

JOHN CRASKE, 1881-1943 NORFOLK FISHERMAN AND ARTIST *Peter Tolhurst*

Two chance meetings, both in 1927, were to prove of far greater significance to Valentine Ackland than she could possibly have foreseen. She was first introduced to Sylvia Townsend Warner in T.F. Powys' Dorset cottage and then, while staying with her mother on the Norfolk coast, she stumbled upon the work of John Craske who had taken to painting between prolonged bouts of ill-health. The two women were soon lovers and over the next few years their life together became enriched by the extraordinary pictures produced by this retired Norfolk fisherman.

Valentine discovered his unlikely talent when, in need of a present for a friend, her aunt told her about a local man who made model boats. At the time Craske and his wife Laura, who had been living at East Dereham, were renting a cottage at Hemsby, just a mile down the coast from the Ackland holiday retreat in the village of Winterton. His doctor had advised another period of recuperation by the sea where he considered the bracing air and the familiarity of a small fishing community would improve Craske's constitution. Arriving at his cottage Valentine was shown into the living-room where, to her amazement, she found seascapes covered every available surface—old doors, tea-chest panels and even pieces of driftwood. She was immediately struck by the directness of Craske's style, in particular the watercolour of a fishing boat that hung over the mantelpiece called *The*

James Edward. Although it was a family favourite named after John's father and Laura's father, Valentine eventually persuaded them to part with it for thirty shillings, the first of many Crasques collected by her and later by Sylvia throughout the 1930s.

Crasques have lived on the north Norfolk coast for generations; their lives, and occasionally their deaths, inextricably linked to the sea. Some were absent for long periods aboard the Arctic whaling ships while others stayed closer to shore, earning a meagre living from their crab boats and manning the lifeboats. John Craske was born into such a community at a time when Sheringham, like its close rival Cromer, was about to be transformed into a fashionable Victorian resort. His father and grandfather had both followed the shoals of herring along the eastern seaboard and when Craske was still a young boy his parents moved briefly to Grimsby. Here he attended the local board school before following in the family tradition aboard a steam drifter. Although his time at sea was comparatively short, the experiences were brought vividly back to life years later in some of his most memorable compositions.



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The James Edward, Valentine Ackland's first purchase from the artist.
Private Collection.

In 1905 he moved inland with his parents to help run the fishmonger's shop they had opened in Dereham and it was here he met his wife. The Craskes lived according to strict Christian principles and attended the Salvation Army citadel each Sunday. During the summer months services were often held outdoors in the market place. Among the worshippers was Laura Eke who recalled the occasion when she first set eyes on a tall swarthy young man in a dark blue fisherman's jersey. Standing astride a soapbox in the centre of a ring of bandsmen John Craske began to sing "Since Christ my soul from sin set free".

The young couple married in 1908 and went to live at Swanton Morley, a village just north of Dereham where John, with the help of two pannier-laden ponies, hawked fish round the neighbouring villages. A year later they moved the short distance to North Elmham where the railway made it easier to obtain fresh fish from Lowestoft each day. By the outbreak of war the Craskes were back in Dereham but doubts about John's health delayed his call-up until March 1917. Just one month later, following an attack of influenza, he was admitted to a military hospital in Croydon with an abscess on the brain that left him prone to periods of nervous exhaustion. He was eventually transferred to Thorpe Hospital in Norwich where he was diagnosed as suffering from "harmless mental stupors" and discharged into Laura's care. The Craskes, who lived a frugal life, were no strangers to hard work and decided to open their own wet fish shop in Norwich Street, in the same building where George Borrow had spent his early childhood. The challenge of the new business revived John's spirits but any improvement in his health was short-lived. The death of his father in 1920 brought about a relapse which left him confined to a wheelchair.

Months later John emerged from another coma with a fervent desire to paint and using household distemper he set about decorating any convenient flat surface—trays, boxes and even the back of Laura's pastry board. It was only when he had exhausted all such possibilities that he was forced to buy cheap paper for his watercolours, embellishing the

frames with clusters of shells and brightly coloured pebbles.

Oils were too expensive for an invalid who painted largely for his own amusement and throughout the 1920s Craske worked almost entirely with watercolours and gouache on thin lining paper. With little regard for posterity he failed to provide either a date or a title for his work although his name usually appears printed crudely in the bottom right hand corner. There was seldom a need for explanation by way of a title; the subject matter was quite obvious and in some cases boats such as the Yarmouth trawler *Mistletoe* or the Sheringham lifeboat *J.C. Madge* were clearly marked. The quality of Craske's painting is certainly variable. The best work often depicts a single dramatic incident—a lightship wallowing in heavy sea, men digging cockles at low tide or a cliff-top rescue—but with declining health the compositions became less assured, the brush strokes more laboured.

In 1923 John spent his first period of convalescence by the sea. On this occasion the Crasques were able to buy a cottage at Wiveton in the Glaven valley from where Laura would push her husband for miles along the coast road. They also bought a small boat and spent hours sailing out in the channel to Blakeney Point. The sea air and the sensation of being afloat once more revived John's spirits and years later he celebrated this familiar watery landscape in *Panorama of the Norfolk Coast*. This, his largest single needlework is 4.5 metres long, a gigantic progression of sinuous rivers, boat-filled creeks and estuaries merging into headlands dotted with fishermen's cottages and a fleet of trawlers in full sail on the open sea. It was included in the 1949 New York exhibition where, fortunately for English admirers of his work, it failed to sell. This magnificent embroidery was eventually and most appropriately acquired by the Shell Museum in Glandford, just a mile upstream from Wiveton.

By 1928 Craske was diabetic and as he became increasingly bed-ridden, turned his hand to needlework, a technique he found less demanding. With commendable inventiveness born of necessity he experimented first on a length of Christmas pudding calico using scraps of wool and

embroidery thread. In June 1931 when Sylvia Townsend Warner first visited his cluttered bedroom-cum-studio in Dereham she found:

... He was lying in bed by the window, a crumpled faced man with darting eyes, and large pale hands. Mrs Craske was short, upstanding, pale sallow. Her knobbed hair and folded hands gave her their air of something by Craske—a model of a woman.

The room was filled with Craske's work, pictures in wool, silk, paint, texts, even the ornaments painted with ships and lighthouses...¹

Once Craske had mastered the technique of needlework he soon developed his own bold style of "painting in wools" using padded stitches for the crests of waves and cheap silk thread for flat reflective surfaces or to highlight foreground details. His subjects were still drawn from a familiar range—craft of all sizes from passenger liners to crab boats on the slipway—but one, depicting a lifeboat and ships in rough weather embroidered as an overmantle for the front parlour of his Dereham terrace, signalled a new, larger scale.

Sylvia shared Valentine's enthusiasm for Craske from the beginning. Together they built up a sizeable collection and championed his work with the help of Valentine's friends in the art world. A year after her trip to Dereham Sylvia was urging David Garnett to visit Craske and cheer him up. Of the paintings she enthused "[they] are really magnificent, Defoe-like pictures, stuggy, exact and passionate."² *The James Edward* had hung in Valentine's London flat where it was much admired by, among others, Dorothy Warren, the owner of a gallery in Maddox Street with whom Valentine was having a tempestuous relationship. She steadfastly resisted Warren's attempts to buy *The James Edward* but did agree to return to Dereham and negotiate the purchase of enough watercolours and Craske's first needleworks to mount an exhibition at the Warren Gallery in 1930. Reviews were generally favourable, notably from Charles Marriott in *The Times* who considered:

The ship pictures by Mr Craske are definitely—if crudely—works of art. In addition to his veracity, Mr Craske has a fine sense of movement and a natural gift for placing objects in right relation to the boundaries of the picture space.³

Following its success a second exhibition was held at the gallery in 1933, providing much needed financial support for the Craskes. The new medium and the confidence that came from the first sales of work in London encouraged Craske to tackle more ambitious scenes of shorelife. These crowded landscapes on a grand scale and in his own naive style represent the artist's greatest achievement. *Beach Scene*, over a metre long is perhaps his finest needlework, a crow's nest view of the foreshore full of life set against a backdrop of round, wooded hills reminiscent of the country behind Sheringham. It was this work that had impressed Sylvia on her visit to 42 Norwich Road in 1931:

“Wool-foamed waves ran along the bottom, under the narrow skyline were emerald green and purple hills, dotted with red bungalows, and parted with white roads. The road from the beach bisected the panel, on it was a fish laden cart, a man with a creel, and the vicar posting a letter.



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Detail from *Beach Scene*. Private Collection.

To the left on the beach was a fish group—the auctioneer with a bell, buyers running, a full-faced policeman to see fair play. On the right were creels of fish unpacking, a man hammering whelks, children sailing toy boats. The whole composition was violently full-faced and direct and crackled with vitality . . . It was not imagination he piques himself upon, but reality—in this fancy piece it is fact he preens over, pointing out the graves in the churchyard.”⁴

Craske’s last needlework, *Evacuation of Dunkirk*, was another enormous seascape. Near completion at the time of his death, this sombre work is a swirling mixture of clouds, dunes and waves in muted colours through which a flotilla of small craft struggle to ferry troops. Hundreds more trench-coated soldiers are lined up on the shore awaiting rescue with dogfights overhead and planes occasionally falling from the sky in a plume of smoke. Here Craske demonstrates again and finally his ability to orchestrate a huge, complex drama which, in its scope and subject matter, stands comparison with that other great tapestry of carnage on display further along the Normandy coast. Valentine Ackland considered it: “. . . a tremendous dramatic tour de force . . . it is a single, massive statement and a huddled confusion of incidents, commonplace, violent, tragic and grotesque. I doubt if there is any other work in the world like it.”⁵ Laura donated *Dunkirk* to the Norwich Art Gallery and, at the time of the first Aldeburgh exhibition, it was on display in the Shell Museum but now languishes in sore in the city’s Textile Study Centre.

A small collection of needleworks was shown at the Norwich Art Circle’s annual exhibition in the late 1930s but several years elapsed before attention switched to America where Elizabeth Wade White, another of Valentine’s lovers and an admirer of Craske, organised an exhibition at the American British Art Centre in New York in 1941. After John’s death Laura continued to receive proceeds from the sale of his work in America including another exhibition at the centre in 1949.

There then followed a long period of neglect until Valentine’s death in 1969 when Sylvia became increasingly

concerned for the welfare of their Craske collection in Dorset. Through her friendship with the engraver Reynolds Stone and his wife Janet who lived in the nearby village of Lytton Cheney, she devised a plan whereby the pictures could be permanently displayed in his native East Anglia as a memorial to Valentine. Sylvia had already met Peter Pears while the singer was staying with the Stones (Janet was his cousin) and, at Reynold's suggestion, wrote to him in Aldeburgh to say that she would like to leave the Crasques to the Festival Foundation where "They will be immensely enhanced in the sharpened light of a seaboard sky. I don't know if there is a word for visual acoustics, but I know the condition exists."⁶ As a result Pears went to discuss the idea with Sylvia in Maiden Newton in July 1970. She had long admired his work with Britten and the two got on extremely well over a lunch of "iced sorrel soup, Prague ham with seven different salads, and a quite childish array of strawberries—on a *quid pro quo* for the Aldeburgh asparagus."⁷ His response to the Crasques was equally enthusiastic and before leaving he had proposed an exhibition to be held at Aldeburgh the following year.

The display of forty-seven pictures at the twenty-fourth Aldeburgh Festival was the first major Craske retrospective, the nucleus formed by the Sylvia Townsend Warner/Valentine Ackland bequest and individual works lent by friends—Bea Howe, Gerald Finzi's wife, Janet Machen, Elizabeth Wade White and Valentine's solicitor Peg Manisty. A further group of six works came from John Diugan, son of Craske's doctor in Dereham who had originally accepted them in settlement of outstanding medical bills. The exhibition with a catalogue essay by Sylvia and an enthusiastic article by Bea Howe in *Country Life*, was such a success that other more modest exhibitions were held at the festival in 1973, 1977 and 1980.

There have been few opportunities since to view Craske's work in public until, with commendable timing, the Dereham Antiquarian Society organised a major retrospective in the artist's home town to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his death. The Sylvia Townsend Warner/

Valentine Ackland bequest and Peter Pears' private collection, assembled since 1971, formed the bulk of the exhibition but, in addition to the Diugan Crasques, a number of works were lent by local people. Among them was a watercolour from Mrs E. Cowper Johnson, a descendent of T.F. Powys' mother. As the name suggests, her Norfolk family were related to the poet Cowper who, like Craske, is buried in Dereham. The more illustrious Cowper is honoured by a stained glass window and Flaxman monument in St Nicholas' church while Craske and his wife are commemorated by an unadorned headstone in the town cemetery.

John Craske's work, accomplished over the last twenty years of his life despite a constant struggle with a long, debilitating illness, is a remarkable achievement. Prompted by those early sea-faring days on the Norfolk coast, he painted what he knew and this gave his work an immediate authority. On those few occasions when he turned inland for inspiration—to anglers fishing in a mill pond or a tug pulling barges up a river there are always boats and water in his pictures. In her own perceptive introduction to the 1971 Aldeburgh catalogue Sylvia argued his unique perspective:

Ships and the sea . . . They were life and death matters to him, and he painted them as such, seriously and truthfully; . . . he painted like a man giving witness under oath to a wild story . . . whether it be a shipwreck, a blizzard, a fair wind, a string of smoked blue fish, boats on a slipway, a parson dropping a letter into a pillarbox, Craske gives you his word for it. The veracity came by experience and weather-eye. Most artists know the sea from its edge. Craske knew it from the middle, from experience of being a small upright movement in a vast swaying horizontality . . . Craske's ships make their way through the sea, are supported by it, founder in it, part contest, part connivance.⁸

Craske, who received no formal training, produced a body of work that in its range and inventiveness is far removed from this semi-commercial perspective. His untutored style and improvised technique has more in common with the folk art of canal barge and fairground decoration. More directly he worked unselfconsciously within the

tradition of embroidered pictures or “ships in wool” create by sailors at sea for long periods or in their retirement. Distinguishing between the Primitives and the Intuitives, Sylvia Townsend Warner was in no doubt that Craske’s place lay with the poet Clare in the company of the Intuitives. Referring to one of his most dramatic embroideries she argued:

At first sight, in the *Rescue by Breeches Buoy* the men in yellow oilies seeming so much out of proportion, might suggest the naivete of the Primitives. But in fact, they are in proportion to the event. The disproportion to the boat declares the height of the cliff and makes the rescue something to attend to. Slavish perspective would have made an ungainly diagram of the composition.⁹

Despite the enthusiastic patronage of Valentine and Sylvia and some initial attention from the London art world Craske’s work has never achieved the recognition it deserves and today the artist is better known in America than in his own country. His enforced isolation and latterly his extensive use of needlework—an “applied” art form generally regarded as rather more restricted in its scope—may help explain this neglect. Craske’s pictures will perhaps be better remembered by friends and a growing number of admirers as an expression of the love that blossomed between Sylvia and Valentine on their visits to Norfolk. Sylvia’s poem “John Craske’s Country” from *Five British Watercolours* is both a celebration of that love and an epitaph for the artist she so admired:

You cannot love here as you can love inland
Where love grows easy as a pig or a south-wall fruit
Love on this coast is something you must dispute
With a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt
water between.

And you cannot grieve here as you can grieve inland
Where the dead lie sweetly labelled like jams in the grocer’s store
You must blink at the sea till your face is scarlet and your eyes sore
With a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt
water between.¹⁰

Today, apart from one impressive tapestry in the Shell Museum, there are few Crasques in public collections. Two small watercolours are on display in Bishop Bonner's Cottage Museum, Dereham and the two in Sheringham Museum include a rare oil on bait board depicting a crab boat in heavy sea.

The Peter Pears collection at the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh contains important embroideries including several presented by Elizabeth Wade White. Among the smaller works are a number of gouaches on card, apparently discovered in a draw at Maiden Newton after Sylvia's death and sent to Pears by Antonia Trautmansdorf.

A selection may be viewed during the Festival or otherwise by appointment. The largest single collection of twenty-five Crasques (the Sylvia Townsend Warner/Valentine Ackland pictures and individual gifts from friends) is held by Aldeburgh Productions at Snape Maltings where, despite the terms of Sylvia's original bequest, they are no longer on display.

Notes

1. *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p.82.
2. *Sylvia Townsend Warner: Letters*, ed. William Maxwell, Chatto & Windus, 1982, p.21.
3. Quoted by Sylvia Townsend Warner in *The Aldeburgh Festival Programme*, 1971, p.83
4. *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p.82.
5. Valentine Ackland quoted by Sally Festing in her article "East Anglia's Artists: V, John Craske" (source unidentified)
6. Letter to Peter Pears, May 1970, quoted by Barbara Brook in her article "Discovering John Craske" (source unidentified).
7. *Sylvia Townsend Warner: Letters*, Ibid, p.253.
8. *John Craske: Fisherman and Artist 1881-1943*, Exhibition Catalogue, The Aldeburgh Festival of Music and The Arts, 1971.
9. Exhibition Catalogue. Op. Cit., Introduction, 1971.
10. *Sylvia Townsend Warner: Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman, Carcanet New Press, 1982, p.66.

References:

- "John Craske: Fisherman and Artist", Bea Howe, *Country Life*, 17th June 1971.
- John Craske: Fisherman and Artist 1881-1943*, Terry Davy, Dereham Antiquarian Society, 1993.