

Research document

on

John Luke

by

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for

Arts for All



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Introduction

This paper is about North Belfast artist John Luke (1906 – 1975), whose work was celebrated in a major exhibition at the Ulster Museum in 2012/13. Arts for All would like to sincerely thank all those who contributed to the paper, in particular Neville and Pat McKee, Dr Joseph McBrinn, Kim Mawhinney, Dr John Lynch, Robert Heslip and Robert Corbett.

The most high profile legacy of John Luke's remarkable career can be found in the entrance hall of Belfast City Hall. A mural, 15ft by 31ft, it is, by any measure, a most significant achievement. Working, by his own standards, at quicksilver pace, John completed the mural between January 1951 and April 1952.

Commissioned to commemorate the Festival of Britain, the subject matter reflects much of John Luke's own life. The mural depicts a figure resembling Sir Arthur Chichester surrounded by symbols of the industries that became synonymous with Belfast, two of which John himself would personally experience. The linen industry is reflected in strips of linen laid on the ground and a weaver's handloom, while the hull of a ship represents Belfast's historic shipbuilding industry.

John's choice is revealing in a more general sense, for it says something about the man and his craft too. Leaving school at 14, he had worked as a heater-boy in the shipyard of Workman, Clark and Co before a serious fall ended his employment there. He then worked as a fibre cutter in the York Street Mill, the world's biggest linen mill, in the world's leading city for linen production. It was a harsh introduction to working life for a teenage boy, but it was nothing exceptional for those of his class in the industrial cities of the day.

John's character and approach to his art seem to have been heavily influenced by his tough, hard-working but happy family upbringing in North Belfast. That life is reflected in his self-discipline, tough regime and dedication to technique. Other artists, from middle class backgrounds, might lean towards the abstract, relying on inspiration and experimentation, but John's approach was based on sheer hard work, long hours and a painstaking attention to technique that extended to mixing his own paints.

John's North Belfast upbringing was clearly influential in helping to shape an artist whose legacy is now appreciated as never before. Today, as we celebrate a resurgence of interest in his work, and a tangible pride in him amongst the people of his city, it is useful to reflect on this upbringing and explore the forces that helped make John Luke such a unique artist.

Background

According to John Luke's nephew, Neville McKee, who knew him well, a family tradition suggests that the Lukes came to Ireland some five generations before John, from the Isle of Bute in Scotland. Certainly, their ancestry was Scottish. Neville believes this Ulster Scots lineage was evident in both John's parents, who would have been Ulster Scots speakers. His father, James, was born in Ahoghill in County Antrim in 1874, while his mother, Sarah (née Clements), born in 1877, came from Ballykeel, a townland near Ballymena. The wider area was a heartland of Ulster Scots culture and even today its dialects are quite distinct, even from village to village.

Both James (listed as a linen dyer in the 1901 census) and Sarah came from linen backgrounds. James' father had been a handloom weaver in Ahoghill and Sarah's mother, Jane Clements, was also a weaver. They would not have been unusual in their professions, for the Antrim countryside had been well known for its linen weavers for centuries. Indeed there was a long tradition both of craftsmanship and artistic endeavour in the wider area that would be inherited by James and Sarah's fourth son, John (known as Jack by the family).

John's friend, the poet and curator John Hewitt, writes (in *Ancestral Voices*), of the weaver poets of North Down and Antrim who worked in the 'Scots conventions'. 'Each of these poets was strongly local. Man and place were knotted together. The Bard of Ballycarry, of Dunclug, of Dunover. There was a lively sense of craft-brotherhood among them, frequently exchanging of riming epistles.'

These working class poets, mostly associated with linen, whose rhymes were heavily laden with Ulster Scots words, connect us with a past almost forgotten now. Rooted in a hard working existence that earned only the bare necessities of life, they found an expression of that life in their poetry. Not all were weavers; some were small farmers and country schoolmasters. Having spent a hard day at the loom, farm or school, their poetry writing in the evenings was a release. Like John Luke, their art came not from abstracted imaginings but from the world around them and the life they lived and was achieved through dedicated, painstaking craftsmanship. Sadly, when handloom weaving was superseded by the arrival of the big linen mills, the weaver poets rapidly diminished in numbers and the workers in the new mills and factories, as Hewitt noted, had little time or inclination for verse.

In 1896, Sarah and James were married at the Gracehill Moravian Church, between Ballymena and Ahoghill in County Antrim, which still stands today. Five years later, the 1901 census records them as living at 173 Ahoghill Village. By this time three of their eight children had been born, Joseph, Matthew and William. The Lukes were listed as Presbyterians, though in Belfast they would worship at the Methodist church in North Belfast's Duncairn Gardens.

Growing up in North Belfast

It is almost certain that, like many thousands of others at the time, the Lukes came to Belfast to seek work in the then thriving linen mills of the city. The first record of their life in Belfast is in the Belfast Streetfinder of 1905, which lists James Luke, labourer, at 60 Spamount Street (a part of the street that no longer exists). The family were still there the following year, when John was born. By 1907 they had moved to 24 Maralin Street, around the corner, where James is listed as a fireman in a factory. It should be noted that John Hewitt recorded the family living at 4 Lewis Street from John Luke's birth, but this was an error, both in house number and time.

There is now a gap in the records for the Lukes until 1911, when the census of that year lists James Luke, fireman in a weaving factory, living at 140 Broadway Lower, off Donegall Road. Life could not have been easy. With him and Sarah and their now six sons was Sarah's widowed mother, Jane Clements, who was suffering from dementia. The Lukes had also known tragedy by this stage, losing at least two children in infancy. Neville McKee, whose mother was Sarah (though known as Sadie), the youngest of the Luke children and the only surviving girl, believes his mother may have been the fourth female of the siblings. "I have a memory of my mother telling me there were three girls born before her," he says. "It seemed to me that two died almost immediately but that one lived a few years, however, I can't be sure. The part of this story that really struck me was that all were called Sarah – each a replacement for the one that died."

In 1913, the family moved to 24 Lewis Street in North Belfast, where John would grow up, and where he was enrolled as a pupil at the nearby Hillman Street National School. By today's standards it was a hard existence with little material comfort, but it was one that shaped the future artist.

Dr Joseph McBrinn, Lecturer in History of Design and Applied Art, University of Ulster, who curated the highly successful John Luke exhibition at the Ulster Museum in 2012/2103 and wrote the accompanying book (Northern Rhythm, the Art of John Luke (1906 – 1975), believes that "if Luke saw his identity in anything it was in his working class roots. He was viscerally fascinated by the techniques of industry, the systems by which people worked."

Nor was John's experience uncommon in industrial cities, until relatively recent times. Dr McBrinn's own father was born in North Queen Street in the 1940s, very near to where Lewis Street once existed. "He went from school to the docks at the age of 13, as happened in working class communities until the 1960s", Dr McBrinn says.

Neville McKee was told that 24 Lewis Street, a typical two-up, two-down Belfast working class house from the city's great housing boom that began in the last decades of the 19th century (the population of Belfast quadrupled between 1870 and 1900), was at the end of the terrace. "I was told that the brothers took over the attic space and turned it into a bedroom for them all," he says. That still left James, Sarah, Sarah's mother Jane and young Sarah (Sadie) to fit into the two bedrooms.

Neville says that his mother, as the only girl, was treated more delicately than her siblings, “according to some of my uncles, my Granny had to keep the brothers in order if their conversation at home became indelicate. ‘Wheesht’ was her word to settle them.”

In one sense the hardworking and aspirational Luke family were typical of the skilled working class Belfast families of the time. Although Neville McKee believes James was not well educated and, indeed, marked his marriage certificate with an X (though he was certainly able to read later in life and is marked as such in the 1901 census), the seven boys were all clearly encouraged to improve themselves through further education. Neville recalls his mother telling him how her father (James) would return home in the evening from work, and after the bath he would badly have needed from his work as a boilerman, read the paper. “My impression of my grandfather as described by my mother was that he was extremely quiet and let the sons get on with their lives. I see them almost as a self-supporting and self-improving brotherhood. My mother, who had great respect for her mother (Sarah), spoke of her as a very hardworking woman who produced good meals for the large family, from what must have been a very limited budget. That they all survived the tuberculosis outbreak that decimated Belfast and took the lives of the children next door, certainly suggests a healthy diet.”

“Luke’s parents”, says Dr McBrinn, “seem to have had strong personalities, particularly his mother. They must have been a very serious and high-minded family, despite the difficulties of life during that period. John Luke is remarkable in that he is the only artist I have researched in Northern Ireland who is from that kind of background. It’s a great testimony to the dedication of his parents who must have materially supported him and his siblings.”

All the brothers, Neville says, pursued further education of some kind, usually evening classes, and were driven to achieve, although with John alone, this drive was not connected with status or money. James became a civil engineer, Billy an engineer who went into business, Bobby a highly skilled toolmaker, Joseph, the eldest, became a district inspector with the RUC, while Albert was a police detective in England. Even Matthew, partially sighted from injuries sustained in the trenches during World War I, worked as a switchboard operator for British European Airway (BEA) in their Belfast office, one of the few careers open to him.

Though close and united by a common bond to improve themselves, there was a clear distinction between John, whose dedication was totally unmaterialistic and focused on his art, and his brothers, who saw improvement in terms of career and wages. John’s painstaking and laborious painting technique, which was never to make him a substantial living, was a puzzle to his brothers. Their inability to understand his motivation was best exemplified in an incident many years later, as John himself related to Neville, with great amusement.

“Uncle Jack (John) told me that Billy, a talented amateur artist himself, came round to the house Jack was living in off the Cavehill Road with three easels, three blank canvases, and a great deal of paint. Jack was made to sit down and watch Billy set up the easels. First he applied the blue paint to the three blank

canvases, then the green and then the other colours. In an hour and a half he had turned out three paintings. 'That,' he told Jack 'is how you do it, that's how you make money!' Uncle Jack took it all in good spirit. 'You know', he told me 'those paintings weren't bad'."

But John's artistic career was still many years ahead. First, there was the small matter of his education at Hillman Street National School. Though, like others of his class, he left school at 14 to begin employment, his learning should not be underestimated, as Robert Heslip, Heritage Officer at Belfast City Council and a former Curator of the Ulster Museum, emphasises.

"By the time he left his core skills would have been better than GCSE level today in several areas, including mathematics, geometry and grammatical knowledge. He would have been expected to parse a sentence at age 12 and would also have been taught drawing, a valued skill in those days."

Neville, too, recalls his mother and uncles, including Jack, as being generally correct in their use of grammar. It would not have been a comfortable education, however. Schools in Belfast had not kept pace with the population explosion, as Sybil Gribbon notes in her book *Edwardian Belfast, A Social Profile*. In 1914 55 Belfast schools were considered constantly overcrowded, with different classes jostling each other in the single large schoolroom, often overflowing into the corridors and cloakrooms.

But what would life have been like for John Luke and his family, and indeed the thousands of other working class families in North Belfast of that time? Belfast-based social and maritime historian, Dr John Lynch, whose books include 'A Tale of Three Cities: Comparative Studies in Working Class life' (in Dublin, Bristol and Belfast), believes that, in terms of housing at least, Belfast was a relatively good city to grow up in at this time.

"Belfast actually had some of the best working class housing in the UK or Ireland during this period," he says. "As a late industrial city, compared to London or Manchester, for instance, it did not suffer the worst housing conditions. Fortunately, Belfast Corporation (the forerunner of Belfast Council), introduced strict housing-related by-laws before the massive expansion in housing stock that began in the last decades of the 19th century. Houses had to have damp courses and have a rear entry and streets couldn't be narrower than the highest building on either side. Back-to-back housing, still being built in Manchester in 1930, was outlawed here in 1911."

As Neville's mother Sarah testified, the Luke children enjoyed a healthy diet. According to Dr Lynch, this would not have been unusual. "Skilled working class families were quite well fed," he says. "The calorific value was roughly the same as today. Families would have filled up on bread, perhaps four and a half pounds, or three loaves, a day. They'd get through about five and a half pounds of meat and a pound and a half of bacon a week, with plenty of dishes that made the meat go a long way, such as soup and stew. What would shock us today is the huge amount of sugar consumed, which they needed for energy. People would think nothing of three or four teaspoons of sugar in a cup of tea. It helped give energy

for a physically demanding lifestyle, in which keeping warm, in the days before central heating, was very important.”

It is not impossible that the Lukes’ good meals were enhanced by home grown vegetables from an allotment, though the keeping of animals like pigs in the back yard, a custom many families brought from the country, had been made illegal the year before John was born. While health visitors of the time deplored the fact that Belfast’s working wives had abandoned the country tradition of porridge, homemade wheaten bread and potatoes, it is more than likely that, with their Scots heritage, the Lukes ate plenty of the former at least. Indeed, Neville recalls his mother serving him porridge for breakfast in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The lack of heating, Dr Lynch says, would also account for the restrictive nature of their early to bed, early to rise lifestyle. “Lighting and heating the house in winter was expensive, so people went to bed early instead, as early as 9pm in winter. As they would start work at 8am at the latest, they would, in many cases, leave the houses as early as 7am. If they were five minutes late they would be docked an hour’s wages. It was a serious business.”

Though some of the family worshipped at the nearby Methodist church in Duncairn Gardens, where the young John attended Sunday School, Neville McKee believes that the family were essentially Church of Ireland. “I was told that they only went to the Methodist church because it was near and, in my mother’s case, because there was a gymnastic club there she attended.” Despite attending Sunday School as a child, John himself was not a follower of any religion, though he took a strong interest in Buddhism in later years. “In later life,” Neville says, “I was unaware of any of the brothers having any strong church attachment or interest in religion philosophically, except for Billy who was very interested in the evangelical interpretations of prophesy for the imminent end of the world.”

Though Sarah, like many wives of the time, did not work, the household income was greatly supplemented by the siblings. Long before John left school, his elder brothers were earning wages that would help keep the rest of the family. During World War One, however, there were three absentees, James Luke and his two elder sons, Joseph and Matthew, all fought in the war. James entered the Royal Army Service Corps in 1915, being discharged after the war on medical grounds.

Working life

John Luke entered working life at the age of 14, as a heater-boy with Workman, Clark and Co. His role was to heat a rivet over the fire with a pair of long tongs until it was red hot before tossing it up to the catch boy, who caught it in a wooden bowl and then used his own tongs to place it into the hole of two overlapping steel plates for the riveting to take place. It is not known whether John worked at the company's North Belfast yard, near today's ferry port, or the recently acquired yard at Queen's Island, alongside Harland & Wolff (in the area where the Paint Hall is today).

Had it been the North Belfast yard, it is likely that John, a great walker (and cyclist) all his life, would have travelled on foot. If it were Queen's Island he would probably have used Belfast's extensive tram network, electrified in 1906, which would have dropped him off right outside the shipyards with several thousand others.

Sadly no records survive of Workman, Clark & Co, but John had joined a significant shipbuilders. Though ironically nicknamed 'the wee yard' by comparison with Harland & Wolff, it was, for a period, the second biggest in the world, after its more famous neighbour. In 1901, 1909, 1910 and 1913 they actually produced more tonnage than Harland & Wolff. During WW1 they were employing 12,000 men. In 1920, when John joined, they received orders for 37 ships and employed 10,000 men.

Neville McKee believes most of the Luke boys started their working lives in the shipyard. Belfast shipyard workers were among the best paid in the UK and competition for work there was intense, a family link always helped.

According to Dr Lynch, it is more than likely that John would have been serving an apprenticeship. This would not have been the premium apprenticeship that the likes of Frank Workman or George Clark had themselves worked at Harland & Wolff, in which the ultimate aim was a management role and the cost was around £700. The equivalent for working class apprentices was a more modest affair, involving John's father putting down five pounds behaviour money as a guarantee of his good conduct. He would also have to provide a full set of tools. By the end of such an apprenticeship John would have been earning around 18 shillings (90p) per week for his 55-hour week, working from 7am to 5pm weekdays and a Saturday until 1.00 pm. John, however, would not stay that long. Around 1922, while carrying out his role as a heater-boy onboard a ship, he fell and badly fractured his leg. To make matters worse, the company compensation scheme did not cover apprentices. It was the end of John's shipbuilding career, he wouldn't return. This may have been due to the daunting experience of his fall, but could also have been caused by the problems the company was beginning to face at this time, with a severe downturn in orders.

The School of Art

Despite a lengthy recuperation, it was not all gloom for John. A prodigious drawer since school days, his sketches had impressed a fellow worker at the shipyard, who suggested he try the art evening classes at the School of Art on the top floor of Belfast's Municipal Technical Institute. With the apparent encouragement of his father, John now enrolled. It should be noted that not long before he completed his first ever mural, of King Billy, painted on a gable wall in Lewis Street. Though he was not a political person, it is his choice of medium that is significant, for he would long be fascinated by murals.

Built between 1900 and 1907, the Municipal Technical College in College Square East took shape around the same time as the nearby Belfast City Hall. It was, in a sense, the other jewel in the crown of Belfast Corporation and reflected the self-improving ethos of the city as well as its growing need for skilled workers at a time of remarkable economic development. It was dedicated to training engineers, designers, artists and apprentices of the principal skilled trades on which so much of Belfast's prosperity depended.

For Robert Heslip, the School of Art and Technical College were part of a wider ethos. "Like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, it provided a continuum of cultural expression, art being seen as a tool in terms of societal development in regard to economics and society and education and indeed morals."

For John Luke and his family, the working class ethos of self-improvement was vital. "In those days, before television, 300 people might turn up to a public lecture. The thirst for knowledge was widespread among the working class at this time," Dr Lynch says. According to Neville McKee, John was a voracious pursuer of knowledge all his life, spending hours in the public libraries of Belfast. His favourite of these was the Belfast Central Library, opened in Royal Avenue in 1888, though he probably also used the Carnegie Libraries on Donegall Road and Oldpark Road.

The York Street Mill

John Luke attended evening classes in art at the School of Art for the session, 1923 to 1924. In the day he had a new job, at another icon of North Belfast's industrial landscape, the York Street Mill. Run by the York Street Flax Spinning Company, it was the biggest linen mill in the world. Unlike shipbuilding, Belfast's linen industry saw little increase in unemployment during the slump of the 1920s.

While shipbuilding was very much a male preserve, women greatly outnumbered men in Belfast's world-leading linen industry, helping boost the city's unusually high percentage (over 40%) of females in the labour force. However, on the cutting floor, where John was employed as a fibre cutter, men were in the majority and conditions were better. Wages too were better for men. Girls earned an average of seven shillings and six pence a week (37.5p), women sixteen shillings (80p). Boys earned an average of eight shillings (40p), men 23 shillings (£1.15p).

It is not hard to imagine the meticulous John, large scissors in hand, precisely cutting the linen. It is again possible that he had taken on an apprenticeship which, after 1920, would have lasted five years. Like the shipyard it would have been a long day. Most mills began operations at 6am and closed at 6pm, for most of which time John would have been at work. He would have enjoyed an hour and a half in total for his meal breaks. Saturdays, ending at Noon, would have included a 30-minute break for breakfast.

By the time John started at York Street, within walking distance of Lewis Street, conditions, though still tough, had improved considerably from the 19th century linen mills. The weekly hours had been reduced to 48 hours and changes in lighting, ventilation and general health requirements, while they had not created working conditions we would recognise today, had improved the situation substantially.

Nevertheless, conditions remained hazardous to health. In the wet spinning rooms, mostly staffed by women, and some children, the atmosphere was hot and humid and the floors wet, sometimes leading to lung diseases. Constant ingestion of fibres led to chest conditions that could be ultimately fatal.

Children worked from the age of twelve, sometimes earlier if baptism certificates could be forged, usually spending three weekdays and Saturday mornings in the mill and two weekdays at school.

Nearly a decade before John began work at the York Street Mill, James Connolly made a famous address to 'the linen slaves of Belfast'.

"It is pointed out that the conditions of your toil are unnecessarily hard, that your low wages do not enable you to procure sufficiently nourishing food for yourselves or your children, and that as a result of your hard work, combined with low wages, you are the easy victims of disease, and that your children never get a decent chance in life, but are handicapped in the race of life before they are born."

It is hard to imagine John enjoying his working life at the mill, but his success in his evening classes soon compensated. His ability was quickly recognised, winning his first prize for 'object and memory drawing' during his first year. In a momentous decision for his future career, he was awarded a free studentship on the recommendation of two of his teachers at the School of Art.

As a result, in 1925, by which time his job at the mill had come to an end, he became a full time student, able to devote himself totally to his chosen field and revealing a considerable ability. He won prizes for pictorial design, drawing after casts, drawing from life, painting, modelling, technical design and lettering, working perspective and geometric design. He also passed a 'Special Exam in Blackboard Drawing' and was awarded an art teacher's certificate.

In 1926, at the age of 20, John became an assistant art master at the School of Art, where he would return to teach much later in life. Robert Heslip believes that the prevailing ethos in Belfast of that time, where art had a commercial application, would have been evident at the School of Art too. "William Conor, a generation earlier but also from a similar background to John, started at David Allen's in Belfast. Today they are the biggest poster site in the United Kingdom. Then they were lithographic printers, specialising in theatrical posters. The precision of Luke's line comes from that illustrative tradition. Design was important. Even if not professionally involved, his training would have included people who didn't necessarily want people to become artists."

The Slade School of Fine Art, London

The crucial breakthrough in John's development as an artist came in his final year at the School of Art, when he won the prestigious Dunville Art Scholarship (donated annually by the famous Belfast whiskey manufacturing dynasty). The £100 per annum over a three-year period allowed him to pursue his desire to attend one of Europe's finest and most influential art schools, the Slade School of Fine Art in London.

He enrolled at the Slade on October 4th 1927 for a Fine Art Diploma, taking classes in figure drawing and comprehension, modelling antique heads, fine art anatomy, art history, life drawing, perspective, life painting and drapery.

Renowned for developing modern artists such as Stanley Spencer and Paul Nash, the Slade would influence John in many ways, as would the experience of living in London. Perhaps most significant was the teaching of Henry Tonks, one of the most renowned teachers in the art world, and his emphasis both on form and the techniques of the old masters, two elements that John would emphasise throughout the rest of his career. This was clear even at John's interview for the Slade, when Tonks looked at his drawings and announced, "To put it bluntly John, you don't know the first thing about drawing. These things you have been doing are quite good, as far as they go –the trouble is they don't go nearly far enough, there is absolutely no form-expression in any of them".

It was a lesson John took to heart. As artist, sculptor and teacher himself, form would be at the centre of his approach. So, indeed, would be the techniques he learned from the old masters.

According to Kenneth McConkey, in *A Free Spirit Irish Art 1860 – 1960*, "the intellectual rigour of Slade's draughtsmanship remained with him for the rest of his life."

After finishing his studies in London John painted a mural for Darnborough's travel company in Piccadilly, though sadly it doesn't remain today. Dr Joseph McBrinn believes that Tonks' influence in this area was crucial for John. "Henry Tonks was one of the great advocates of mural painting and also the societal role of painting, the idea that art should have a social function. It's about being useful and beautifying the environment. He had obtained a commission for one of his previous students, Rex Whistler, to paint murals for Shadwell Boy's Club, for instance. When John Luke comes back to Ireland in 1931 you can sense he is experimenting with techniques, and the quality of the decorativeness of the way he paints speaks of public fresco and mural painting, though he didn't get the opportunity to paint a public mural until 1951."

John won a series of awards at the Slade, including a second prize in the Summer Prize Competition of 1928 for his first large-scale landscape, *A Farmstead in County Armagh*, and the prestigious Robert Ross scholarship. After completing his Diploma in 1930, he stayed briefly in London, taking wood engraving classes and contributing to several exhibitions, before returning home, to the small family home in Lewis Street, in 1931.

Life as an artist

Though he would also teach, John's career was now the financially precarious one of an artist. Uninterested in money, always a frugal liver, he settled in comfortably to a life of long hours, painstaking concentration and little material reward. Even now, Dr McBrinn says, technique was at the forefront of his approach.

"There is a quality to the way he worked which is often misunderstood but was not uncommon in the early modern period, where there was a focus on the process of how you make art and a respect for techniques. And in some ways the focus in his career is on that and not the end product because the end product is never satisfactory. He would paint a figurative composition that was purely imaginative and people would want an explanation or story, which he wouldn't give. People thought this was just his personality, that he wasn't communicative, but I think there was another emphasis there, labour."

This is best summed up in a letter John wrote to literary critic, poet and art curator John Hewitt. 'Most people are by outlook and certainly by training literary minded. There's nothing wrong with this, but they tend to overlook and even despise manual work, and as Renoir wrote on painting, "It is primarily a manual metier and must be performed like a good workman".'

For Dr McBrinn, these sentiments were a window into understanding John's approach, that art and labour are indivisible. "Renoir came from a similar working class background in Paris and worked in a factory painting porcelain. That's where he gets these ideas in his later work about flower painting and female figures because they relate to the history of porcelain in a very complex way. In a sense Luke is at the end of a late 19th century European tradition which made a strong connection between art and labour and art and commerce."

John had met John Hewitt in 1932, soon after Hewitt's appointment as assistant curator at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery (the precursor of the Ulster Museum). Hewitt described the young artist thus, 'John Luke was twenty-six, six feet tall, dark, handsome, of an erect spare built. The Self Portrait (1928) painted while he was at the Slade and now in the Ulster Museum, remains an excellent record of his features at the time. Always tidy, his clothes brushed, his hair short, he was not at all close to the romantic stereotype of an artist.'

Around this time, Hewitt was invited to the family home.

'A little later I visited his neat home in Lewis Street and met his father and mother. Friendly folk but a bit restrained in the presence of someone from 'the Museum'. Among other objects, I remember that plaster head he had made at the Slade, of Laura Knight's model. John explained that it had served as a handy hat-stand for one of his brothers, indicating the dark ring around the brow.'

It was Hewitt who commissioned County Down, a landscape based on a trip the two made to the Mourne Mountains, and which, Dr McBrinn believes, is one of the first paintings which John approaches through symbolism, intuition and invention. He spent considerable amounts of time on similar sketching trips in

areas such as the Belfast Hills, the Glens of Antrim, the Mourne and even as far away as the west coast of Ireland.

Perhaps the most important aspect of County Down, however, was that it was John's first tempera painting. This ancient painting medium, composed of egg yolk and ground colour pigments, was hugely painstaking and time consuming to produce and apply but was not only long lasting and durable but achieved a brilliance and luminosity of colour that greatly appealed to John.

Dr McBrinn believes that one important source for John, who became known as a tempera artist, was 'The Craftsman's Handbook' by medieval Italian artist Cennino d'Andrea Cennini. The book offers detailed instructions on lost arts such as gilding stone, making mosaics out of crushed eggshells, colouring parchment and painting in egg tempera. Possibly John was also influenced by his advice to the young artist, "Your life should be arranged just as if you were studying theology, or philosophy, or other theories, that is to say, eating and drinking moderately, at least twice a day, electing digestible and wholesome dishes, and light wines...'

Popular until the 1500s and used by John's beloved Italian masters, including Michelangelo and Botticelli, egg yolk tempera was superseded by oil painting, but while others demurred at the work involved, John who mixed his own paints throughout his career, gradually developed his own process, working in tempera over a carefully primed gesso ground.

John retained his fascination for the manufacture of paints throughout his life. A student of his at the College of Art, William J Craig of Ballymena, recalls walking home with him many times in the 1950s, discussing art.

'He talking of his interest in old masters and his study of their techniques of colour mixing, the use of silverpoint, formulae of painting media, tempera, fresco etc. Including the oddity 'Stand Oil' for which he gave me the recipe, though I doubt if anyone else in the college knew of it. In this modern age when paints and media come prepared and pre-packed I admired him for taking the trouble to obtain materials, taking the time to cook and mix them according to old recipes in order to get the feel of the materials of the old masters. His admiration of the masters he said was because they were superb craftsmen; painting was simply a craft like carpentry. But when the craftsmen were inspired it then became 'art.'

With oil paints such as the Ballysillan Road (1933), On the Lagan (1933), the Lustre Jug (1934), Mac Art's Fort (1934), Connswater Bridge (1934) and a tempera painting, *The Bridge* (1936), his technique matured and recognition grew. His last painting before the war, Shaw's Bridge (1939) is considered one of his finest as Kenneth McConkey writes in 'A Free Spirit in Irish Art, 1860 – 1960':

"With Vermeer-like precision and searing spectral colours, acquired by the use of tempera, Luke takes an old country bridge on the outskirts of Belfast and makes of it a picture of visionary intensity.'

John was a founding member of the briefly lived Ulster Unit, a collection of Northern Ireland's major artists who held just one exhibition, in the Locksley

Hall, Belfast in December 1934. John Hewitt wrote the preface in the catalogue, noting that for the first time Ulster had a body of artists alert to the continental influence.

In 1938, John was commissioned by the Northern Ireland Government to assist renowned sculptor Morris Harding (who spent several years designing pillars themed for agriculture, arts, linen, music, science, shipbuilding, and motherhood in the nave of Belfast Cathedral) in designing and making a mural frieze for the Northern Irish display in the Ulster Pavilion at the Glasgow Empire Exhibition. Of the fifteen panels, each four feet by ten, John was responsible for twelve, significantly on the theme of industry. He carried out the work in Harding's St Brigid's Studios in Holywood, just outside Belfast.

After the Belfast Blitz of 1941 in which German bombs killed 1,000 people and destroyed half of the city's housing stock, John and his mother went to live in a cottage at Knappagh House in Killyleagh, County Armagh. While it would not be until 1943, that he produced his next painting, the highly acclaimed *Pax*, Neville McKee believes the rural life suited his temperament well and that he enjoyed his teaching post there.

"I went down to stay with my granny at Killyleagh when I was a young child and remember him well there", Neville says. "He was always Uncle Jack, I never had a sense of him being different. He used to wheel me around in one of those big old-fashioned wheelbarrows, it was a great childhood experience for me. All the brothers loved gardening and he loved the rural life there, living on the edge of a large farm."

John found employment there as a part-time art teacher at the Manor House School, Milford, within walking distance of the farm. John Hewitt recalls that the farm owner, Paul Terris, allowed John, a vegan (apart from his drinking of milk), to plant his own drill of potatoes.

Following *Pax*, in 1944, came one of his most important and enduring paintings, *Three Dancers* (1945), one of a series of dancer paintings, which John described as being about musical rhythm. With *Dancer and the Bubble* (1947) and *Northern Rhythm* (1946) the series represent to many the peak of John's career.

A one-man show at the Belfast (Ulster) Museum in 1946 attracted the attention of Irish art critic and writer, James White, who said of his work:

'Here we are faced with craftsmanship on so high a plane that one can do little but gasp. The comparisons which come to mind are almost fantastic; for one speaks of the 15th century masters with awe and reverence, and not as men whose colour excellences can be rivalled or equalled. Yet I feel a peculiar confidence in suggesting that John Luke has achieved colour tones of a purity, and textured values of a quality unparalleled by any painter of the past three centuries whose work I know.'

Neville McKee believes that *Northern Rhythm*, which his father bought from John and later gave to him for his 21st birthday, was the ultimate expression of his painting technique, a view that many art critics, and John himself, shared. "No

painting has so much or so deeply expressed my own particular type or state of mind and spirit as Northern Rhythm," he later wrote.

John also told Neville of another aspect of his approach to painting that was of vital importance to the dancer paintings.

"He told me that he saw music in these paintings, that each one is integrated in an amazing way, every bit interconnected. He would hear the music as he painted. For instance, he told me that when he painted Northern Rhythm he had Beethoven's Sixth Symphony in his head. He didn't paint while listening to music; it was already in his head. He was connecting these aspects, the music, the rhythm, in his head. I know he loved classical music, because he would often come to our house to listen to my father's classical record collection. In the 1950s my father had bought a big music centre, then quite advanced, and they often listened together in the evenings."

Belfast City Hall mural

By 1950 John had returned to Belfast with his mother. First living with his sister Sarah (Sadie) at the McKee household and then at Westland Bungalows, a series of pre-fabricated bungalows off the Cavehill Road in North Belfast. From this time, there would be no more paintings and though highly regarded still, there was a criticism of his work in some quarters that his obsession with technique had blunted his artistic expression, and that as a result, his remarkable talent had not been completely fulfilled.

However, his most enduring legacy was still to come. The Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts commissioned him to paint a mural to commemorate the Festival of Britain in 1951. He had initially been asked to base his design on TW Moody's book, 'The Plantation of Ulster', but he wanted to be free to approach the subject in his own way. In the winter of 1950 he decided to make the focus of the work Sir Arthur Chichester, the founder of modern Belfast, reading from King James 1's Royal Charter of 1613, which essentially gave royal assent to the formation of the Corporation of Belfast.

Asked by the Belfast News-letter in August 1951, how he came to choose his subject matter, John replied that the first aspect of Belfast that occurred to him was, "the linen industry, then he thought of the first charter which was presented to the inhabitants by James 1, and so one idea led to another."

From there, he added the great Belfast industries that together had made the city and port a world leader in shipbuilding and the manufacture of tobacco, rope, and linen and so much else by the Edwardian era of his birth. That he himself had worked in the two greatest of these industries gives the mural a particular interest.

It was a physically demanding job, with a deadline that ensured John work at a far greater pace than had previously been the case. Just to add to his difficulty, he and his mother had influenza at the time he was composing a preliminary sketch to submit to Belfast Corporation for approval.

Approval was given and he began work on a chilly day in mid-January 1951. Painting the tympanum of the inner dome, he worked on the 15ft by 31ft mural for twelve hours a day, often at the top of a 20-ft ladder, through the cold winter months. An article in Ireland's Saturday Night describes him wearing, 'a set of ultra thick underclothing, a couple of pairs of socks, a couple of pullovers, his heaviest suit, and on top of all, his overcoat and muffler, plus his hat. "Even then" he remarked, blowing on his hands, "You're always cold."

John was paid the grand sum of £500 for his work, later increased to £700. It was not quite finished in time for Queen Elizabeth's (the present Queen's mother) visit but she was impressed with what she saw and fulsome in her praise. Her opinion was, and is, widely shared.

"Technically, it's a superb mural", Dr McBrinn says, "and stands with anything he has done. He himself felt it was a considerable achievement and was very proud of it. It is on a vast scale and it's a testimony to his belief and desire. There are some who criticise it for being unimaginative and conservative but technically it

is one of the finest public murals of the period, a great accomplishment. Perhaps it is conservative in its subject matter but public art is a compromise. The depiction is very considered and careful and I think that criticism is harsh.”

In 1953, John’s mother died. He continued to live at Westland Bungalows alone, later moving to a flat at 240 Duncairn Gardens, where a blue plaque, commissioned by the Ulster History Foundation, was unveiled by his sister Sarah McKee on March 25th 1998. At the unveiling, Neville McKee spoke for the family and Martyn Anglesea, Keeper of Fine Art at the Ulster Museum, for the art world.

Other murals

The critical and public acclaim for the City Hall mural led to another mural commission, this time for the Provincial Masonic Hall in Rosemary Street in 1956. By this time John had returned to part-time teaching, but still found time to complete the decoration of the tympanum at the east end of the Provincial Lodge Room. His theme this time was Solomon and the building of the Temple. Again the scale was considerable, the same width, 32 feet, and just less than half the height, 7 feet, as City Hall.

That was not John's last mural painting, though his final commission, at the Millfield extension of the Belfast College of Technology, was never completed. Beginning in 1961, slowed by growing ill health and the coldness of the site, he worked for a decade before the project floundered. A porter there told John Hewitt that John, still teaching at the Belfast College of Art, would arrive at 9pm each evening and stay until midnight, though merely adding a few brush strokes, before walking home alone.

According to Neville McKee, the Millfield mural, entitled Building and Engineering, whose themes are technology and science, was a result of intensive research, some of it conducted through him.

"The research into the atom, for instance, came from a school chemistry book of mine," says Neville, who was for many years a distinguished teacher of biology at Belfast Royal Academy. "He looked through all my textbooks, that was his initial stimulus, and he was never out of Central Library, with bundles of books in his arms, in his later years. I watched him at work on the mural, one little piece at a time. It was a very demanding way of painting. He spent years on Millfield as he got slower and slower and his health was deteriorating but it was 90 per cent finished by the end."

Near completion, the mural survived the demolition of the building but, at the time of writing, its state and the possibility of restoration are unknown, despite a vigorous campaign for it to be returned to public viewing. Millfield was John Luke's last commission, though he continued to teach for as long as his ailing health would allow.

John Luke – the man

In no small part due to the Ulster Museum's 2012/13 retrospective of his work and the accompanying book by Dr Joseph McBrinn, John Luke's status as a major Irish artist is now acknowledged. But what of John the man?

Over the years, his reputation as a shy, retiring, even aloof man has been widely accepted. There is an inference that his obsessiveness in his pursuit of technique cost him a greater place in the pantheon of Irish artists and perhaps that he became disillusioned with the art world. But this is not necessarily the picture of John that is held by those who knew, and admired, him.

"I think he was pleased with all of his work and the different strands of it, sculpting, painting, the murals..." Neville McKee says. "It is true that he wouldn't have necessarily found it easy to get to know new people but he was very comfortable with family and friends. After my grandmother's (Sarah Luke) death, our house became a focal point for the family and he enjoyed his visits, as did we."

The self-discipline, absorbed from his working class North Belfast childhood, meant long hours at work, and his lifestyle, perhaps by necessity as well as choice, was Spartan. "He lived very frugally," Neville says. "He was obsessed with vegetarianism, though I am not sure whether this was down just to health reasons or ethics as well. When I started to study biology at school he quizzed me about this at some length. I had also been a vegetarian for some time but dropped it when I took up science. I explained to him you couldn't get the full range of nutrients from plant material. He read widely on the subject but I am not sure the books he read were very reliable."

Neville's wife Pat recalls John preparing his own, largely vegan food (only the drinking of milk prevented him being a fully fledged vegan). "He spent a lot of time preparing his food, such as grinding beans. At the time vegetarianism wasn't popular so it was harder to buy that kind of food but he bought some from Jack McClelland (famous for his attempts to swim the North Channel from Donaghadee to Portpatrick, as a vegetarian), who had a specialist vegetarian supplies store opposite the Waterworks in North Belfast."

"Uncle Jack travelled everywhere by bike or on foot," Neville says. "Certainly he would think nothing of walking the mile and a half from Duncairn Gardens to the house myself and my wife Pat first lived in. He had a very curious mind, always seeking knowledge. He'd often bring me articles, mainly from the New Scientist magazine. He was always very keen on science, all kinds of inventions fascinated him, that was very much his inspiration for the mural at Millfield."

One incident stands out in Neville's mind that reflects the scientific bent of John's mind. "One day when our son Ian was a baby, around 1970, Jack was absolutely fascinated by a new invention, a nappy liner of light, un-tearable paper, which went in the terrytowelling nappies of the day. In fact he took one back home to study further. In another age, with another education, I believe he could easily have been a scientist, he had that kind of mind."

He was, Neville says, an independent thinker on religion, and did not follow any religion or go to church. He was, however, always interested in the philosophical aspect of religion and was fascinated by Zen Buddhism.

His identity is a more complex question. As discussed, Dr McBrinn feels he would probably have identified with the working class ethos of his upbringing rather than in terms of nationality or religion, though he was quite happy to be known as an Irish painter.

Neville McKee recalls overhearing discussions between John and his father and believes his uncle would have been sympathetic to John Hewitt's concept of regionalism in that he would have felt both an Ulster and Irish identity. It was not, Neville believes, an issue of great importance to him. "He was not bigoted in the slightest way, and would never slight someone because of their religion or background."

John himself wrote, with some humour, about the Scottish and Irish elements of his identity, after the *Three Dancers* was bought with copyright for one hundred pounds at an exhibition at the Ulster Academy in 1945.

'There is something of the Scot in me, in that I want to wring as much out of the one design as possible, as this is by far the most difficult and important part of the picture, but Scottie has somehow always taken a back seat and never seems to do much apart from making protests and threats. The Pat in me takes...little heed of the outside world and its measures, rambling on in his contented slow and unhurried rhythm with a simple calm and assurance and creating something a little different to what was done before.'

Both Neville and Pat, who also knew him well in his later years, insist he was neither aloof nor humourless. Both recall him visiting their house regularly to see favourite television programmes. Mostly, they were science programmes like the BBC series *Horizon* or documentaries, but they also remember him laughing at the *Two Ronnies*, a particular favourite. "Contrary to public perception," Pat says, "he had a good sense of humour, you can see it in his writings and paintings too, and when he was relaxed with people it came through."

Neville too remembers this aspect of his personality with affection. "Uncle Jack had a very infectious laugh. As a child I overheard it often when he was in conversation with my parents, especially my dad, and also one day in particular when John Hewitt visited. Later in his life when he was visiting our own house just after we were married and with a very young family, we might have to leave him in the living room watching television while we were bathing the children, reading to them and putting them to bed. It was such a normal background noise to hear his laugh downstairs as he watched those comedy shows of the early 1970s. He also watched *Horizon* programmes with intense concentration and discussed the science with me afterwards. If we hadn't been so busy, with the children, we could have had better discussions, but his last few years coincided with our family being under five years of age."

Pat had first encountered John as a teacher at the College of Art in 1963, where she was doing a course in pottery, painting and bookbinding and decided to take

on evening classes in art. She recalls him then as a quiet and reserved man, though she would see a different, more companionable side later. "I remember coming through the door of the class and seeing him placing every chair in a perfect circle, all equidistant. Everything was done properly. If he was sharpening pencils it was slowly and deliberately until the perfect point had been achieved. Everyone would get on with their work and he would wander around, talking quietly to a student if he felt his advice could help."

John Hewitt, who visited him at the Westland bungalow, was surprised at its austere nature, with its utilitarian furnishing and Spartan décor, quite unexpected for an artist of John's status. 'It seemed, on entering, as if the harmony and colour so strenuously sought by the artist in his work had been rigorously excluded from his living space. His sister Sadie and a brother's wife volunteered to have the place redecorated and to find some sort of home help for him but he tenaciously clung to his Spartan regime as the stacks of newspapers grew ceiling-wards and the biscuit tins of string piled up.'

Neville too remembers the biscuit tins of string and piles of newspapers, but largely puts this down to the frugality of his upbringing during a period long before the throwaway ethos that materialised in the 1960s. He also recalls hundreds of pencils sharpened to chisel point and lots of art materials. He and Pat still have some of John's pigments, brushes, palettes, hand-crafted tools, oils and woodcuts, (which were displayed at the Ulster Museum retrospective of his work). "Uncle Jack even made the table himself and everything was made from scratch, including the paint from powders and oils."

John's health was failing for some time. But, according to Neville, he didn't seek medical attention when it was clear he was suffering from prostate problems. When he did, it was too late. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Pat points out that he was probably too shy to discuss such problems with doctors anyway. "He was his own person and happy with his situation. He didn't want to be dependent on anyone else," he says.

Following an unsuccessful prostate operation, John Luke died at the Mater Infirmorum on Crumlin Road on February 4th 1975, at the age of 69. The Millfield mural remained unfinished and there are those who felt his undoubted talent had not been fully realised despite a long and varied career. But today, both the market (his paintings now sell for over £400,000) and, more importantly the art world and wider public, are beginning to see his true worth. Over the last few years there has been a greater awareness of his value as an artist and of his legacy, especially following the Ulster Museum exhibition, Northern Rhythm, the Art of John Luke (1906 – 1975).

John Luke – the legacy

For Kim Mawhinney, Head of Art at National Museums Northern Ireland, whom Dr McBrinn approached with the idea for the exhibition at the Ulster Museum, there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the first retrospective of his work since 1977.

“We have a detailed evaluation report, compiled by our Interpretation Manager, and the feedback to this exhibition has been phenomenally positive. There is a great buzz throughout the exhibition and the staff have been getting really involved. I think many people were excited by the Belfast connection, that an artist from a working class North Belfast community went to the Slade in London, when it was the centre of art in the world and was taught by a teacher of the calibre and renown of Henry Tonks. People who didn’t know his work think it is fantastic, while it has reinforced the admiration of those who did.”

The Ulster Museum decided to reflect the multi-faceted nature of this artist, sculptor and mural painter, with a series of different events to compliment the exhibition. All were sold out. 400 people alone applied for tickets for a showing of Moore Sinnerton’s 1993 BBC documentary, *Like a Good Workman – A Portrait of John Luke*, while a showing of *Odd Man Out*, in which the character of Lukey Malquin is apparently based on John Luke, was also sold out, as was a poetry reading linked to his work by renowned Belfast poet Michael Longley.

For Kim Mawhinney, it was important to reflect the different aspects of the artist. “One thing myself and Joseph (McBrinn) felt strongly about was to bring out the range of his work. He was extremely adaptable from designing something almost conventional such as the Coats of Arms at Hillsborough, which required considerable skill to carve, to the great scale of the public murals and to the intricacy of the small tempera paintings. He was a craftsman of great versatility and through his techniques you can make links back to the great Italian masters of the Later Renaissance.”

One of the most difficult of Irish artists to pigeonhole, Kim believes that one of John Luke’s strengths is his versatility and uniqueness. “One of the reasons he is so difficult to pin down is that he doesn’t belong to one particular school but follows his own philosophy and approach to the end. Unfortunately, he doesn’t have an international reputation, perhaps because we (the Ulster Museum) have the biggest collection of his work and I don’t think he will ever have as great an impact around the world as he does here. But I think his legacy will lie partly in his craftsmanship and range of work. Whereas now art students have to specialise early, there was much more crossover when he studied at the Slade. He was such a skilled artist in what he could draw, it didn’t matter which technique he chose.”

Kim believes we must build on John Luke’s legacy, not least in re-examining the techniques and ideas covered in his extensive art practice through exhibitions such as *Northern Rhythm*.

John Luke Legacy Programme

North Belfast community arts organisation Arts for All is committed to preserving and promoting John Luke's legacy.

Arts for All was formed in 2000. It is based on the York Road in Belfast- very near to where John Luke grew up - and exists to promote positive change and sustainable, cohesive communities across North Belfast. Arts for All has four aims:

- To encourage and stimulate the artistic creativity of people from North Belfast
- To encourage appreciation of and participation in community arts
- To provide advice, training and information on the arts
- To promote and conduct research benefiting the arts

Arts for All has been running the only community gallery in North Belfast for over ten years. It organises ten exhibitions every year, supporting up to 50 artists with space to curate, exhibit and promote their work. The gallery also supports community groups by providing important gallery space.

Arts for All John Luke project 2012-2013

With funding from the Ulster Scots Agency and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), Arts for All will celebrate the life of John Luke by rebranding its gallery the **John Luke Gallery**. This will send a strong message that people coming from areas such as Tiger's Bay can and do become creative members of society and make an important contribution to the creative life of the city. Both the Ulster Scots Agency and ACNI have made a significant investment in the building and the gallery. This will allow Arts for All to install a lighting system which will show artistic work off in the best possible light. It will also allow Arts for All to introduce signage to the gallery, celebrating the life and work of John Luke.

Between November 2012 and June 2013, Arts for All delivered a series of workshops across North Belfast, teaching participants about John Luke's work and offering them the opportunity to develop paintings in his style. Work from these classes will be displayed in the opening exhibition. Participants also visited the exhibition on John's work at the Ulster Museum between November 2012 and April 2013. Groups involved include:

- St. Gemma's High School – GCSE and A-level students
- Currie Primary School – P6 class
- Currie Primary School – two different parents' groups
- Midland Senior's Art Club

In addition, with funding from the Ulster Scots Agency, Arts for All commissioned research about John Luke's early life and work. This was carried out by Seth Linder who has a background in creative writing, historical research and journalism. Seth condensed this extensive research (available at www.artsforall) into a promotional booklet about John Luke, the **John Luke Gallery** and Arts for All. This booklet will complement the Ulster Museum's beautiful publication Northern Rhythm, the art of John Luke. It will also complement a much earlier

publication, John Luke 1906–1975, a monograph by John Hewitt, a close friend of John Luke.

John Luke's nephew Neville McKee has been supportive of the project and will officially open the John Luke Gallery in September 2013.

The Arts for All John Luke project will mean that two galleries in Belfast which are based in areas of disadvantage, celebrate the life of local residents – Arts for All's **John Luke Gallery** and An Chultúrlann's **Gerard Dillon Gallery**. This sends an important message that arts play an important role within disadvantaged communities.

Arts for All would like to thank the following for support with the John Luke project:

- The Ulster Scots Agency
- The Arts Council of Northern Ireland
- Neville McKee
- Seth Linder
- St. Gemma's High School
- Currie Primary School
- Midland Senior's Arts Club

Sources

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