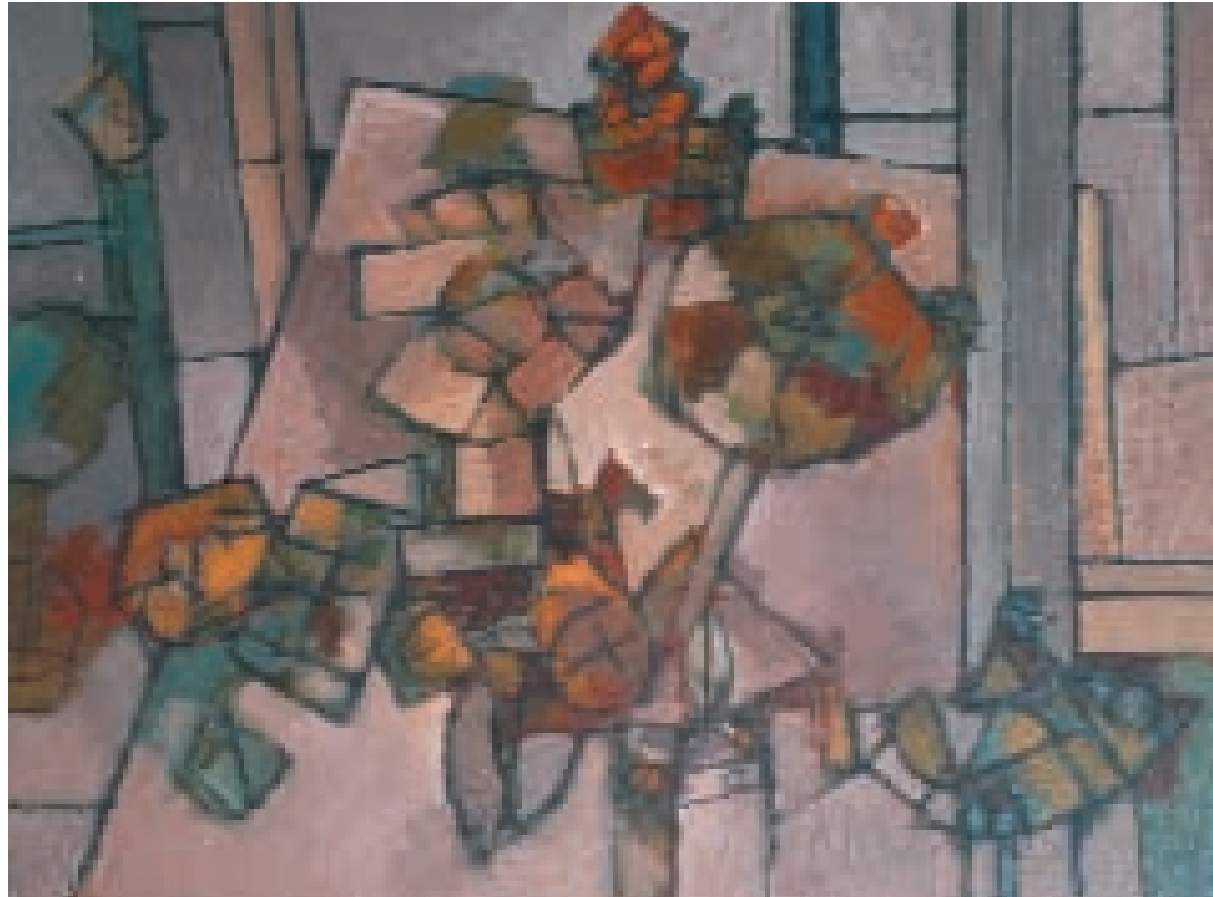
“Painting is an encounter. A struggle to uncover intuited structures.”

“Painting is a physical, visceral engagement, a contact with primordial codes. A response and a responsibility.”

“Of the work I make I am the first spectator. I am first-footing it in a strangely familiar place.”

For a highly articulate man of literary inclinations, Johnson rarely pronounced on his own painting and it is revealing that all three of these statements reinforce the idea of painting as an instinctive response to what is only expressed and understood through the act of making the image. Owen Franklin writes of Johnson “using a grammar of symbols that he has developed, symbols not referent to linear logic, but hierarchic, beyond the word...in that way one can avoid the censor of one's super-ego and suppress one's conscious personality.”

These artist's statements recall the magical signs that guide us through the post-war painting and hint at their meaning, and the empty shores of a bare world that he painted in which we have to re-discover ourselves. The artist has to find a language of signs and visual forms that reveal the



Still Life

physical structure of our surroundings and the metaphysical revelations implicit in this structure. To express this truth with clarity and honesty is the responsibility of the artist.

If Nevill Johnson's work is the creation and examination of a highly personal psychological landscape, it remains a landscape in which these private issues co-exist alongside broader meanings and implications. The paintings of the 1940s were rarely far removed from the world around him, which provided the shape of his symbolic world; shores and mountains drawn from the unique landscape of Northern Ireland. The 1950s began to people this harsh landscape with travelling people and those disdainful of society and its rules, such as he found in Dublin and the Wicklow hills. Through these he expressed a vision of the post-war world, physical in its expression but deeply spiritual in its implication. Johnson saw the world around him with an intensity that made the biblical references of his work a natural development.

But the years at Wilby transformed the metaphor by which Johnson as a painter understood the world around him and his own life. The deep impression of those years, the physical experience of living that harsh and primitive rural life which could still be found in England in the 1960s, as well as the metaphysical experience of that intense loneliness, the self-examination as an



Earthman



The Shepherd

artist and a man, all these created a mythology that drove his painting for the following four decades. Perhaps it also became an imaginative retreat from London life which, while it is referred to on occasions, is largely absent from Johnson's work. Wilby appears to have been the turning point at which decisions were made and an understanding of the shape of the future reached, so that the vocabulary of Wilby life extends in meaning into all that occurred subsequently. The psychological landscape took on the form of Wilby, the beauty of its ancient landscape, the renewal of the seasons, the disappointment and nostalgia of a vanished existence.

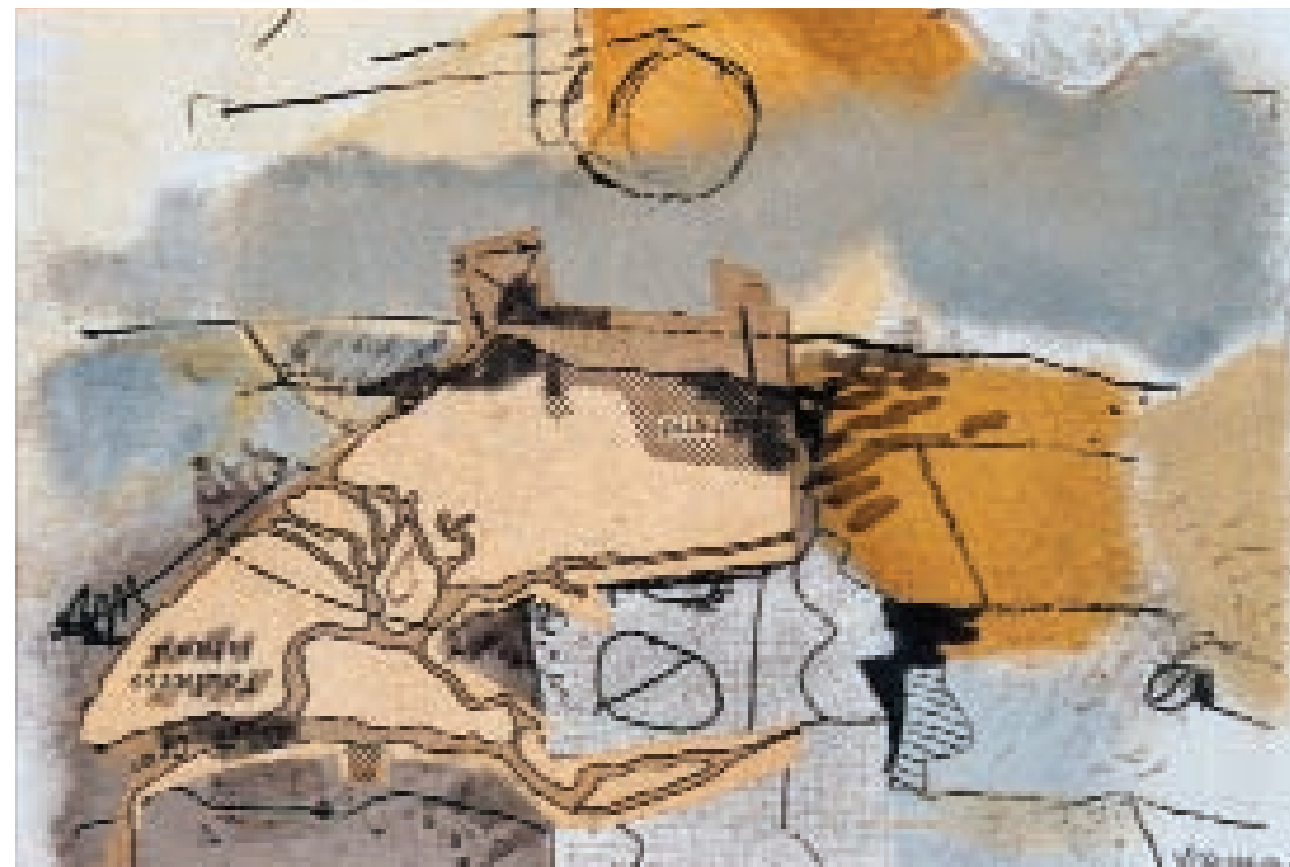
Looking through the catalogue of the 1972 exhibition there are Johnsonian titles from the past, such as *Enigma* or *My Father's House*, others that recall the existential bleakness of Beckett,



Landscape



Gethsemane



Landscape with Pond



Cow and Evening Bird



Landscape with Cows

but one could see here the first point at which the psychological landscape has shifted to suggest a transformation of ideas and personality. This might explain why the only diary or notebook that Johnson kept to the end of his life, perhaps the only diary he ever wrote, detailed the time from the last days before he left London until the day he left Wilby.

Johnson had received a grant from the Royal Academy in 1970 and was having some success selling work at this time, even if not necessarily through galleries; his detailed ledgers record sales to various clients in London, Belfast and even Rome. Some works went to supportive friends such as Cedra Castellain and we could assume that a number of these sales were conducted through his occasional gallery exhibitions. An etching *Untitled* was included in the 1975 Listowel Graphics Exhibition and he also showed work in an unrecorded loan exhibition in Drogheda, both very possibly entered by the Dawson Gallery. The sums recorded from these were small and as the 1970s progressed the ledgers change from a record of sales to a record of works completed. Fewer large acrylic paintings are completed and Johnson increasingly draws in ink, charcoal or biro, makes monotypes and etchings and experiments with newsprint collages.

Johnson's records for 1977 note a number of sales to a geographically diverse but anonymous group of collectors, from Germany, the Lebanon, South Africa, Nigeria, the USA and Sweden. Perhaps the lack of names indicates sales through a gallery which passed limited information back to the artist. An alternative theory comes from the occasional references to 'railings' in the profits of Johnson's accounts; perhaps he was one of the anonymous artists who exhibit and sell their work from park railings and therefore he knew little more than vague details about buyers. He also left works with significant London dealers such as Alan Cristea at Marlborough Fine Art and Christian Neffe of JPL Fine Art, an authority on the work of Bonnard, Vuillard and many others, who remains an imaginative and passionate figure in the London art world.

But we must assume that times remained hard and that, as was important for Nevill Johnson, there was a struggle for recognition as an artist. Only those who really have a drive to paint and communicate continue to work while they have no audience and no reward for it, and he was one of these. But, much as Victor Waddington had entered his life at a crucial moment, Johnson was to meet another figure whose presence was to dominate the last twenty years of his professional life.



Figures in a Landscape



Cottage, Ticknock (detail)

IV. London 1978–1999

NEVILL JOHNSON SEEMS to have been most comfortable addressing society from the outside, as a painter, photographer, writer and polemicist. An Englishman by birth and education, it seems to have been the nature of semi-imposed exile in Belfast and Dublin that gave birth to Johnson the artist and, despite subsequent disillusion with the island and a return to live in England, he retained an umbilical connection until the end of his life by exhibiting in Ireland. Leo Smith took over Dublin's leading contemporary art gallery from his ex-employer Victor Waddington when the latter left Dublin for Cork Street. Johnson remained on good terms with him and Smith's Dawson Gallery seems to have represented him throughout the 1960s and much of the 1970s without ever holding an exhibition of his work. Correspondence to Johnson, then living in Earls' Court, dated 28th February 1978, seems to mark the end of this connection. Written by John Taylor, who had worked at the Dawson Gallery, it notes that Leo Smith is to close the Dawson Gallery and that Taylor is to vacate the premises on Dawson Street, presumably to open his own gallery (which still runs successfully today), although this is not made clear. A statement of account from the Dawson Gallery lists twenty-seven pictures sold (presumably drawings from the prices given), as payment for which a cheque was enclosed.

It was in this month that the Tom Caldwell Gallery held their first solo exhibition of Nevill Johnson's work in Belfast. Caldwell and the Irish painter Charles Brady, whom he represented, no longer wished to work together, so he came to an agreement with Leo Smith or his successor, John Taylor, to exchange Brady for Johnson, who was in a similar position in regard to the Dawson Gallery.

Caldwell was to remain Johnson's primary dealer for the remainder of his life. Tom Caldwell was an interior decorator with a showroom in Belfast, who built up a remarkable stable of artists

and a strong reputation for his galleries in Belfast and Dublin. He filled a gap left by the McClelland Gallery in Belfast, at a time when the Bell Gallery was the leading venue for contemporary artists in Northern Ireland. Caldwell exhibited Johnson's contemporaries from Waddington days, such as Colin Middleton and George Campbell, as well as Tom Carr and younger figures such as Basil Blackshaw and Patrick Collins. Johnson was a heavyweight addition to this group, despite awareness of his work having dipped during the decade and a half when he was absent from the Irish stage, and a series of solo exhibitions at Caldwell's began to establish him with a new generation of collectors.

Of this first solo exhibition in Northern Ireland or the Republic for over twenty years eight paintings and nine drawings appear to have sold. Johnson, as ever, was interested in the details of both purchaser and price. The acrylic paintings ranged in price from £150 to £600, with two substantial drawings, *Holy Hour* and *Two Figures Resting* both under £100. Drawings, in a variety of media, were priced between £50 and £100. The Arts Council bought four drawings, Tom Carr purchased *Evening Bird* and the Ulster Museum acquired the large *Summer Solstice*, which remains the only work by Johnson in the Ulster Museum collection, who have extensive holdings of work by his contemporaries in Ireland.

Caldwell appears to have had great faith in Johnson, as well as some sympathy for his financial situation perhaps, and purchased work outright from him before selling it. This might also explain the artist's subsequent interest in the prices that were charged. In 1978, he made £1,096 as an artist, indicating some real success and progress, and this was maintained by regular cheques from Tom Caldwell totalling £1,100 and a further £120 from the Arts Council.

Further success in the year of this first solo exhibition in Belfast came in the Silver Medal that Johnson was awarded for his painting *Still Life with White Jug* at the annual Royal Ulster Academy exhibition, the highest prize given to a non-academician. It appears to have been the first occasion on which he had entered, his work having been put forward by Tom Caldwell, according to Helen Falloon, then Honorary Secretary, who wrote to inform him of the good news. Practical and still short of money, Johnson planned to sell this medal as an object of value, until he was informed just in time that one was expected to return it to be passed on to the next recipient.

To complete this successful return to the two cities that had nurtured him as an artist, three paintings by Nevill Johnson were shown in Dublin in November 1979 as part of an Exhibition of Contemporary Irish Art, again included as one of a group of Caldwell artists. It is an intriguing prospect to imagine artists such as Johnson, Middleton and le Brocqy exhibiting together again, all once young stars in the Waddington firmament in Dublin, whose careers had taken such different courses since then.

The fifty-five works in this 1978 exhibition have a gentle and occasionally bucolic mood, certainly compared to the last painting exhibited in Dublin in the 1950s. They are a mixture of



Summer Solstice

recent pictures and some from the previous six or seven years. Many adopt a world parallel to Wilby, some refer directly to it, and occasionally there are Irish connections, such as *The House of Ticknock* and *Holy Hour*. But beyond the references this is a body of work that represents Johnson at that point, coming after so much change, and it shows an absolute maturity in him as an artist. These works are complex constructions based on remarkable draughtsmanship, but the lines have softened from the more abstract work of the late 1960s and early 1970s such as *Silent Encounter* of 1971, which was included in the same exhibition, although they still retain the same spatial density, even in drawings such as *Holy Hour*.

There are stark contrasts between some paintings. *Figure in Moonpark* harks back to paintings of the 1950s such as *A Voice Crying* or *Magdalene*, with its extremely abstracted figure alone in a desolate and barren landscape, only relieved by the smoke of a fire or the cloud of an explosion. The moon has become an alternative imaginative site of human isolation since the post-atomic vocabulary of the post-war years. The landscape of *Bathers* is softer and more fertile but its heightened, hallucinatory colours and awkwardly lumbering figures are still unsettling. But the lyricism of some new works, such as *Breakfast at Wilby*, is perhaps more typical of the mood of the exhibition. This painting's complex treatment of form within an ambiguous space, as well as a softer palette, is reminiscent of Braque's late poetic studio interiors.

The success of Nevill Johnson's return to Belfast clearly encouraged Tom Caldwell. In February 1979, a new solo exhibition opened in Caldwell's gallery in Dublin, at 31 Upper Fitzwilliam Street. The bulk of this transferred to Belfast in June of that year, with the sold paintings being replaced by others. Ten paintings sold in Dublin, although only two appear to have sold in Belfast, a number perhaps being sold afterwards or privately.

The changes prefigured in the previous exhibition are seen more completely here. The cats of Wilby, animals with which Johnson always felt a kinship and alongside which he had worked there, are quietly present, as is the moon that hung over the ambiguous ancient Suffolk landscape. The self-referential *The Smallholder* and the magisterial *Sentio Ergo Sum*, create a world within which Johnson's highly personal style and artistic persona can explore, 'first-footing' it into this world to unearth the old signs that give some understanding to a later era.

Dawlish featured in a title in the 1978 exhibition and there are suggestions of Cornwall in a number of works here, including perhaps *Window on the Sea*, a fine example of Johnson's later style, with its sense of absolute resolution, its complex treatment of the image and its muted palette. In many ways Johnson might be seen alongside English artists such as Graham Sutherland or Alan Reynolds, who had found such inspiration in natural forms for the structure of their own images and keys within nature for unlocking its meaning. Much of Johnson's response to his experience of living in the landscape, which he wrote of in the Wilby notebooks, is embedded in his paintings, some parts made obvious, others in code.



Cottage, Ticknock



Breakfast at Wilby



The Smallholder



Window on the Sea



Sentio Ergo Sum

1980 saw the publication of Johnson’s 1952-1953 photographs as *Dublin: The People’s City*, winning a prize at the Leipzig International Book Fair. In November of that year, Caldwell staged a twenty-five painting exhibition in Dublin that, while it maintained that predominantly pastoral mood of his previous exhibition, demonstrated that the instinctive and sensualist painter still co-existed with the acerbic commentator on the world that Ireland had known in the post-war era.

Two paintings of *The Family* hark back clearly to the dispossessed groups of the 1950s and Johnson has written in brackets in the catalogue beside them “nuclear”. This theme was to continue for some years now; *The Picnic* series that also related to Manet’s *Dejeuner sur l’Herbe* seems to revive memories of the Johnson family picnicking quietly by the shore on the day that the first atomic bomb was dropped, a connection he made in *The Other Side of Six*, published in 1983, at a prolific and successful time for him. But as is the case with so much of Johnson’s work the autobiography is multi-layered; perhaps there are nostalgic distant memories of childhood holidays on the Isle of Man.

The Other Side of Six is extremely revealing as a document about Nevill Johnson as a man and artist, while pruning away or disguising as many facts as possible. He never claimed that it was factually correct. For obvious reasons, perhaps, he altered the names of a couple of ladies with whom he had been involved, but for no apparent reason he re-christened his first wife and claimed to have lived in the boathouse at Ballintoy, whereas in fact it was at Ballyhalbert. Is it then more useful to see it as a book that runs in parallel to his painting, as the description and analysis of a psychological landscape, a synthesis of visual images within a fragmented text that moves from nostalgia to anger to creative struggle and fulfilment to an embracing of the world despite a rejection of so much within it. It is a book about the twentieth century that presents its turmoil and changes on both a global and a highly individual level.

Most baffling about the book is its title, which does not seem to have any clear meaning or reference. A clue as to how we should read it lies perhaps in an unpublished story Johnson wrote and dated February 15th 1975. As he recycled titles in his paintings, he obviously did the same in his writing. ‘The Other Side of Six’ describes the visit of the narrator to his friend, a maverick physicist called Dr Lucius Kithogue, a name in which Johnson typically must have taken much pleasure. It is full of phrases describing Kithogue which clearly refer back to Johnson. He is “an outsider and loner all his life” with “a fierce morality in his iconoclasm”. Johnson, who was always conscious of his own identity as a left-hander, describes Kithogue’s “power as a penetrating left-handedness”. Kithogue has asked the narrator for his help because he has “seen the other side of six”.

The world into which the narrator arrives is redolent of the sterilised, banal, plastic world of the 1970s which Johnson loathed. Kithogue describes his ‘counter-logic’, how he has been able to enter the world that exists in parallel to this world, a mirror image but “quite different on this



Sleeping Village

side of the glass”. This world he shows the narrator presents the ‘real’ world of February 1975 as a ridiculous but unpleasant stage against which the world has reacted and which it employs as a reminder of how wrong a path we took. As the story develops, Johnson undermines the logic and rules according to which we believe the world runs.

“But I reckon those wearing a doubtproof carapace of logic must inevitably cut themselves off from the surprise and magic of life. Certainly for Mrs K everything appeared to be plain sailing. There was a place and a meaning for everything. But in a world where two and two make four there is precious little room for laughter and ecstasy.” Presumably the other side of six is where two and two do not necessarily make four. Much as Johnson the painter has created a world where there are gaps in logic that are filled with the suggestions of all the possibilities that transform our conception of human life and the world we inhabit, so his autobiography reminds us of the fluidity of our world and the limits of our understanding.

It is revealing how rarely a man who analysed himself so ruthlessly made self-portraits. One does date from the year his autobiography was published and reinforces the complexity of any attempt to pin down a clear or single identity. ‘Johnson’ stands looking out at the viewer and holds a self-portrait drawing, reminding us that this picture-within-a-picture is no different from the self in the painting.

By this stage he was achieving a steady run of sales; the Arts Council of Ireland, the Board of Works and the Allied Irish Bank all purchased work from the 1980 exhibition and in 1981 he returned to Belfast with a solo exhibition in November. Increasingly in his ledgers it is clear that the majority of his work is being sent to Tom Caldwell, although sales seem a little slower in the 1981 exhibition, with seven paintings sold. The highest price is still £600, although a small (four by seven inches) painting in acrylic, *Country Still Life*, sold for £200. Belfast was a city with a small circle of dedicated collectors, knowledgeable about local art, despite the constant threat of violence from terrorists. A number of these works also appeared in Johnson’s subsequent exhibition at Tom Caldwell’s in Dublin in May 1982, where sales totalled £1,800.

It was possibly for reasons of Johnson’s health (he was now in his seventies) that there appear to have been no further exhibitions at the Caldwell Gallery until 1987, when a mini-retrospective of paintings from 1976 to 1987 took place. By this point his work had become increasingly abstracted; figures, other objects and landscapes are broken down into passages of geometric shapes that through their formal unity convey an emotional weight at the same time as the clarity of image becomes more ambiguous.

GAEA can possibly be read as another self-portrait, a monumental seated figure surrounded by cats. They are the familiar with which Johnson empathised so strongly and which appear in so many paintings that it is tempting to see this as an equally real ‘self’ to the two human depictions. There is a mythic quality about the figure in *GAEA*, as there is about *Mariner’s Lady*, which



GAEA



The Observer



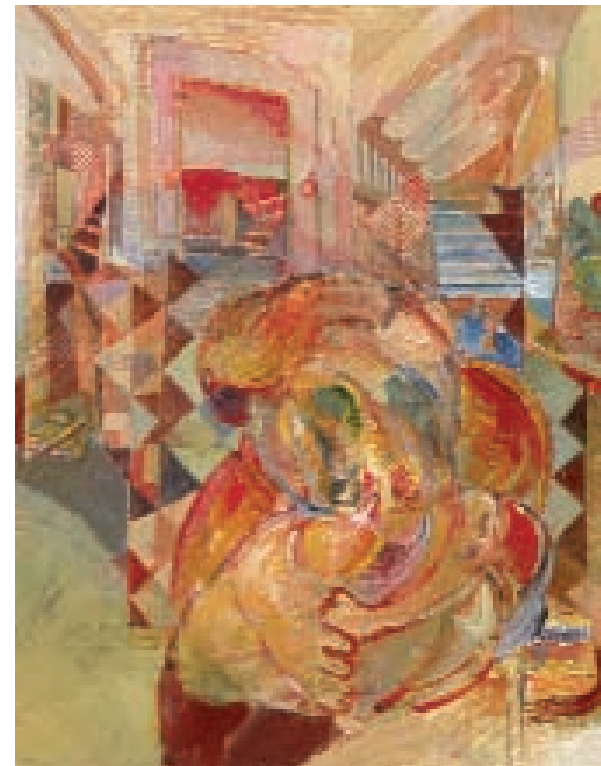
Self-Portrait

Johnson also expresses within the specific landscapes that he paints; *Connemara* and *Minard* both suggest an increasing time spent within Ireland. An earlier painting of Minard Castle, begun in 1972 and reworked in 1976, reveals a different aspect to Johnson the landscape painter. Rather than an ordered, complex depiction, it is loose and non-linear, full of event and narrative, with expressive brushstrokes, more reminiscent of Soutine than Johnson's few usual artistic heroes.

Johnson's work was now beginning to change once again. His drawings had become the shortcut to the workings of his mind in the period following his re-assessment, and now their invention prefigures the development of the paintings. Picasso had been perhaps the only painter in whom Johnson had retained any interest, and much as Picasso turned in his later years to interpreting some of the great paintings of his predecessors, such as Velazquez and Manet, so Johnson in his mid-seventies began to revisit Picasso's own reworkings. These pictures allowed the expression of wit that had existed on the opposite side of the coin of much of Johnson's earlier work. Perhaps also Johnson recognised in Picasso the theme of magic as a key to understanding and perhaps redemption.

By the early nineties the process of simplification and abstraction that had begun in the 1940s had been resolved to the natural conclusion of work that appeared entirely non-referential, although there were clear figurative starting points for most works. These were begun with an acrylic ground, upon which Johnson completed a detailed but simplistic drawing in pencil. This drawing is full of ideas, images, text, narrative. One unfinished work, that still remains at this preparatory stage, has trains, figures, even a hoarding with the lettering for Guinness. Some of the images created by the underdrawing are perhaps more accidental than literal, but they set up an abstract arrangement, as well as establishing undercurrents of theme and mood.

Johnson would then begin, using a single colour, to pick out certain lines and shapes, elaborating on certain passages, inventing in others aside from the lines of the drawing. Gradually the abstract relationships take over from the underlying images. The effect of the completed paintings can be



Annunciation



Figure in a Landscape



Minard



Kerry Landscape with Chair



Artist and Model



Déjeuner sur l'herbe



Bathers



Woman with Bird and Child



Le Déjeuner I



Las Meninas

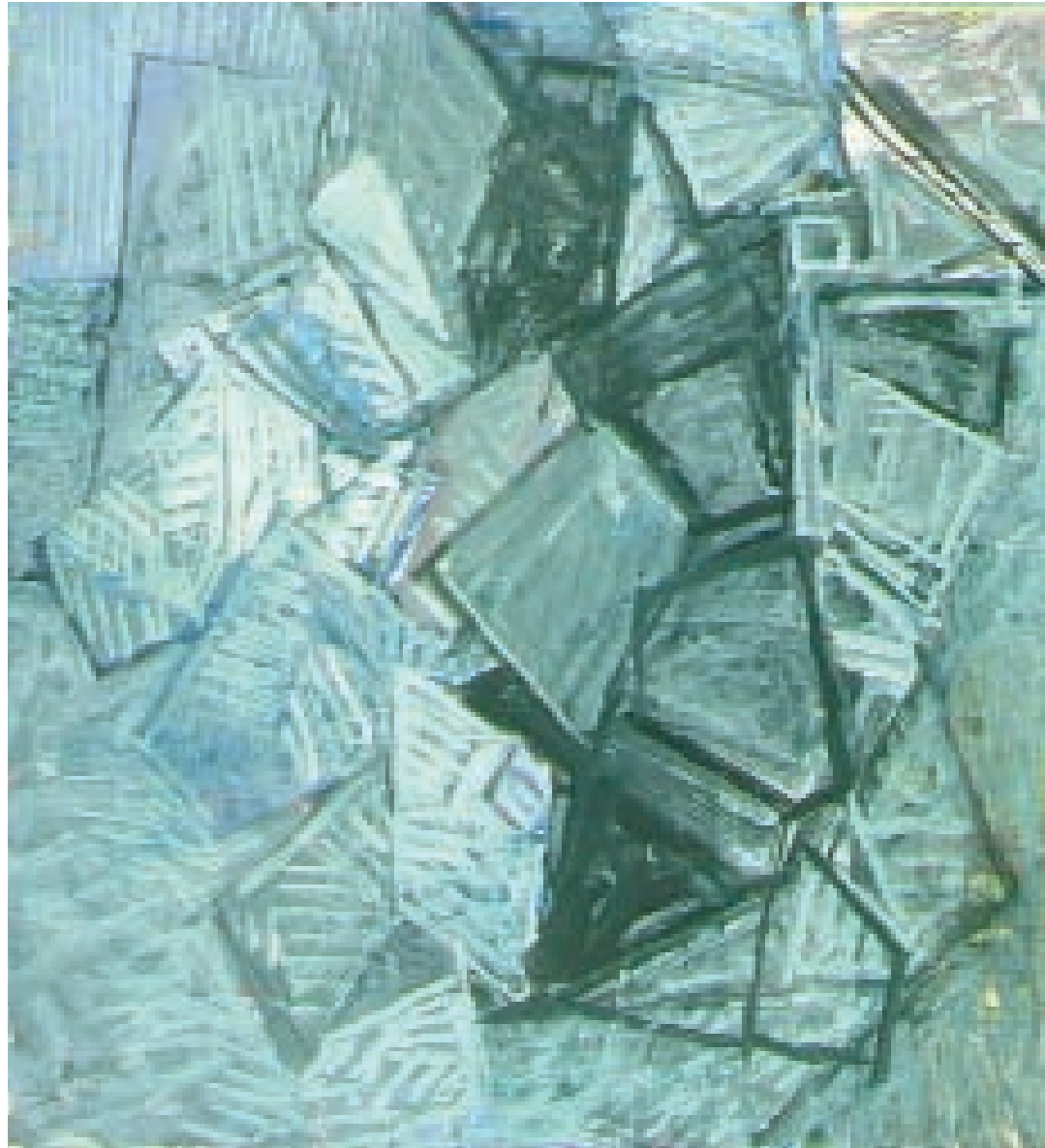
confusing, especially to those unfamiliar with the process within Johnson's work or with his work in general. Many people who come to these paintings with little previous knowledge of Nevill Johnson find them baffling. The formal sophistication of these paintings often makes them very satisfying aesthetic objects, although the viewer might often be distracted from this pure enjoyment by the suggestion within the title of other meanings or references.

Titles were often reminiscent of other periods in Johnson's work; *Enigma* and *Assignment* make connections with much earlier work, while *Baigneur*, *Gleaner* or *Saint Victoire* refer to his renewed interest in other painters. All provide tantalising and perhaps teasing clues for the viewer as well as a sense of the genesis of each work.

He had also continued to work in collage. From the mid-1970s, Johnson's process of technical experimentation had resulted in collages which use their materials with great judgement and refinement. While Picasso or Braque might originally have awakened Johnson's interest in this medium, he immediately found his own voice in works such as *Ballywilliam*, demonstrating a sensitivity to the effects of materials without ever sacrificing the coherence of the whole picture.



Figures in the Park



Enigma 3

The chance effects that arise from collage, its potential to unsettle and also to amuse, suited Johnson so well that he returned to it increasingly throughout the 1970s, using it to place unexpected elements within a work, to create artificial-looking mechanical constructions or simply to introduce different tones or textures. As his work became more abstract, he began to create pure collages, with no drawing or painting used alongside them, placing firm blocks of colour against each other as he was doing in his painting.

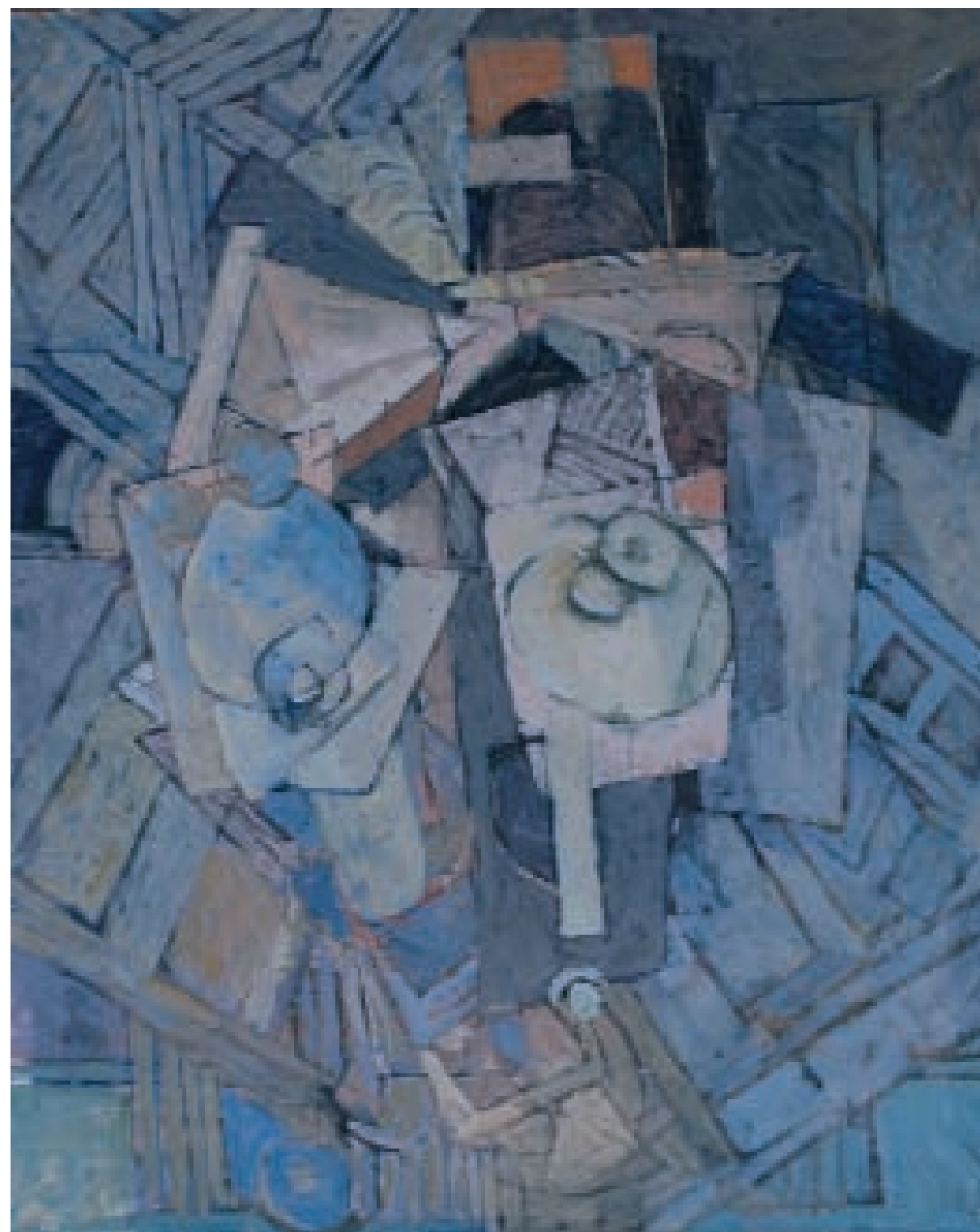
The Solomon Gallery exhibition of 1995 was held at a time when Johnson's work had reached this extremely advanced point. Due to the enthusiasm of Eoin O'Brien and Suzanne Macdougald, this exhibition took place despite a waning interest among the public and Irish collectors. The range



Woman on a Bench



Terra Incognita



Blue Abstract



The Gleaner

within these paintings is immense, but perhaps most striking for an artist well into his eighties is the energy and the inventiveness that runs through all of them. The clashing and overlapping of these strong and unfussy formal shapes creates a very physical sense of immediacy and dynamism in works that, as Brian Kennedy writes in his introduction to the catalogue, “exhibit great assurance and determination of character”.

Johnson’s insistence on moving forward constantly, rarely taking the easy route, came to the fore again when the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland commissioned him. Despite having painted a number of self-portraits in the past, this work marked a departure for Johnson into even more conceptual terrain and he commented with delight on the subsequent interest of the Limerick museum on seeing the completed work. Musing on the multi-faceted nature of any identity and the complexity of establishing a single clear self-image within society or privately, Johnson joined together various drawings and pieces of text that explored the idea of a self-portrait, rather than providing a likeness.

In all Johnson’s later work there is a complete absence of vanity. Despite his confidence in the importance of the work he was producing, he is still against the establishment and never seeking easy acceptance or honours, financial reward or the interest of the market and still determined to challenge and question in his work to retain an absolute honesty as an artist. When *The Family*, painted in 1953, was sold for £20,000 at auction in 1993, Dublin dealers appeared at Johnson’s council flat to ask whether he still owned any work from this period and, as he did not, whether he could paint anything similar, ignoring his new work. Typically, this offer was of no interest.

At a time when artists were increasingly keen to promote their own importance and prices and many were becoming extremely wealthy, he remained a remarkable example of how one should retain humility in front of one’s work and the idea of making art that is able to achieve anything of lasting importance.

This is not the only way in which Johnson stands alone amidst his Irish contemporaries. The range of his achievement, little known as yet though it is, is breathtaking. He published an



Child Resting



Seated Figure



Northern Field

1970-1971 (1972)
In the early 1970s, I was in the
Luna Society, which was a
very important part of my life.

Part of a whole
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Self Portrait

autobiography; produced a group of photographs, despite having had no training or background in this discipline, which are judged by leading contemporary photographers such as Perry Ogden to be amongst the best photographic work done in Ireland; wrote film scripts and film reviews for various magazines in London; designed stage sets for plays and fabrics for John McGuire, who owned Brown Thomas; patented his own inventions; wrote polemics against the state. Above all he worked as a painter, sculptor and printmaker and made collages and drawings over seven decades.

Ultimately it was as a visual artist that he worked and was best known to the public. It is a shame that at the time he was most actively exhibiting in London, the late 1960s, the taste of the art market was for pop art and an abstraction influenced by the American painters of the time, both far removed from the subtle intensity of Nevill Johnson's work in that decade.

An extensive obituary published in *The Times* on 13th October 1999 notes the intellectualism, social conscience and independence that mark him out from the other painters of the Waddington group of the post-war years and which remain consistently present in his later work. It is this independence that makes Johnson's work difficult to judge, since he does not fit easily into any group. As an Englishman, he is immediately different. The easily approachable and occasionally provincial charm of Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill are many miles away from his work and technically he is arguably their superior. Very few of this group of artists received much formal training but John Luke's influence provided sound foundations for Johnson's subsequent development.

The seriousness and international outlook of Johnson's work mark him out from nearly all Irish painters of his generation. He assimilated the varied influences of European modernism but his physical distance gave his work a remarkable independence of vision once he acquires the confidence to start exhibiting. He is always selective in the artists he looks at: Yves Tanguy, Edward Wadsworth, Tristram Hillier and Giorgio de Chirico he would have seen in Paris and London in 1936, as well, of course, as Picasso, Braque and Gris. Gris is a striking, yet rarely mentioned, influence on paintings such as *The Fortune Teller* and *The Clown*.

So while Johnson was influenced by surrealism, he was never a surrealist, and while he exhibited with Waddington, he was never a typical Waddington artist. But his career and his art cannot be separated from Ireland. His paintings from the early 1940s are arguably the earliest modernist treatments of the Irish landscape in relation to events in the contemporary world. This work also demonstrates immense technical and imaginative skills that rival those of any of his contemporaries. He became the artist who depicted first Belfast and Ulster, then Dublin with the unerring judgement of an outsider, but with the underlying fondness of one who felt great affection for these places. In the two eponymous paintings, his Belfast is an abstract pattern of conformity, his Dublin a jumbled rack of toppling houses, raffish and lively but precarious. He

depicted the oppression of the church in Ireland, the romantic beauty of the Ulster landscape with an eerie silence of a country at war, the poverty of Dublin's elegant Georgian terraces.

While many Irish artists chose to romanticise the country around them, Johnson became the most honest painter of its cities in the post-war era. But he saw his calling on a broader level; while Belfast trained him and Dublin seduced him, his work needed the broad skies and timelessness of Suffolk to be able to express the level of humanity that he began to feel in such an ancient place. Johnson's art always has meaning and the imaginative power to best express that, but in the mature style that evolves in the 1960s and is present in the 1970s he makes the two most indivisible. While he lived in England, he rarely exhibited there and is little known there. There is a sad irony that John Kasmin, one of the great gallerists and dealers who represented Hockney, Caro and Hodgkin, amongst many others, recently noted and admired a painting by Nevill Johnson, but when Johnson went to see a Hockney exhibition at Kasmin in 1960, he seems not to have mentioned his own work to them.

But commercial success and recognition might not have meant a great deal to Johnson, as indeed he had turned his back on it in the 1950s, distrusting the easy fame of Dublin. Without much encouragement, he still produced an extensive and impressive body of work throughout these later decades. The exhibitions at Tom Caldwell's and the Solomon Gallery complete the work shown by Victor Waddington in a previous era and in totality represent a body of work alongside which, I would argue, no other artist working in Ireland at the same period could stand, in terms of formal quality, ambition and meaning. Purely as a painter, he succeeds and convinces consistently to a remarkable degree.

Knowledge of his work is so limited that his stature as a painter is completely underrated. His paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, in particular, are rare, and because they are seen occasionally and in isolation, with no conception of their relationship with the rest of his work, even those who regard themselves as interested in art often have no coherent overall understanding of Johnson as a painter. Equally, the appreciation of art in Ireland is arguably at an early stage, celebrating an easy narrative and commercialism at the expense of that which is more serious and less easy to promote, so that it will take time for those who look at, exhibit and buy art to begin to appreciate the qualities of his work.

It is, happily, on his substantial body of work, rather than on the fashions and whims of dealers and collectors, that Nevill Johnson will eventually be judged as an artist. The consistent questioning and exploration that drives his work ensures that it has a deep and enduring humanity, to which we will always return. His psychological landscape, as well as his engagement with the world, are relevant beyond their particular time and place, and are conveyed with a deftness and directness that still resonates with the viewer.



The Nurses (detail)

A PERSONAL MEMOIR

EOIN O'BRIEN

NEVILL JOHNSON was an enigmatic artist within whom three artistic *personas* struggled for expression. First, and dominant, was the painter in Johnson; then closely related but distinct, there was Johnson the photographer; and finally, Johnson the writer had to be content to let visual portrayal take precedence over literary expression. Serendipity cast him in four locations on the islands of Britain and Ireland and we have allowed Johnson's peregrinations to determine the structure of this work.

First, there was Buxton in the north of England, and the Isle of Man, where boyhood, family and schooling set down persuasive influences that would endure. "Beneath the drawers, beneath the soft epidermal boundary of abdominal skin, not yet identified, named or recorded, lay a pulsing blastoderm. And there came to term in July 1911, under the sign of Leo, in one of the hottest summers on record, a blue-eyed web-toed left-handed boychild." Johnson's childhood and adolescence was dominated by middle-class comfort and privilege. His education was comprehensive and conservative, being directed to producing a predictable product to grace the academic or business establishment of pre-war England. But the system had a cuckoo in the nest. "It is Armistice Day. I and



Nevill Johnson (right), Prestatyn, north Wales (1919)

my fellows are enjoying the unusual experience of being in the town. We line the main street behind a rope while there pass a succession of decorated floats to the sound of martial music. On one such float sits a shy Britannia, a local girl with helmet, shield and trident of wobbly cardboard. Our little band, dressed in Norfolk jackets and Eton collars wave Union jacks all but me, that is. It seems that at the age of seven I already felt a need to stand aside, to walk against the wind.”

Though art was not an influence in young Johnson’s life there were at least two influences that would later become relevant. The “King James bible” springs up in titles of many paintings – how much it was to influence content is debatable, but let us not confuse the enduring influence of this work of art with religiosity. Also from childhood were the pervading evocative influences of sight, sound and smell; indeed Johnson was to ask the same questions that had preoccupied Proust (and would later do so with Beckett): “When you are nosehigh to a dog adults are but trowsers and skirts, so my parents and their friends were quite beyond my horizon. Right now my world was furnished with sunshine and warm stones, with close up grass and shoe-black beetles, and spiders on stilts. It was abundant with blackberries, and mushrooms budded like manna in the morning.” This artistic sense of evocation is further examined in a short passage from Johnson’s autobiography *The Other Side of Six* in which he attempts to fathom the mind’s remarkable ability to lock away a stimulus of evocation only to release it untarnished many decades later: “Presently I got to my feet and stood like a dog pointing. A certain smell, a perfume, attracted me, striking a deep memory; it was not the clover nor the meadowsweet, nor the camomile and the wild peas. I could not place it and, puzzled, returned to the sweet grass beside Sally trying to trace the memory. Way back I went – to a child of five leaning against the bank of a country lane in Anglesey in 1916. Some grass or flower on that bank released a perfume that profoundly affected me; part sweet, part fusty, like cloverhay or dried honeysuckle. For thirty six years I had remembered this smell with a tang of sensuality and melancholy, and had searched long to match this first rapture (for such it was), and on that August evening as the birds commenced to sing, as we brushed the seeds from our hair and made for the gate, I found it – in a tangle of flowers hanging from laurellike leaves on the wall of the stableyard.”

Johnson accepted the marvel of being that permitted the creative process but his thoughts were never too far removed from the scientific basis that facilitates execution of the wonder known as art. “It is said that the brain is a slightly alkaline electro-chemical computer working on glucose at 35 watts. Be that as it may I stand always in awe of the depth and staggering range of man’s memory, astonished by this bulging cornucopia – as I am daily surprised that, without heed or thought I stand upright, or wake in the morning. Thus, within the convolutions of my brain lie the sight and smell of unnumbered mornings, of seals sunning on the rocks and plover on the wind; of streams tumbling turf-brown from the flanks of Errigal; of Muckish glistening and Binyon, the lords and ladies of Donegal and Down.”

When the time came for Johnson to conform, to become a member of the establishment for which he had been so well-groomed, it was not to be. He tried – but not for long: “One bleak morning I visited a hatter’s shop and emerged in a few moments half shamed, half laughing wearing a bowler hat. Perhaps, thus covered, success would attend me? My father and brother wore them habitually. Let it be understood that I tried; it was just that my skull was the wrong shape for this adornment. I glanced up repeatedly to the driving mirror then pulled impulsively to the curb where I got out to the pavement and removed this expensive item from my head. I placed it upon the ground and crushed it with my foot. In this manner did I commit almamatricide.”

Johnson fled to another part of the Empire – to Belfast in 1935, shedding in the process the comfort and security of family and business. “There is a primitive within me, I think, that shies from the trap of comfort and complacency, which looks askance at rare carpets and the second car, which drips a little bile of discontent into our safe havens; a pattern-seeking logic-dodging ghost, refusing sanctuary and the easy option.” So it was to be – the future course had been charted.

But Belfast was a strange place in 1934: “Institutional green and pew brown paint on those Presbyterian facades, few signs of style or culture. The trades basic; the making of rope and cloth, the building of ships. And rife here the Calvinist ethic. St Chads and Sedbergh had offered me no key to unlock the secret societies and their unspoken signals of complicity.”

Belfast was the beginning of Johnson’s artistic career. Here he joined a circle of writers – Forrest Reid, Louis MacNeice and John Hewitt, and artists – John Luke and George MacCann. Luke influenced Johnson to take up painting for reasons that are not recorded, but what is evident is that once launched Johnson dedicated himself to painting with an intensity that only waned when periods of doubt obsessed him, as happened from time to time. Luke proved a good master and he had in Johnson a willing and talented pupil: “It has not been revealed how this son of a shipyard worker came to be an artist and pupil of the Slade, nor do I recall how I first met this modest man. Suffice to say that he set about to teach me and set me spinning on my courses. For two years we worked together, patient John a good teacher. So, rising before dawn, painting early and late while earning my keep by day I worked without stint, fuelled by the distant hope of one day escaping from business.” The two traveled together to Paris where influences abounded: “We stayed for a time in Paris exploring and tasting rare fruits. Braque and Picasso held sway and the surrealists were on stage; Ernst, Magritte and Tanguy, Lipschitz and Gargallo, splendid straight-faced progenitors of the fur-lined teacup and the spiked flatiron, tripping my pulse. And round the comer fresh young faces – Vivin, Peyronnet, Bombois, children of le Douanier, maître de la réalité. Lifeenhancing stuff it was.”

In Belfast Johnson met and married his first wife, Noelle Biehlman, a Frenchwoman from Versailles, and had two sons. The couple escaped the oppressiveness of Belfast to the countryside

to find peace and time to paint: “So we moved to another farmhouse on the shores of Strangford Lough. Here was conceived our second son, and here I made for myself a private place reached by ladder in a little room over the cowshed. I was deep into Aquinas and Maritain – a peeping Thomist you might say. I flirted, to my astonishment, with Rome, taking instruction from the bland fathers; and was soon sickened by their responses to my modest though searching questions. I could feel no respect or tenderness for a Being so ineffably pure, beyond corruption. Compassion was stifled and I turned away, fancying myself insulted and demeaned by enraged angels. God knows what I sought but it was not to be found among the mystics and scholars of religious faith. I sought a saner world, far from patriotic fervour and a dog-like “smilin’ through”.

Religion was not the only demon to trouble the young artist. This was wartime and though Johnson would possess all the sensitivities to justify a stance as a conscientious objector, there was within him an inbred sense of loyalty and duty, instilled no doubt by an upbringing that was very traditionally “old England”. Perhaps we should not be too surprised, therefore, to find the call to enlist for the motherland preying on his conscience. “As darkness settled over the sea and the wind moaned in the chimney I sat thinking, suffering all manner of doubts and self questioning. Primitive defence of hearth and home I understood; I would rebut fascism from any quarter – but fight now for whom? For what? For King George, Mr Chamberlain, the ‘B’ Specials, the old school tie, the bums and bobbydazzlers? I was in a ‘reserved’ job, albeit that didn’t resolve my problems and a few months later I entered a recruiting office on the Antrim Road – after a few drinks – and offered my life and services as aircrew. The offer was not taken up, but this did nothing to quell the voices within me – loyalty to what? to whom?”

These doubts behind him, at least momentarily, and the peeping Thomist firmly in its box, Johnson was free to make a declaration of independence from perfidy and humbug: “Political and ecclesiastical societies were anathema to me; I disavowed all cults, clans and brotherhoods, as I avoided the hoods and headbags of cant, the polluted wine and the prejudicial bread. I thereby excited the attention of those devoted to surveillance, the notetakers and pigeonholers, the committed protectors of the status quo.” Some twenty years earlier similar sentiments had been expressed in the name of art south of the border in the short-lived publication *To-morrow*: “We proclaim that we can forgive the sinner, but abhor the atheist, and that we count among atheists bad writers and bishops of all denominations.”



Noelle

The fishing village of Kilkeel on the coast of county Down was another retreat, a retreat that would provide the peaceful solitude needed to execute a number of paintings. “The harbour rang with sweet sounds, on one side the thump and flash of an adze against the pale resinous ribs of a new built boat, its keel resting on grassy cobbles; and across the slow surging tide a band of men dressing granite, making curbstones for the streets of London. The unsynchronised ring of their chisels made water music, enhanced by the piping of sand martens nesting in the crumbling bluff which sheltered their simple forges from the wind.”

But for Johnson, escape from a barbarous world in which man inflicted outrageous cruelty on fellowman was not possible, if for no other reason than the unimaginable suffering inflicted by one side was just as readily perpetrated by the other in the name of self-righteous retaliation and when viewed from the safety of a far-away pinnacle the overwhelming sentiment was a burden of unbearable guilt; a guilt, which if not to be expiated might at least be lightened through the sharing of pain on canvas. “For myself and thousands more, these events demanded a total reassessment, a check time, a time to measure the burden of guilt, to reconsider the credit of being human.” Johnson has recorded these post-war sentiments in a brief chronology:

Diary of notable events 1945

<i>February 13th</i>	A cold night in Dresden, the citizens going about their evening business, washing dishes, bedding children. The Allies drop incendiary bombs and the city becomes enveloped in a firestorm, an inescapable holocaust, the streets like furnace tubes. Those people not burned choked to death through lack of oxygen. Total kill 135,000.
<i>March 9th</i>	One hundred American bombers dropped firebombs on Tokyo, total kill 124,000.
<i>May 8th</i>	End of European war. Body count 54,800,000 dead, 10,000,000 displaced.
<i>July 2nd</i>	Japan sues for peace. Replying to a question by Mr Horabin in the House of Commons on December 5th – as reported by the <i>News Chronicle</i> – Mr Atlee said ‘the decision to use the atomic weapon was taken at the beginning of July 1945’. The first atomic bomb was dropped on August 6th, and the offer of peace made by Japan was not accepted until August 10th.
<i>August 4th</i>	Japan warned about the bomb.
<i>August 6th</i>	Let us look closely at this summer day

1. I and my wife prepared a picnic for an afternoon on the shores of Lough Neagh.
2. John Luke scraped with a razor blade and polished with silk cloth a gesso panel, preparing to lay thereon an imprimatura or glaze of Ivory Black and Terre Verte.
3. The bones of Clegbert Chutz lay quiet in his grave in Morganza, Louisiana.
4. The ruins and the people of Hiroshima lay steaming and screaming in the evening sun. Colonel Paul Tebbitts, illustrating that strange paradox of submission to aggression enacted by all soldiers, had fulfilled his duty. Having centred his aircraft over the city he signalled release of the 9,000 lb bomb. It burst with the heat and blast of twenty thousand tons of Tri-Nitro – Toluene above the living day – the scrubbing typing teaching eating nappy-changing day. 97,000 people were blistered and destroyed, 10,000 died later of cancer and radiation sickness.

August 9th A second bomb named ‘big boy’ was dropped on Nagasaki.

It was inevitable that the South of Ireland would soon beckon as a haven from the turmoil of post-war Belfast, a broken marriage and the ever-present demon of doubt: “All artists are subject to periods of doubt, however, and I was no exception. It came suddenly; the painting was rubbish I felt, however well received; these silent surreal wastelands, these mute bones and raven skies – who was I addressing? Of what relevance these Arcadian shores to a world of blackmail and bombs? In despair I ravaged the housekeeping pot and caught the train for Dublin. I had to see Victor, to have his assurance – though God knows he couldn’t really help me. He provided lunch, brandy, money, warmth and flattery. I thanked him and left. But the brandy soon evaporated and the cigar became sour in my mouth. My song was a squeak I thought, my world a pretty place but gutless and unmanned. I was insulated, uncommitted – a touchline aesthete.”



Off St. Stephens Green

In Dublin “I closed one eye to make a friend – and found plenty.” Here his painting flourished. In 1946 Waddington encouraged Johnson to paint full time, offering him a retainer, and a regular allowance. He blended readily in the agreeable social milieu of the ‘largest village in Europe’. The good dinners and cigars in Jammet’s – courtesy of Victor Waddington – were relished, at least initially. This temporary security allowed Johnson time to reflect to read more and to ponder his future. The work of Samuel Beckett is a constant refrain in Johnson’s writings and he told me many years later that Beckett was an ever-present source of encouragement to him. We find a remarkable similarity in the artistic mission that each imposed upon themselves: “Right now I lay on the bed smoking, thinking over the day’s talk; of the creature who had enquired of me not only what sort of painting I made but why I painted. How answer that in words? Might as well measure distance with a thermometer – or pitch with a footrule. And that fellow reading Roland Barthes – who was this he quoted? Angelus Silesius (never heard of him). ‘The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which he sees me’ . . . rum thought.” How similar these sentiments are to those of another artist struggling to find the meaning and the means of artistic expression:

*who may tell the tale
of the old man?
weigh absence in a scale?
mete want with a span?
the sum assess
of the world's woes?
nothingness
in words enclose?*¹

Johnson’s perception of Dublin in the fifties is important. He saw the city as one from without and unlike indigent commentators, such as Cronin and Ryan, he had no need to eulogise the ‘characters’ of the city who, unlike those, such as Joyce and Beckett, with the guts to give the place the treatment it deserved by gazing back from afar, were being assiduously packaged and labeled for export to an outer world, which believed that leprechauns in green tweed strode the sidewalks of Grafton and O’Connell Street – and who would disillusion them? Johnson’s view of Dublin did not deny the eccentricities of its people, the peculiarities of their behaviour, the hypocrisy of their beliefs, rather he saw the city for what it was and loved it all the more deeply: “Through its people, thronged as they were by dogma and tacitly in thrall to the hereafter, ran a maverick undertow; these folk laughed and winked like boys behind Godmaster’s back. Wit and a casual intelligence was the key to this society; today was fine – nd tomorrow would be very welcome.” Johnson regarded Dublin of the fifties as a stimulating place and he may well have been right. It certainly bred an interesting array of talent provided the talent survived. “The price was sometimes high; some drifted in a whirlpool of lost endeavour, some drowned...The bar stool supported some, others it captured, and for some the snugs were tombs.”

The artist in Johnson sensed in Dublin what Dubliners themselves could not sense and what the planners of the next decade were oblivious to, namely that this capital microcosm had been suspended in time, its people as though from another age had been untainted by the evils of affluence that was contaminating the denizens of other capitals of the world; an aura of innocence and purity pervaded the place. “Buttressed by piety, capped and shod by wit and crafty indolence, even the poorest lived out a strange Dickensian scenario. Behind elegant Georgian facades lay an intimate world of brick and iron, timber, and fine though crumbling plaster. The city had not yet undergone the humiliating submission to planners, and that frenetic consumerism which had begun to afflict the capitals of Europe. Day to day living passed unhurried, inexpensive, and a light-footed sanity prevailed.”

1. Beckett S. *Watt*. Calder and Boyars. London. 1972. p. 274



Nevill Johnson's studio

The painter in Johnson set out to capture the uniqueness of Dublin but he substituted the lens of a camera for brush and canvas, and the result was a striking artistic success. Assisted by the artist Anne Yeats, Johnson walked Dublin of the fifties “circling like a hunting dog, nose and ear taking as much as my eye: the smell of hay and feeding stuff in a store off Smithfield, the yard paved with grassy flags and setts of old blue limestone. And there used to be a knackers’ yard in Newmarket, whence came on west wind an evil stench of bones and hide.” In his introduction to the book he puts his case as a photographer: “As Koestler says, quoting Paracelsus, ‘God can make an ass with three tails but not a triangle with four sides.’ So, in my photo-hat I cannot build or rub out – only select, and accept. I cannot in words translate the signals; I can only hope to match the image.” Johnson’s images of a Dublin lost are probably more valuable than any of the many notable photographic archives, such as Lawrence or Valentine, simply because in Johnson’s case the photographer’s eye is that of a painter; Johnson’s images have a wonderful pathos because though intent on capturing a sense of place he did so by endowing place with its personalities, the residents, the jokers on the dole, the dockers, the clergy, the poor and down and outs, hosses and bicycles, pubs and booze. Johnson’s photographs of Dublin were not published



Pearse Street



Charlemont Mall Hallway



Old Men Sitting, St. Stephen's Green

for thirty years when, in 1981 a selection appeared in *Dublin: the people's city. The photographs of Nevill Johnson 1952-53*, with an interesting introduction by Johnson and a foreword by James Plunkett. This publication was seriously flawed by poor reproduction that did a grave disservice to the photography. These unique images of a city and its people poised to step from an aeonian past into a turbulent future in which all would change utterly, must now surely be published in their totality in a sensitive format with duo-tone reproduction of the photography.

Another Dublin work of Johnson's that may interest the bold and daring is the *Symphonie pour un homme seul*, later renamed *Goonstone*, a surrealistic cinematic romp in which love, violence, pornography and death are portrayed in Dublin "a total microcosm of a city on the life-supporting planet, Earth." This work, which was never published, even less became a reality, is a film script filling some 60 pages of text. There are elaborate instructions as to how the complex series of flashbacks – present action in black and white, flashbacks in colour or sepia – are to be integrated. There was to be little dialogue because "words have become suspect, devalued, hence GOONSTONE'S silence. HE is NOT deaf – just wise." The film is symphonic in form with seven movements and there are detailed directions for the sound sequences; "The blackbird is used to denote tranquility – and (in alarm) approaching violence. Apart from the Valse Grise accompanying smalzy sequences with Giggy, I want only natural sounds (Larks, corncrakes –

becoming rarer through industrial farming), and man-made (peace-destroying) noises – Musak, M/C's etc. – except for Karl Orff's *Catullus* at the beginning of Adam and Giggy's love-making in Marram grass – which is followed by early Erotica." Likewise the directions for character casting are clearly stated, for example, "Anna – (Livia, Plurabelle, Molly/Ulysses) Earth woman. No ratting here. Sensual, quiet, content" and "Giggy – sixteen on first flashback. Twenty-five on second flash-back. Kind, pinheaded, very sexy, passive, romantic blonde. A very sexy body." As I said *Goonstone* is for the bold and daring but who will dare fail?

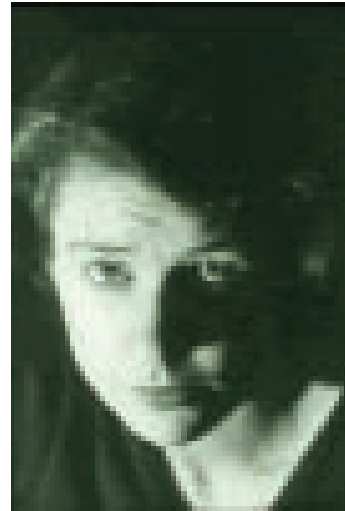
In Dublin the painting went on – this was a prolific period for Johnson living in a variety of addresses – Raglan Road and Convent Place in the city and Ticknock in the mountains of Dublin. In the pubs the babble of witty conversation untainted by television or other distractions could be enjoyed – "I stepped out to join a weird company; a throng of crazed polemicists, smart Alecs, winking know-alls, jokers and gentle men: In the pubs of Hartigan, McDaid, the Bailey and Byrne's, O'Dwyer, O'Neill and Mooney's on the bridge and after nighttime Powers and poteen, there were the characters – apple-cheeked O'Sullivan Paddy Kavanagh, Augustan headed Behan and old Liam O'Flaherty, and "Myles feeding our vanity and sanity in the *Irish Times*." Add to this the background figures, such as Harry Kernoff "rising every morning from his bed into his hat", Sean O'Sullivan, Denis Johnston, Micheál MacLiammóir, and Con Leventhal, but to name a mere few and it is small wonder that one wag seeing Johnson approach his group exclaimed "O god, there are too many of us left".

And women – always an important influence and necessity – helped sustain the painter: "Amid these turbulent waters stood the bollards and mooring posts of my work. I had set up a teaching school, but my main income derived from wealthy ladies who desired to render the pretty colours of their gardens and drawing rooms; my 'hollyhockers', I called them. A profitable exchange ensued."

But even Dublin could not hold Johnson indefinitely. The city had served a need in him; he had served the city on canvas, celluloid and in prose. It was time to be off: "I needed the wilderness – and a voice crying. In such mood I broke away from Waddington and jettisoned the bait; I brushed away the dust of Dublin and set off again for London – to be an exile in my birth land, to be an oddball in that country of class and compromise, that well swept catacomb of logic and commonsense. 'Why don't you give up painting and get a proper job', they would say."

In Chalk Farm he was befriended by Cedra Castellain, who gave him a roof with fellow painters Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde. This was a period when Johnson drifted, painting murals in clubs and bars. "I took work where I could (*Dura Virum Nutrix*) as painter, decorator, any old job – creating nothing, but surviving, stoic, biding my time, a grail-seeking misfit." The lowest point came when he took a job as a milkman leading his electric float through "the cold dawns and misty streets" of London. "I was rudderless though not yet beaten down."

Then two happenings changed the course of his life. He met and married Margaret Pettigrew-King (alias Jenny in *The Other Side of Six*): “Notwithstanding the requirements of legitimacy and the laws of property, I believed in divorce no more than I believed in marriage. The oaths and the written bonds, the witnessed registration of belonging, the receipts and waybills FOB, the licence to copulate – these were repugnant to me, an affront to the honesty of private declaration. We were married on a thundery afternoon at the registry office at Eye, Norfolk. Clad in torn jeans and jungle boots, I promised to cherish and protect, gaining thereby an oath of loyalty from Jenny.”



Margaret Pettigrew-King

He also inherited a little money with which he purchased four cottages at Wilby Green, near Framlingham. “I had become a squireen, lord and master of fourteen rooms, four front doors and four privies.” Here he found solace and inspiration, in working the land and in communion with animals. He returned to painting: “There followed a spring stunned with cold, and few birds left to greet it. Others perished that year: Georges Braque, Robert Frost, Jean Cocteau. I lived on, hoeing, digging, building and now painting again.”

During this period Johnson kept a diary, which unlike *The Other Side of Six*, is a very private chronicle without editing for publication, and, as such, is all the more valuable in permitting insight into the mind of the artist grappling with the artistic process, its joys and vicissitudes. The proximity of nature, the seasons however harsh betimes, the soil and animals, dominant themes in the diary, provide it would seem an ambience conducive to artistic expression, or at worst to contemplating how best to go about painting. “Up at 7. The usual chore. Tea. Washingwater. Make the fire. Strong west wind, cool, good promise. Kitten shit everywhere. Biddy not well. “There was comfort and fun in the company of many friends who invaded the cottages at Wilby knowing that a kindred spirit lay inside: “Constructed splendid cat walk for East window to bypass painting table. Fully signed and directed.” It is interesting to see the artist instil into words the colours and the nuances of the canvas: “Great skies. Thunder showers. Overpowering cumulus. Great snowy-breasted goose galleons of clouds. Greens and blues electric, the barley fear-pale.” Solitude was another boon though at times this weighed heavily: “There is too much to enjoy alone. It is unbearable.”

At Wilby Johnson was able to indulge himself in reading and importantly to leave us some record as to what moved him in literature. He may have seen much of self in the disillusioned and exiled protagonist in Malcolm Lowry’s “compelling” novel *Under the Volcano*. He was also drawn to books on gardening, house building and magic, especially the “fascinating” *Conjuror’s*

Magazine of 1793 with a translation of Johann Caspar Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy designed to promote the knowledge and the love of mankind*, which had so fascinated Goethe and William Blake among many contemporary intellectuals. And in the background philosophers, such as Henry David Thoreau emerge from time to time: “A great cheerfulness have all great arts possessed, almost a profane levity to such as understood them not. But their religion had a broader basis in proportion as it was prominent. The clergy are as diseased, in as much possessed with a devil as the reformers. They make their topic as offensive as the politician, for our religion is as impatient and incommunicable as our poetical vein, and to be approved with as much love and tenderness!”

Johnson was not much influenced by fellow artists but he did respect Robert MacBryde and Robert Colquhoun of whom he wrote: “The local paper talks about McColquhoun the artist, now showing (God help him, with the advanced demographers of Museum Street). And Mr MacBryde. Don’t mind Robert can still draw. I’ve seen them. Don’t mind his company. OR his friends. And don’t mind Picasso either.” Then on March 21st the Diary records: “Robert is dead. Collapsed & died in studio above museum gallery says East Anglian. Dear Jesus. Poor MacB. Poor everyone.” Johnson, never one given to expressing emotion, was deeply upset by this event: “Rang S’OB from the Crown - it’s true he’s dead. More need to live. To use the time. O Jesus. I’m sad for him for him. This rare beautiful man. 47 for Gods sake. Idiot. Lovely man. Est is Bandt.” And later: “I’m near to painting - nearer to Robert.” Other contemporaries in the art world get scant if not derogatory mention: “Hockney (pop) shows at KASMIN. New Bond St Print Centre. Holland Street. W.8” And Anne Yeats who had trudged behind Nevill and his Leica in Dublin and who journeyed loyally to Wilby receives the following: “Anne Yeats entrained at Diss at 12.45. Nice, nice woman, but doglike. Mean of me, but so much to do - and so much treacle. Each way I even look, she looks. Like a mirror, and I’m not that pretty now.”

Much of the Wilby diary is devoted to painting, or rather the difficulty Johnson had in bringing himself to paint. Lack of the means whereby to exist is a constant thread in Johnson’s life: “It is not just the sheer indignity of poverty. It inhibits and desensitizes. Wastes such precious time. Months of scratching instead of painting. It’s really sordid and angry-making. So I’m supposed to be decorating a house this weekend. And panels waiting. And waiting for Alf who waits for his money. And uncertain I am about the club/studio in Hertart St – all because of £4 a week. So I jump and take it and get working.” Johnson never shied from menial work, if for no other reason that he often had no alternative: “Alf offers £2 a week – and a daily meal if I lock myself in. He really means this. The arm still fairly useless but signed off the sick & onto the labour. Offered work as messenger or parking meter attendant! No benefits, 20 years of contribution of no avail. Finished painting for Johnson. Minimal existence possibility, but I will dig in regardless.” Procrastination dominates the Wilby diaries. Tomorrow will be fine for painting but not today. “So much I owe in work and time. Surely I can break through these paper bags &

build good things. – So very near to big painting. – Too much beer yesterday. It affects the eyes. There isn't time for it. – What about painting? Yes – very near. Not to worry. All good – No need to go out tomorrow. So maybe I'll start painting tomorrow – Near to painting, Though Margaret's love & body very present. I'm gambling – Any day now this will contain an entry recording a day's painting. And then we are off." But painting is not easy, creativity is draining: "The sheer effort (almost physical) of painting very marked. I can break through walls and manhandle loads of rubble with far less fatigue."

But in time there comes dissolution of apathy and the clouds of inertia and procrastination lift: "Started to paint. Hunger intervened – so a great pork chop. Then again to the painting. It's hard. Slept from 16 to 18. Then to work again. This time with more courage than daring. Much today is just that – daring. I've done it myself. But courage is the man. All the things to do for tomorrow's arrival of Anne were by-passed desperately rather for this painting. I must be my own man. And returning now from the gambling Swan (and my usual luck) I can see the difference – between daring and courage, between the easy private & the difficult public between micro & macro cosmos, licence & liberty, running from & to, and the rest. And having here the



place & (short) time, I must prove this, in spite of Kennedy blocking Cuba and the baying of the hounds. Things, ordinary concrete discreet mundane things are increasingly loveable."

The tempo increases as the seasons drift by: "A week of frost clear sun, night fog - dwindling fuel. No money, but good work. Jack brings a fine duck this morning. SO'B sending £10. Charlie on 3 legs. Maggie making a skirt. 600 000000 Christmas cards & not one from me. Five drawings & four pastel paintings last week. The work going better & better & bolder & better Thank God." And some good news on the financial front: "All set for showing. Sweet hopes of invitation.... Miss Haridman, Royal Academy reports Society will pay my debts £88, give 15/- money. £100 for materials."

The Wilby diary will be of interest to art historians as a potential source for detail on particular paintings. But here it has to be said that they hold more promise than fulfilment. There are however interesting references on Johnson's technique: "Two fine drawings yesterday. Real good. The white-bellied enamel T-pot will figure a lot. Yes the drawing straight. i.e. no translation no transference no geometry. The formal ABC still there, nonetheless. Three good knifed panels drying overnight. This dry colour & glue promises the final joy." Johnson's painting is never static and as his life moves on so does his journey towards abstraction: "So very simple the key. To leave out all but the heart, So the object floats on the panel. The frame frames. It binds no more." And again: "But exhausted myself (11 pm) in terms of translation to paint. I can't figure the marriage between abstract & concrete - like many many others. But it must be done. And I will do it. And soon."

There are references in the diary to a number of specific paintings, the whereabouts of which are mostly unknown. The *Coffee grinder* of which there seem to have been a number of versions is an example: "Thursday's prayer came true. Yesterday I broke through. Encouraged by the winter collage. Blocked in large 36.31 design for coffee grinder (on back of abortive woman & lamp) ... and a new panel 28:24. Coffee grinder finished virtually. Thin turps – oil paint – over PVA white (latter gives thick body). Too excited to examine closer at present...Joy again. Five hours and two pictures nearly finished. Large coffee grinder certainly. Smaller will take colour simplification. White very important. Drawing very important, - margins easily gone. A prospect opening. Why am I here? Can pay my way too with this... Started the third coffee grinder. Canvas insufficiently primed. Work pleasingly free & fluent, but wrong colour. Try again.... Wet & windy. Critical day. Waiting to start third painting. Scared? Yes – the first two (coffee-grinders) so satisfactory. I fear to fail." In the latter reference we are reminded again of Johnson's awareness of Beckettian theme s – "As no other dare fail".

Another painting entitled *Eden* receives much attention in the Diary: "After spending £7 on oil colour, I'm back on P&A. The new Eden very exciting. Still fighting for time peace & ease to get at it – and anticipating a broken weekend. Never mind....Fairly desperate day with Eden. Slower

will to continue & suddenly regain innocence. Will probably get it alright now. ... I'm actually painting with colour for the first time...If. What do you mean if – Eden succeeds, my whole life will literally change. If this is the breakthrough I think it is, it will be surely remarkable – after 8½ Years. I'm surely on the edge of great joy & health and activity.... Eden is finished. For better or worse. Here for the first time ever, I have painted with paint. This is the beginning. I hope they like it. So it will be easier to go on. Though I surely will go on regardless. Indeed not keen on a few days in London. Though they are necessary. I am cracked and scrofulous and too hermetic.”

Biblical names abound in the Johnson oeuvre. There are many versions of *Annunciation* and it is sometimes difficult to know if later versions are, in fact, modified from the earlier painting: “Finished preparation of Annunciation. Prepared all remaining panels white emulsion... and when Annunciation succeeds, life and general activity will be quite changed....HO - HO. The Annun coming on very splendidly. Frighteningly? So, when this is finished the road will be clear, or rather stuffed with wads of splendid relief. And a flood of all work, energy & health. How about that....ENDLISCH. The Annunciation barely finished & v pleasing. Now the flag is up. All versions but related problems fell in to shape in working this, the first real painting I ever made. Now it is just a matter of health & time.”

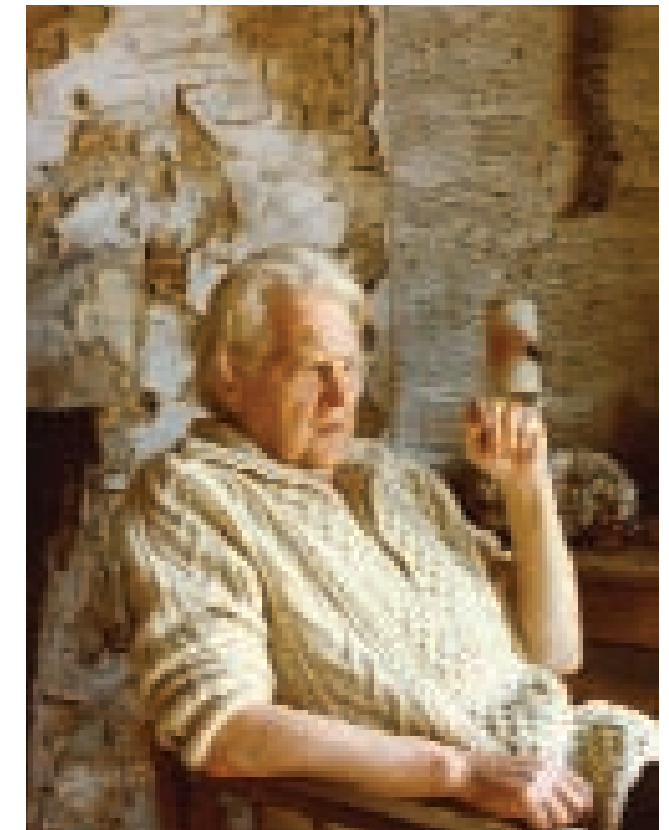
Betrothal gives an interesting glimpse into Johnson's methodological approach to painting: “Now working on Betrothal. big 48.43. Sketches completed. Hope draw it up today. But will make fire on the line...Next a severe cold. & exhaustion + palpitation & shortness of breath for several days. A daily fight against the dark frost. Withdrew to parlour & worked on Betrothal. But rarely started till 6 pm... A long well-meant day's work painting on Eden with atrocious results. But another good lesson. And I review Betrothed in the light of the coffee grinder. This last really has it. Moral down. And oil paint in first stages must be water thin. Six hours ahead & the best of luck. Dear God I've been a long time digging. Isn't it time I had a crop.”

Other paintings named in the Diary during this productive period are *Cow parsley*, *Krapp* (back to Beckett), *The Letionial* “(Yes another big one up. The Letionial (bad title). Done in very rapid very short bursts. The glue is richly rapid.”), *Picnic* (“Two child figures amid cow parsley”, Now it's nearly finished. And it is full of magic. And' colour”), *Wilby orchard*; *Orchard with bird*; ‘*Wilby Orchard with white cat*; *Woman in landscape with white cat & strange creature*; *Nuns in harbour*; *Nude*; *Cornfield*; *Kitchen table* and *Seated woman*.

Sales, as always, were few and far between. We find mention of *The Sun Man* being sold to Owen Franklin for £35, and *Apples* (for £35) and *Chair* (for £30) to Frank Mathyshead, and *Hill top with 3 birds* (20?.19?) to Brigit Mackenzie for £20. Poor sales were not for want of trying. Johnson brought his work to many galleries – more than twenty London galleries are listed – largely without success. But characteristically he could never down his anchor for long and he soon returned to the “din and the shoddy streets of Notting Hill.”

I first met Nevill in the early eighties when he was exhibiting at Tom Caldwell's gallery in Fitzwilliam Street. We found much common ground – life, beauty, women and, of course, the demon of ‘Byrne's Pub’. In *The Other Side of Six* there is a delightful dissertation on alcohol: “I examine the empty glass – ifteen pints a week by 52 weeks for fifty years. Thirty nine thousand (39,000) pints. Yes. They should ring glad bells at opening time, I thought. O well, thus drank, no doubt Diogenes, thus Kepler, certainly Behan. Drinking is for younger men; provers, improvers, disprovers – and the hopeless ones.” A line from the Wilby diaries – “Old jazz fetches me. I need dancing” brings back a fragment of our conversation at this first meeting, when Nevill told me that one of his favourite escapes was “dancin with nigga women in Camden Town.” It was at this meeting that he gave me a copy of his autobiography, *The Other Side of Six*. Our friendship grew and when I published *The Beckett Country* in 1986, Nevill gave generously of his Dublin photographs, which were reproduced for the first time to a standard befitting their artistic merit.

The last decade of Nevill's life was of necessity preoccupied with health, or rather lack of it. “On shaky legs I entered the winter of my seventieth year, a sad bag of muscle and gut, humbled and prepared to listen.’ Take it easy’, they said, ‘and you'll last a few years yet’.” He lasted quite a few years and painted away continuously and true to previous form destroyed much of his work. I visited him regularly during this period. One day as we sipped beer in the Churchill Arms, he invited me back to his little studio in Peel Street to “share the mood he was transmitting to canvas”. I was astounded by the ten or so canvases he showed me. I asked if he had suffered much in their execution. He did not reply but asked why I thought there might have been pain. I felt in the paintings an intensity of personal involvement, an Augustinian expression on canvas. He acknowledged that whereas the creation of a good painting might invoke great pain in the artist, the viewer might experience pleasure, no bad thing in itself, but a successful painting should also transmit the pain of the creative process to the voyeur, for such to a greater or lesser extent is the beholder. He then admitted to the constant presence of a ‘monster’ named ‘doubt’





that watched over his every brush stroke and made him wonder if anything he painted was worth a damn. Indeed, as I later recalled, he had identified the monster at a much earlier period in his career: “All artists are subject to periods of doubt, however, and I was no exception. It came suddenly; the painting was rubbish I felt, however well received; these silent surreal wastelands, these mute bones and raven skies – who was I addressing? Of what relevance these Arcadian shores to a world of blackmail and bombs?”

Apart from the autobiographical catharsis that I saw in these paintings, I think I identified another quality I had seen also in Beckett’s writing, and which I had earlier expressed: “With this realisation comes another; much of the apparently surrealistic in Beckett’s writing is linked, sometimes very positively, sometimes only tenuously, with the reality of existence, and much of this existence emanates from memories of Dublin, a world rendered almost unrecognisable by Beckett’s technique of denuding his landscape and its people (while also annihilating time) in his creation of the ‘unreality of the real’.”² Was Johnson not expressing similar sentiments when he wrote: “I spy psychiatrists and neurologists waiting in the wings. Let them come to the podium and state their case. Rupert Sheldrake, for instance, writes of time and space-denying chreodes bearing atavistic messages from a deep primeval code through morphogenetic fields which determine our behaviour – and write our songs. Should I sit at this man’s feet and thus quench the incandescent magic? I’m not denying the role of intellect; with it we can build a frame on which

2. O’Brien E. *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett’s Ireland*. Black Cat Press and Faber and Faber. Dublin. 1986. P. xix



Golgotha



Endgame

to pin our claims. Then, if the song rings true, we can kick away the props and it will stand.” The paintings from Johnson’s last mood have achieved this; he has kicked the props to hell and the edifice is left resplendent in its sturdiness. The comparison which I have made with Beckett may indeed have more substance than we will ever know; as Beckett was influenced by painting, so too was Johnson influenced by literature not least being Beckett’s writings: “In due course Samuel Beckett scraped the bucket of irony, while painter Bacon scored his canvas with torn flesh, and his screaming popes engendered a cult of intellectual ferocity and acting out the hopeless existentialism of the day, the day of Pozzo and the screaming cardinals of Bacon.”

I believe I restored Nevill’s confidence that afternoon – at least for at time. I urged him to keep painting, not to compromise, to allow the “mood of the moment” influence the brush. He

needed though to escape from the stress of this “mood” and we agreed that he would do this through drawing which would allow him to free himself, to meander as it were with Picasso, Braque, the younger Johnson, or whoever. “Such is the surge of delight that accompanies a good drawing; I am a privileged spectator first-footing it in paradise – re-opening for a moment that door which closed in childhood.”

On another visit to Peel Street, I realised that some of the paintings I had seen on my previous visit were gone and knowing that he only rarely sold a painting I asked him what had happened to *Golgotha* which I had admired so much at our last meeting. He replied “Eoin, I devour my children”. I was put in mind of a line from *The Other Side of Six* “It is fair to say that I worked continuously at the painting and destroyed all I made.” From then my visits became missions of mercy with the purpose of saving as many of the ‘children’ as I could – some thirty or so – by taking them back to Dublin for framing for future exhibiting.

During this period Nevill lived frugally; he had little income and he had not attempted to sell his paintings for years, and yet he saw his earlier works fetch, what seemed to him to be phenomenal sums. *The Family* for example, sold at Adams Salesrooms in Dublin in 1991 for £20,000 and *Monkey, Harlequin and Women* for £9,000. These and other salesroom successes rekindled interest in his work and one dealer made so bold as to suggest to him that he should paint again in ‘the old style’, recreating as it were the paintings of the forties and fifties, which were now proving so popular. This request enraged and depressed him and far from compromising his art for the babble of the market-place, he determined to persist in the mood of the moment, which continued until his death. Two exhibitions of the ‘children’ of this last ‘mood’ ensued – the first at the Solomon Gallery in Dublin in 1995, and the second in the Tom Caldwell Gallery in Belfast in 1999.

On the literary front I was able to help Nevill complete his last literary work, the *Tractatus Pudicus*, best described perhaps as a poetic dialogue in which Johnson philosophises on the human condition, and in the process gives interesting insights into his development as a painter. Take for example *The Hermit* in which he expands on his friendship with his mentor John Luke (as originally recounted in *The Other Side of Six*), but he now expresses an opinion on Luke the artist, (whose paintings are presently much sought after):

*Good day – can’t stop. On my way
to the shores of Arcady where dwell
serendipitous P’s and Q’s.
Where the still air bears witness
and the buds envelop correct
testimonials.*

*All very welcome.
It is time to tell a story. To tell
it as it was.
John Luke, artist, lived in a
brick terrace house near the
Belfast docks. His father lay
in the front parlour a froth of
spittle on his lips.
Dead he was and waiting
for the box.
John had managed to reach the
Slade where he sat at the feet
of Mr. Tonks.
He lived content
fine skinned
chopping twigs
defining his virginity
with gesso and yoke
of the unborn pecker
and Terre Verte
he built his sexless
Valhallas.*

On my last meeting with Nevill some days before he died he looked from me standing at his bedside to the catheter draining him like an hour-glass that would alas never be inverted, and with eyes of sadness, sadness in the realization that his time had passed and mine not quite so, we parted on a quote from the *Book of Samuel*: “How are the mighty fallen and the weapons of war perished.”

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Golgotha

Acrylic on board

12" x 13"

Private Collection

Page 137

Child Resting

1998

Acrylic on board

20" x 22"

Private Collection

Page 109

Seated Figure

1998

Acrylic on board

20" x 22"

Private Collection

Self-Portrait

1998

Pencil and ink on paper mounted on foam
centreboard

31" x 34³/₄"

Courtesy of the National Self-Portrait
(photograph Eoin Stephenson LIPPA
Photographic Unit, University of Limerick)

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*The following images are a small selection taken from
Nevill Johnson's photographic archive of his own work.*



