

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Etchings of Wilfred Fairclough

Ian Lowe



THE ETCHINGS OF WILFRED FAIRCLOUGH



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Ian Lowe

The Etchings of Wilfred Fairclough

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1990 by Ashgate Publishing

Reissued 2018 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Text copyright © 1990 Ian Lowe

Plates copyright © 1990 Wilfred Fairclough

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and welcomes correspondence from those they have been unable to contact.

A Library of Congress record exists under LC control number: 91156471

Designed by Alan Bartram

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-34942-1 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-429-43632-1 (ebk)

Contents

Foreword 7

Introduction 9

Beginnings: Blackburn 9

The Royal College of Art: London 1931-34 10

Rome Scholar: Italy 1934-35 13

Rome Scholar: Spain 1935-36 14

Rome Scholar: Italy 1936-37 15

Draughtsman, Etcher and Teacher: 1938-72 18

A Second Career 20

Acknowledgements 25

Notes 26

The plates 29

Catalogue of published plates 79

List of unpublished plates 112



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Foreword

When Wilfred Fairclough gave a talk about his own work at the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers on 1 March 1983 he said that 'the world is a pretty marvellous place if you go about with your eyes open and you can see the things that are in front of you. There are two sorts of seeing in my experience: there is the optical seeing, and there is the seeing of the mind, what might be called the seeing eye. One is absolutely interdependent on the other. With the inner eye you can see the possibilities of what you are looking at, and all my life I have gone around looking at the raw material, spinning it round in my mind, tossing it in the air, and hopefully it comes back with a little gilding of magic which will make the ordinary into something just a little bit extraordinary and maybe make somebody say 'Well, I never thought of that'.¹ This provides the text for the essay which follows, because it is the quality of 'magic', united with the personality of the artist, that I would like to try to describe. In doing so, I will make frequent use of the artist's own words, believing that what an articulate and reflective creator can tell you is an invaluable insight into his way of approaching as well as rendering a subject. As E. S. Lumsden put it, 'a definitive assertion by the etcher himself must necessarily be of far more value than suppositions by anyone else'.² I have therefore drawn upon Wilfred Fairclough's lecture and letters in presenting what is both an appreciation and a portrait. For his generous support and welcome invitation to contribute to this record of his work as a printmaker I am deeply grateful.

IAN LOWE

1 March 1990



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Introduction

Beginnings: Blackburn

The 'ordinary' on which Wilfred Fairclough's eyes first looked was his native city of Blackburn in Lancashire, where he was born on 13 June 1907. The only son of Herbert Fairclough and Edith Amy Milton, he had two elder sisters, Ethel and Clara, and two who were younger than himself, Lilian and Gertrude.³ In 1912, at the age of five, he went to All Saints School in Blackburn. There, when he reached the senior school in 1918, he was fortunate in being taught by Edward Biggs, who recognised his early talent in drawing, from which the path was to lead on to the Blackburn School of Art and Crafts.⁴ Biggs, a communist and an atheist, did not force his views on his pupils but encouraged Fairclough to read G B Shaw, H G Wells, Thomas Hardy and W H Hudson.

When Fairclough left school at the age of fourteen he had been a 'half-timer', working alternately during his last year, at school and in a cotton mill. When the mill failed, Biggs suggested to his father that Fairclough should return to school until he was fifteen. He then started work with a local firm of accountants, Nathaniel Duxbury Son and Finch. He arrived at the office at 8.30, lit the senior partner's fire and filled the inkwells, doing the job so well that he did three years as office boy rather than eighteen months. On five nights a week he attended evening classes in book-keeping, commerce and English to assist his training as an audit clerk. What appears to be an unpromising start to a creative life already demonstrates a number of qualities which were later to distinguish the etcher – efficiency, and a business-like approach both to creative work and to presenting the results; even the responsibility for ink looks forward to Fairclough's later activities.

In the autumn of 1925, at the age of eighteen, he engaged in a new series of evening classes, at the Blackburn School of Art and Crafts under Arthur Jackson, 'a dear headmaster' but 'the training was absolutely abysmal':

There was a complete five-year course of nothing else except what in those days was called 'Light and Shade'. I put up with it for a while and then rebelled because I realised that it was a complete waste of time . . . 'Light and Shade' was done from plaster casts. There was an apple with leaves, there was a lemon, there were a couple of plums. The casts were hung on a post at eye level. The light came over your left shoulder through a piece of tracing paper, and the exercise was to copy that piece of plaster. You copied what you could see, so that, if it was a good copy, you could hang it at ten feet alongside the original plaster cast, and it would be difficult to tell one from t'other. It had nothing whatsoever to do with drawing, nothing at all. And that went on for five years, before you were even allowed to see a model, that was, a live model'.⁵

In July 1928, Fairclough's mother died of cancer, and his father died in the following May. His sister Clara, 'an angel', two years his senior, had followed in her father's footsteps and qualified as a hairdresser. She continued the business, took on the mortgage of the modest house at 165 Bolton Road, and provided a home for her brother. The demanding life of being an audit clerk from 9 till 6, and then attending evening classes from 6.30 until 9.15 pm, after which he returned home to supper, was relieved at the weekends by walking and sketching. A friend, Jenny Fryers, who had been engaged to Edgar Ainsworth who had gone from Blackburn to the Royal College of Art, mentioned that Ainsworth had no School Certificate which Fairclough had been told was a necessary qualification for admission to the college. He resolved to follow the same route and decided to take the Board of Education's drawing examination in May of 1930. There were six papers. For drawing from the antique and life drawing he used the school, but the remaining four subjects he studied at home, working for hours in his bedroom on human anatomy (bones and muscles), architecture, perspective and drawing from memory in preparation for the four-hour long examinations. This was the practical form that his rebellion against the teaching of 'Light and Shade' took, following the retirement of Arthur Jackson at the end of the summer term, and his succession as headmaster by George Reed.

In the Autumn of 1929 he met Joan Cryer, a student teacher attending the School of Art, whom he was later to marry. After he had successfully passed the six parts of the drawing examination in July 1930, he was offered a post as a part-time teacher at the school in which he had been studying for five years. During his year as a part-time teacher he was stimulated by E S Lumsden's *The Art of Etching*.⁶ With 'the finest, most comprehensive book on etching ever written' in hand, he refaced two old copper plates and made his first experiments in the medium.

He resolved to follow up his success in the drawing examination by taking the Board of Education's pictorial design course, a two-year programme which he crammed into one. He was the only student in Blackburn working for it, and received little instruction. In 1930 during the Christmas holidays he went to London for the first time and combed the museums, buying postcards to aid his course of study. Although only twenty-five per cent of those who sat the examination passed, he was again successful in the examinations in July 1931. As a result he decided to leave Blackburn, and to study at the Royal College of Art in London. He was convinced that the engraving school there was 'the

best in the world'. He was determined to get there, and it had never occurred to him to do anything else. 1931 was 'make or break year'.

There were still two hurdles to be overcome by the twenty-four year old Fairclough, with two Board of Education examinations to his credit, as well as five years' work at the Blackburn School of Art and Crafts. The first of these was financial. The Blackburn Town Council Education Committee usually made a grant of £50 to those who succeeded in getting a place at the Royal College of Art, together with a further loan of £30. The family's solicitor, Mr Roger Oddie, agreed to guarantee the loan but the committee refused to make a grant. Joan Cryer's mother stepped into the breach and offered a loan of £60 so that the way was cleared. When Mr Oddie learnt that his offer had been rejected by the Education Committee, he complained, with the result that, from January 1932, Fairclough received an annual grant of £50. As the fees at the Royal College of Art amounted to thirty guineas a year (£31.50), that left £18 10s (£18.50) to provide for board and lodging, hence the need for the loan. In the second year, free admission was granted to certain students, of whom Fairclough was to be one, but he had yet to get a place. Applications for these had had to be made by June, so that in his reply to Fairclough's letter of application, the Registrar of the Royal College of Art, Hubert Wellington,⁷ wrote that he was too late for that year. Fairclough's 'hackles went up'. He decided to go to London to try to persuade Mr Wellington at a meeting in mid-October. Wellington explained that the college was full, that term had started, and that it was too late for him to join for that academic year. Fairclough replied that he had 'burnt his boats' in Blackburn, having resigned his part-time teachership, and that he 'could not go back'. In the face of such firmness of purpose, Wellington ended the interview by saying that he would see the Principal, Sir William Rothenstein,⁸ the next morning, and told him to return at 11. At that point Fairclough felt that he was in. He duly returned next day at that time and was working in the engraving school a quarter of an hour later, with his jacket off, 'getting down to it', with guidance from one of his fellow students, Esmé Sandercock. It is not surprising that over fifty years later Fairclough remembered Wellington as 'a gem of a man'.⁹

The Royal College of Art: London 1931-34

Work at the college was no easier for Fairclough initially than it had been at Blackburn:

When the students saw my life drawings they were highly critical. I said 'What should I be doing?' They said 'Form, Form!' So I

said 'What's Form?' 'Well, you see, Form's *Form*. If you don't know what Form is, you should go back home.'

I made other enquiries and I more or less got the same answer. I was a very worried student, and suddenly light dawned on me like a shaft of sunlight. What was meant was *Shape* whatever you were doing, whether it were an object or a figure in life drawing. You analysed Shape, and then you put down that analysis of that shape on paper. Now the difference may not be immediately apparent but it was absolutely a fundamental difference of approach. One was what I call blind copying; the other was a creative process, where you were doing and creating something new. It was a very hard life, much harder than Blackburn... From that time on, things began to get a bit better. Now in this battle-cry 'Form', you were not allowed to incorporate any sort of 'colour'. You were permitted to use a certain amount of texture, but 'colour' was out. As far as drawing and getting studies this was fine, but once you wanted to carry the design forward - I was an engraver, so you had to carry this drawing forward in the making of prints - this Form idea had very severe limitations.¹⁰

The routine at the college in the early 1930s has been described by Fairclough: 'From Monday to Thursday there was no instruction in the engraving school: "you were on your own". The professors visited on Fridays and Saturdays until 3.30 in the afternoon.' His first etching at the college was a *Van Dyck Head*.¹¹ 'A copy was the first task all new students in the Engraving School (RCA) were given - "to let them find out how the school worked, and where the tools were". Why that could not have been done with an original plate I never puzzled out.' There were also life-drawing classes in the college which the engravers attended. Among the teaching staff was Alan Sorrell, who had won the Rome Scholarship for Painting in 1928.¹² 'In ten minutes he taught me a great deal about drawing'. In his stuttering voice Sorrell told him that it was 'the directions that you look for, not the bits'.¹³ In addition the engravers had a life class of their own but without any instruction. A technician was present throughout the week to provide etching materials.

In 1931 the School of Engraving consisted of the Professor, Malcolm Osborne; his assistant, Robert Austin; the teacher of lithography, F H Spear; and the Visitor, Francis Dodd, who was followed in 1932 by Henry Rushbury.¹⁴ It was 'the most influential London art school of the period for printmaking'.¹⁵ It was dedicated to high, traditional standards which had been set by Sir Frank Short.¹⁶ Short had 'directed the etching class until 1926 when he was succeeded by Malcolm Osborne'.¹⁷ Osborne had been trained by Short from 1901 to 1906 and had been followed in his classes by Austin from 1913 to 1915.¹⁸ When Osborne retired in 1948, he was succeeded by Austin as Professor, until his retirement in 1955, so that there was a remarkable degree of continuity.¹⁹ When Fairclough entered the engraving school

Short was President of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers. In addition, Austin had won the Rome Scholarship for Engraving in 1922, its third holder.²⁰ By the time Fairclough reached the college, Austin was at the height of his career, having produced eighty-nine plates, an achievement which had been crowned by the catalogue of his prints by Campbell Dodgson.²¹

The training he received was that which had been provided at South Kensington for over forty years. Apart from the fact that Osborne and Austin 'were monopolised by the part-time female students', Fairclough has made no criticism of the instruction which he received aside from the difficulty that he experienced over printing, which was only permitted when the professors were in attendance.

At the end of the summer term 1932, Fairclough left the digs which he had rented in Oakley Street, Chelsea for fifteen shillings (75 pence) a week, and returned home to Blackburn. There he made the studies that he was to use during the following year for his etchings of *Shetley Brook No. 1* (5) and for *Scotshaw Brook* (6), a view of the paper mill at Lower Darwen where he also drew the 'smiling pigs' which were to be 'put to good account' six years later in *The Large Cart, Rothenburg* (28).

On his return for the autumn term he lodged at 1 Hollywood Road, opposite St Stephen's Hospital, again for fifteen shillings a week. The house was kept by two elderly seamstresses, the Misses Caley, and it was their front door which provided the setting for *The Doorway (The Arrival)* (4). This was the set subject for the College Diploma Examination in June 1933. It was *The Doorway (The Arrival)* which was to prompt Fairclough's recollection of the etchings of G L Brockhurst:²²

In the printing room were two prints of Brockhurst's, a portrait and standing female figure. I am not sure but I think that they belonged to Malcolm Osborne. They were very much admired; the technical finesse is quite remarkable. In those days students were not allowed to print except on Fridays and Saturdays when the Prof. was in attendance. Very frustrating! One worked on a plate, printed it on Friday morning, worked like beaver to be able to print again on Saturday morning. After that, a long wait until Friday came round again. Time was too short to wait so long. The Welches had a copper-plate printing workshop at Hammersmith. Father did the general administration, one son looked after all the paper, and the other three brothers each had a room, complete with presses. Frank Welch charged a shilling (five pence) a print on handmade Whatman (paper). I went for a print one Monday morning to find Frank printing Brockhurst's *Adolescence*²³ (a very beautiful fifteen-year old girl sitting nude in front of a mirror). He told me that Brockhurst had been in with the model for the plate. She looked at Frank and asked 'Do you think it is like me?' to which Frank replied 'Very like you – so far as I can see'.²⁴



Crockery on Table, Hollywood Road. 1934.
E. 5¼ × 5¼ (L20)

That demonstrates Fairclough's ability to tell a good story, coupled with his sense of humour. 'With no sales for prints, there was no call for printers'.²⁵ The Welches' workshop closed. 'Frank went to live outside St Albans, Harry moved to a shop in Brook Green Road and I don't know what became of the father and the other two'.²⁶

Adolescence was certainly 'a tour de force' in which Brockhurst had 'probably never used his needle with more subtle richness'.²⁷ Fairclough was to write:

I had the privilege of seeing the actual plate at close quarters and for a short while the technical methods influenced my work (*Joan Dressing her Hair* (2), *The Doorway (The Arrival)* (4) and *Morning* (7)). I would learn from anyone and of course coarsened the method of drawing. The influence was very short-lived. I found the methods Brockhurst used too mechanical and at that time had no knowledge of the acid he used. Working so finely as he did, one look in the nitric bath and the plate would have blown up and disintegrated. It was only very much later that I learned that he used a very weak Dutch bath and bit the plate for a very long time, more or less put the plate in the bath, went to bed, and picked out the plate the following morning. The plate would be pretty black and he then went to work with a burnisher, much in the same way that a mezzotint is worked with scrapers and burnishing.²⁸

The influence of Brockhurst can be seen in the composition of the self-portrait, which Fairclough etched, reflected in the mirror (as was *Adolescence*), the table in the foreground covered with the remains of breakfast, *Crockery on Table, Hollywood Road* (List 20).