

Percy Kelly (1918-1993). Artist Extraordinaire

By Ian Hodkinson

“I cannot paint for monetary gain. I would rather starve than sell one piece of my work, but I know when I depart this world people will stop and wonder at the beauty and truth that I have endeavoured to portray.” Percy Kelly.

The artist Percy Kelly was one of life's great eccentrics. During his colourful life he lived for a short while (May to November 1971), at Levens Park Cottage on the Levens Hall estate. Kelly had fallen on hard times and through the generosity of Robin Bagot he was offered a short term tenancy on the cottage at a low rent (Burkett 1994).



Levens Park Cottages

While in Levens he wrote a series of *Letters from Levens* to Norman Nicholson the Cumbrian poet, the texts of which were published in David Cross's book *Cumbrian Brothers* in 2007. These letters are typical of the many letters he sent throughout his lifetime to friends and acquaintances, which since his death have been recognised as important works of art in their own right. The text of the written letters is often ornately illustrated with coloured paintings or drawings in Kelly's unique style (see also Wadsworth 2004, 2009, Cross 2011).

During his lifetime Percy Kelly, was little recognised within his native Cumbria. Now thanks to a series of exhibitions and publications by Mary Burkett, formerly of Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal, Chris Wadsworth of the Castlegate House Gallery, Cockermouth and David Cross of Carlisle, his unique representations of the landscape, often embracing the industrial past, is now increasingly appreciated by a much wider audience. His paintings exhibited at Messum's Gallery, London as part of an exhibition entitled *The Elemental North* in 2009 led to a major one man show at the same gallery in January 2012 (Barwise 2011). Percy Kelly's work is now eagerly sought by collectors with several paintings having recently passed through local auction houses in Cumbria. He has yet to establish a track record at the major international auction houses in London. A plaque, recognising his talents and achievements was recently been erected at the old Post Office in Workington Town Centre, the town of his birth (Anon 2012). He was elected a member of the Lake Artists Society in 1957 but resigned his membership in 1963 (Lake Artists Society website).

Much has been written about the life and work of Robert Percy Kelly (see Burkett 1994, Burkett and Rickerby 1998, Wadsworth 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011a,b, Cross 2007, 2011, Renouf 2004) and there is little point in reiterating the detailed information already available. Nevertheless, a brief outline of his life,

based on the above works, helps to place his time in Levens within a broader context.

The young Percy Kelly was first employed as a Post Office telegraph boy in Workington. He moved to Kendal as a telegraph officer, joining the Kendal Art Society in the early 1930s. During the war he served in France with the Royal Border Regiment, having married his first wife Audrey James in 1942. After the war they settled in Great Broughton near Cockermouth, where they ran the Post Office. During the 1950s he suffered a series of nervous breakdowns that forced him to relinquish his sub-postmasters job. He then studied art for several years at Carlisle College (1961-65) and was supported by his wife. Despite Audrey's best loyal efforts he divorced her in 1970 and in 1971 married Christine, the wife of an eye specialist he had consulted. The resulting scandal led him to flee with Christine and her children to a rundown cottage at St. Davids, Pembrokeshire. The family moved again in the early 1980s to the village of Rockland St. Peter, Norfolk but the marriage broke down and Christine left in 1983, never to see Percy again.

Percy Kelly's eccentricities are well documented, particularly his refusal later in his life, despite his parlous financial state, to sell any of his paintings, even those in the few public exhibitions he could be persuaded to stage. At the time of his death in 1993 he was in deep poverty yet his meagre cottage at Rocklands St.

Peter was filled with unsold paintings for which there was great demand. He is reputed to have twice refused to sell paintings to Melvin Bragg, despite him making appointments expressly for that purpose, and to have refused L.S. Lowry access to his studio on the grounds that he might plagiarise his ideas (Anon 2011). Notwithstanding his innate fear of criticism Percy Kelly's pictures received warm reviews during his lifetime.

Despite marrying twice, Percy Kelly struggled increasingly with gender identity and his habit of cross dressing became more firmly entrenched with time. His transvestite behaviour, which started in Cumbria, did not go down well, particularly, with the inhabitants of West Wales and is probably one of the reasons for the failure of his marriages. His female persona was that of Roberta, a name derived by the feminisation of his first Christian name. Following the departure of his second wife he formally changed his name by deed poll to Roberta Penelope Kelly in 1985 but on legal advice changed it back to Robert seven years later. Apparently while in Norfolk he undertook shopping trips to different neighbouring villages under either his male or female persona. It is reputed that the locals, with the exception of the village mole catcher, were not taken in by this subterfuge.

Percy Kelly, surprisingly for one of such vulnerable constitution, played football at one time for Workington Town FC, under Bill Shankly.

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