

## Ardizzone's Sadness

My first encounter with the work of Edward Ardizzone (1900-1979) was with the illustrations he made to accompany Cyril Ray's book, *Merrie England*. (*Merrie England*, Vista Books, 1960.) Some time was to pass before I discovered that he was not only a master illustrator but was equally adept in watercolours, drawing, pen and ink, and the very occasional oil painting. Despite his forays into commercial work, it was as an illustrator of books that he was, and is, most well known. He provided illustrations for such classics of English literature as *David Copperfield* (1955) and *Bleak House* (1955) as well as for minor works such as *Hunting with Mr. Jorrocks* (1956) and *Ardizzone's Kilvert* (1976). His work also appeared in the books of his friends, for example the London trilogy with Maurice Gorham. *Back to the Local* (1949), *Londoners* (1951), and *Showmen & Suckers* (1951). But his most popular books were the illustrations he created for children's books such as *The Otterbury Incident* (1948) and *Stig of the Dump* (1963). The most popular of his works for children were the Little Tim books that he wrote and illustrated himself. *Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain*, the first in the series, were published in 1936, and the final one, *The Adventures of Tim*, was published in 1985, six years after his death.

Although this kind of illustrative work demanded a high level of pictorial versatility from the artist, it is through his style that Ardizzone is immediately recognisable. It was a style that would persist for most of his working life, holding the 'incidents' in his pictures within a distinctive, and recognisable, world. There were two exceptions to this stylistic continuity. As might be expected, at the start of his career, there is a short period when his mature style has not yet formed. (See Sheridan Le Fanu, *In a Glass Darkly*, 1929). His characters resemble blobs and we are still waiting for the people, dogs, trees and buildings, to appear in their familiar forms. Towards the end of his life he moved from his home in Maida Vale in London (1972)—where he had spent most of his adult life- to Rodmersham Green on the Kent coast. Now, when he now looked out of his window he saw the sea, boats, and a village atmosphere that his new home was such an integral part. Gone were the ever-changing scenes of city life that he had both drawn, and drawn on, for over thirty years. It's hardly surprising that such a major shift in his living arrangements should produce a shift in the content of his work, as well as in his style.

Ardizzone's work has regularly attracted two responses called *English*, or it may be described as *charming*. I want to see to what extent these are accurate characterizations of his work and if they aren't then what is it that lies beneath these labels and makes Ardizzone Ardizzone?

The Englishness of Ardizzone has often been secured by placing him in the tradition of English caricaturists such as Hogarth, Gillray, Cruikshank, and Rowlandson. These are artists who share a graphic similarity, as well as a common moral sensibility. I'm not convinced that this is a legitimate lineage in which to place Ardizzone. The satire, so central to Gillray, Hogarth, Cruikshank and Rowlandson is absent from Ardizzone. The forms of his human subjects are crafted with an affectionate eye and anger, and so satire, is absent from his work. Just occasionally, one can detect echoes from this satirical lineage. There is a gentle suggestion of kinship between Thomas Rowlandson's *Exhibition Stare Case*, 1811 and *Christmas Eve at the Warrington*; 1939. Ardizzone's sketch is filled with warmth and affection for the individuals grouped round the pub staircase. In Rowlandson's picture we find an unsympathetic vision of human kind (Especially of women) making a spectacle of it as it tumbles down the stairs.

If we were to tie Ardizzone to a specific place and time rather than leaving him to float in a vague mist of Englishness, then that place would surely be London, and particularly London in the immediate decades after the war. (Ref. Paul Johnson, 'Celebrating the Michelangelo of the Maida Vale Pub', *Spectator*, 21<sup>st</sup>, March, 2009) It is in London, and in the books he illustrated with his friend Maurice Gorham, that he recorded the 'daily round that unfolded in his immediate neighbourhood of Maida Vale. (Refs. Maurice Gorham and Edward Ardizzone, *The Local*, (1939) *Back to the Local* (1949) *Londoners* (1951) and *Showmen and Suckers and Londoners*, (1951)) It is here that his Englishness blossomed, as his style and content came together to create a wonderful world that is the match of any of the other great 'describers' of London. (Such as Dickens, Blake, Dore and Booth) As we shall see, for once, this is an Englishness not reliant upon the transfiguration of a landscape. It is an urban Englishness, and it is in the details of city life that Ardizzone was at his most English.

The Local. The Pub.

Ardizzone's vision of post-war London was a place where historical ceremony and commercial spectacle, were absent. He is an artist of the local and it is in, and around the local, where the flow

of events he loved so much, took place. If London was the city where Englishness is experienced at its most intense, then the pub, and particularly the local, was the place where Ardizzone's cast of characters were to be found being English. Close to Ardizzone's home in Maida Vale were two such pubs, The Warwick Castle and The Warrington that he both patronised, and drew, for most of the time he lived in London.

The life of the pub provided him with a place where he could observe the regulars enjoying themselves in a variety of ways. Small groups might be leaning against the bar having quite conversations. At weekends enthusiastic community singing might break out in one of the larger bar. No matter how much how much his characters may have drunk these scenes always carried an affectionate recognition that alcohol makes you drunk, but not malicious. However, the pub could also be a place of solitude, a place where the world slowed down. Often, one might visit the pub to 'get away from things' rather than engage in neighbourly conversation, or the riotous drinking and singing happening in the main bar. This is perfectly caught in the *Saloon Bar at the Prince Alfred*. (*Back to the Local*, p.35). A woman drinker is leaning back against her seat whilst a man rests on the bar waiting to be served. There is no indication that the two have any connection. The bar has a feeling of quiet, emptiness, far away from the convivial groups that, in all likelihood, are to be found in the other bars.

At the heart of Ardizzone's world of affection and conviviality is a thread of sadness that can lay claim to being just as English as his scenes of happy sociability. It is not just a matter of depicting individuals becalmed in moods of dejection. The places where they are sitting-the space itself, and the objects in it-can also be drained of any promise that the mood would be eventually broken. This despondency was aided by the pub architecture of the day where the bars were often both smaller and more plentiful than is the case nowadays. This meant that a space was almost always available, for the solitary drinker. One of his most poignant depictions of pubs and drunkenness is a sketch of an elderly lady who has drunk herself into unconsciousness. She is seated with her head resting on her breast. Ardizzone has draw her alone in the snug, which was a small bar frequently used by unaccompanied women. For once it is her dog that takes up a concerned attitude whilst the barmaid comments 'She may have a lot to forget, poor thing.' This remark is even more poignant once one remembers that, even in 1954 when the sketch was made, the physical and emotional effects of the war were still being felt.

## Your Local Bohemia

Judging from the details of his life, it seems that Ardizzone was part of a gentle bohemia whose meetings revolved around certain tables and chairs in their 'local'. (Probably The Warrington with occasional visits to The Warwick Castle.) Like many other groups of this sort, a local was essential to their social life. It provided them with a place to gather and exchange ideas and was the closest to a home environment that many of them would have. If you visited the pub regularly then you might become a 'regular', that is someone who is local rather than someone who is just passing through, and so just a visitor. What Ardizzone drew, and was himself a part of, was the life of his local Bohemia. Local pubs often drew their clientele from people who lived within walking distance and the small scale of this world was certainly part of Ardizzone's Englishness. It was not by chance that Ardizzone illustrated so many children's books where the action unfolded inside of small, localised worlds. A consequence of this smallness is that the life lived by its inhabitants unfolds below the horizon of the official world, as a consequence the representatives of the state are almost completely absent. In his wonderful panorama depicting a nearby park (*'Trickles of Spring'*, 1955) (Gabriel White, *Edward Ardizzone*, Schocken Books, New York, 1980) apart from a soldier, who is obviously on leave, there is no trace of officialdom, nor is there any evidence of lives being shaped by the advertising of large corporations. (Ardizzone did accept commercial commissions. But even here, his work for the cover of *The Listener*, *Overtons Oyster Bars* and champagne dealers—to name but a few- were always small in scale.)

The Maida Vale bohemian enclave, of which Ardizzone was a part, was just one of a number of such groups that flourished in north London in the decades after the war. These groups could be found in Chelsea, the Fulham Road, Hampstead, Fitzrovia, Maida Vale and Notting Hill. All were organised according to the principles of the local. (There were exceptions, one of which was the Colony Room, in Soho. The Colony Room was many things but gentle was not one of them and its patrons tended to be regulars but not locals.)

By the mid-nineteen sixties these Bohemian groups had begun to break up. Accommodation was becoming more expensive and so out of reach for the less well off Bohemians. The local aspect of these areas that had been so important to Ardizzone's art began to crumble as the population of London became more mobile and so less likely to become part of the pattern of relationships that

made up a 'locality'. In many ways, the scenes that Ardizzone was documenting represented a gradual fading away of the life in his local, the Warrington. What had been semi-formal gatherings began to decay into individual encounters.

Running through his love of the pub and the life to be found there, was Ardizzone's recording of that most English of moods, the contemplation of a world that is sad. It might be a sadness that comes out of the disappearance of so much of the physical and emotional fabric of pre-war London. (Perhaps this is why bombsites, although rare in his work, are so poignant. (See 'The Bombed Pub', in *Back to the Local*, p.91) English sadness is caught up with disappearance, and there was no sadder sight than a pub that had been destroyed. Maurice Gorham accompanies Ardizzone's picture of the bombed pub with an obituary of his own. 'For those of us who feel sad whenever a pub vanishes, this is a sad life'. *Back to the Local*, p.90

### Charming

As well as being characterised as 'English', Ardizzone's work is sometimes referred to as 'charming'. It's hard to think of a more damning description of an artist's work than *charming*. We are drifting dangerously close to Hallmark greetings card territory. There is much in Ardizzone's *oeuvre* that, at first sight, seems to confirm such a description. Charming can mean, and very often does, the artistic creation of a world where trouble, of any kind, is absent. I have even heard his work referred to as 'innocent', as if it were a world before the fall. Art becomes charming the degree to which it banishes, and represses, 'trouble'. What remains is a spurious confection where any disturbing dimensions to life are absent. But Ardizzone's work is not an *oeuvre* where troubled situations, or troubled people, are absent. It is the very English nature of these 'troubles', and the way they are represented, that can mislead the inattentive viewer into a judgement of 'charming'. Ardizzone's world is not a place of violence, but it is a place of gentle sadness and it is that quality of gentleness that is often mistaken for charming. (Two rare examples of violence are 'The Gibbet' from *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 1946 and 'A Battle in an Orchard of Almond Trees', 1943. (This is a scene in the aftermath of a battle in Italy in WW11. Corpses are scattered in the foreground of the sketch.) Ardizzone gives us an affectionate view of urban life, perhaps of life in general, and it is a pictorial affection that prefers to forgive rather than judge. It is this forgiveness, not charm that opens his work to that sadness which is so much

an English mood. It is this gentle melancholy, that deflects the judgement of charming from being made against his work.

It is worth remembering that the war had cast a long shadow over the world that Ardizzone lived in. There was the material and mental damage inflicted upon British cities, in particular London and the destruction of so much of the world that had existed before the war. Disappearance, and so sadness; waiting, and so thwarted expectation, were daily occurrences. (I remember, as a young boy, shopping with my mother and being able to identify where we were headed because it was the only shop that had not been bombed in what had been the main commercial street.) For Ardizzone, sadness could fall on men and women like a soft rain. It fell in pubs, on parks and queues. It was a sad world

The sadness of Englishness was not just a solitary experience. In Ardizzone's picture of a cinema queue in 'The Queue', in *Londoners*, 1951, p.53. The mood is one of a group melancholy. We are not shown either the head or the end of the queue, just a small section as it turns a corner. There is no indication as to what they are waiting for but, in all probability, it is a cinema queue. On the wall above the queue is a large poster that, once again, one supposes is advertising the film they are about to see. The artists' cross-hatching has made it difficult to make out what is on the poster apart from the word LOVE that can be detected towards the bottom. It could almost be a scene from the life of the proles depicted in George Orwell's *1984*. Ardizzone, of course, would never make such a judgement on these people in the way that Orwell does. What gives Ardizzone's picture its warmth and sadness is that one feels that as soon as he finished the sketch he would join the back of the queue. A busker is entertaining the queue which was a not an uncommon sight well into the sixties. However, musician and audience can hardly be said to be taking part in a joyful experience. Both the musician and his audience seem unmoved by the sounds he is making. (A similar morose tune seems to be issuing from the cornet of its player as he stands in the lighted pub door. (See 'The Cornet Player', *Back to the Local*. P. 83.) Those standing in the queue show little expectation of an enjoyable evening. Huddled together, they are drifting between a world that the war wiped out, and a present that they sense will disappear too. ('Surely it can't be left like this, can it?') The queue has been left standing in the rain.

There seems little doubt that the strand of sadness running through much of Ardizzone's work was a response to the consequences of the war. At about the same time that Ardizzone's work was appearing, two artists, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton, were gaining inspiration from the very bits and pieces of the mass culture that were almost wholly absent from the work of Ardizzone's. Gone was the warmth of a local, gone was the faithful companion at one's feet and gone was that place to reflect on what might have been but never was.

It is now almost thirty years ago since I first began to enjoy Ardizzone's work. Now I live twelve thousand miles away in my home in Australia, but I can still enjoy the warmth, the affection and above all the forgiveness in Ardizzone's work. I prefer it to the left over's of a world devoured by banks, multi-national corporations and the paranoid vindictiveness of government agencies.

#### Postscript

1963. Winter. London. The Henekeys pub on Portobello Road. Saturday Evening.

In those days Henekeys consisted of a conventional bar where drinks for the whole pub were served and a large back room with an equally large, rectangular table placed at its centre.

When you went into the back room, on a Friday or Saturday night, it was exceedingly noisy, something achieved without the help of live, or recorded, music. Seated around the table were a group of mainly men who seemed not only to be acquainted with one another but were also in some way similar. Many wore, what to me, were eccentric combinations of clothing. There was an absence of ties. Their hair was a long way away from the accepted male styles of the day.

Many wore jewellery. (Rings and earrings.) There was a middle class quality to their speech whilst the ease of their gestures as they spoke to one another announced that they were all taking part in some sort of collective performance. Women too were present but they were unlike the mothers and sisters that an 18 year old would have been familiar with. They were definitely concerned with their dress but it was not a striving for chic, or a muted respectability. Their look approximated to such characters as ballet dancers, Spanish gypsies and, most peculiar of all, American teenagers. As startling as these women were to a teenager, fresh from the provinces, they took root in one's sub-conscious only to surface when, a few years later, one began to make serious choices as to a suitable mate.

To be seated at the table was clearly by invitation only so the rest of us were pressed against the walls of the back room with our drinks perched on very narrow shelves that ran along the walls. We were the audience.

It was only later that I learned that the 'Rectangular Table' was occupied by the artists and antique dealers who had workshops and studios close by.

At the weekend, there was an additional 'Ardizzone' moment. At closing time an elderly gent, dressed a bit like Chaplin, and called Uncle.... would wait by the main door as the drinkers left. He had an old fashioned pram with a wind-up gramophone and a selection of records that he would play. Invariably, groups would form to sing along to his collection of popular favourites.