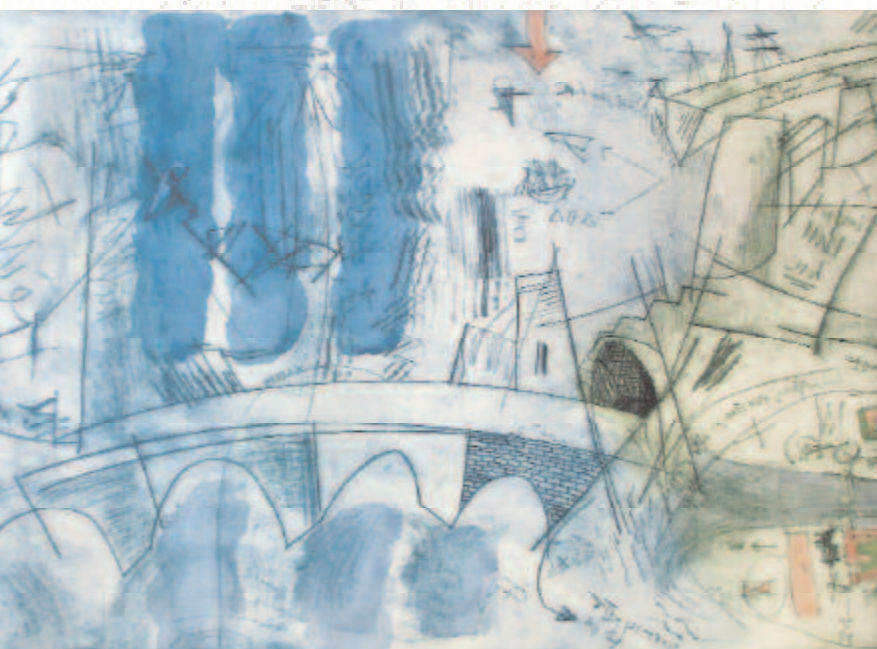


Fit to print

Brian McAvera tracks the milestones in David Lilburn's career from reading History and Politics at university to becoming a master printmaker



Brian McAvera: You are primarily a printmaker, one who also works regularly with drawing. Why do you restrict yourself to these two media, or put another way, why do you consider them primary?

David Lilburn: Though I do work with other media, it's true that drawing and basic intaglio printmaking are central. They involve, or at least, the way I draw and make prints, a way of working that suits me emotionally – it seems... correct! – if that makes sense. I am able to do most of what I want to do using those graphic media so I suppose I see no reason not to continue.

BMcA: Much printmaking in Ireland is decorative craft: expertly put together and of little consequence. You don't fit into that niche. Your focus seems to be on mapmaking, diary entries and a proclivity for allusion and reference, funnelled through a twisting space that, rather dangerously, rarely allows the eye to rest. The whole is wrapped

in a kind of faux-naïf, childlike delight in filling every available space, rather like those early maps of Venice with their Godlike viewpoint overlaid with copious figurative elements such as houses, churches and the like. How did this develop?

DL: I like that! How did it develop? I think it probably started when I returned to live in Limerick city. Up to that, for years, I had been living in the country and a lot of my work was about landscape. When I returned to Limerick, the place I grew up in and went to art school in, I began to get the urge to add stories, events from my own past, to mark sites that had an historical significance and to mark routes through the city that I followed. You can load all sorts of information and meaning onto a map.

You mentioned Limerick as being a provincial city. In many ways it still is, but for me in another way it became a metaphor for 'the city' (in general). So I wanted to find a way of expressing all the activity that goes on/went on in the one image. I love the way George Grosz described the city – Berlin in the early 20th century. In *Pandemonium* for example, a wonderful drawing packed with detail – murders, crashes, dogs pissing, religious groups parading with banners – I never get tired of it. The drawings of people are quite simple but so expressive.

I also completed a few commissions that influenced this way of working. I made what I call an 'artist's map' of Ireland for expo 2000 as a way of commenting on Ireland's relationship through trade and culture with the rest of the world and a map of Dublin – to comment on 1000 years of Dublin's history (for a permanent exhibition in City Hall).

BMcA: In this country printmaking is mainly viewed as a secondary activity and few artists, if they exhibit drawings at all, show anything other than finished ones. What are your viewpoints?

DL: It's true that printmaking is by and large viewed as a secondary activity here. Worldwide though there are a few magnificent exceptions, which I keep in mind, for whom



1 David Lilburn in his Limerick studio
Photo Mary Nagle

2 DAVID LILBURN
b.1950 *PARADISI
PORTAE CLAUSAE
SUNT* (DETAIL)1998
drypoint,
watercolour, Chine
Collé 45x60cm

3 *THE ULYSSES
MAPS: A DUBLIN
ODYSSEY: LOOP
BRIDGE* drypoint,
watercolour, chine
collé 108x66 cm



PROMOTING DRAWING, ALL SORTS OF DRAWING – NOT JUST FINISHED ONES – IS ONE OF THE AIMS JIM SAVAGE AND I HAD WHEN SETTING UP OCCASIONAL PRESS

'print' is central to their best work: Anton Hyboer, the Russian artist Oleg Kudryashov – I saw a marvellous exhibition of his in the Douglas Hyde Gallery ten years ago; Tapiés, one of the artists in the first ROSC – there was a great exhibition of his 'monumental' prints in the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny some years ago. I think too the prints and calligraphic drawings of Alechinsky (another of the artists in the first ROSC) are central to his work. Of Irish artists Michael Kane immediately comes to mind.

You're right about the lack of drawings exhibited. I personally have always been attracted to the informal, loose, gestural and exploratory qualities you can get in drawing. Promoting drawing, all sorts of drawing – not just finished ones – is one of the aims Jim Savage and I had when setting up Occasional Press.

BMcA: You were born in 1950 in Limerick, a provincial city with a long history, at a stagnant time socio-politically. What was your family situation, what kind of upbringing did you have, and what elements of the city, if any, imprinted themselves upon your imagination?

DL: The Limerick I was born into was quite sectarian. As we were a Protestant family, we went to Protestant schools, protestant sport clubs, and went to a different church from that of our neighbours: much of our social activity was within that set-up. In one sense I was brought up in a completely different Limerick from that of a lot of my friends now. My grandfather was a Presbyterian from County Down, and was very involved with the Presbyterian Church – he wrote a book on their history in Limerick. There is a really nice Presbyterian church in Limerick that I often put

into my pictures. Before independence, Limerick was a Scottish garrison. I've often thought since that I was very lucky that I was born two generations later and two hundred miles from Belfast. We had visiting Presbyterian ministers in the early days and I felt lucky that I would easily be able to break away from that world-view. I went as a boarder to Newtown, a Quaker secondary school in Waterford. It was there that I got into art. There was an art-room and a lovely library with a great collection of monographs. I had a few friends in my class who were also interested in art. I think the highlight for me was the 'modern art' exhibition in 1967 called ROSC at the RDS in Dublin. We got a train a number of times to see it: fantastic! Up to then the only paintings I was familiar with were in the modest collection at the Waterford Municipal Gallery. ROSC was an absolutely liberating experience: the scale and freshness of the work were tremendous.

BMcA: Looking at some of your recent 'City of Culture' series, I'm struck by their similarity to those tourist maps of the kind found in *Ireland of the Welcomes*, in the 1950s and 1960s of tourist 'highlights', and the storyline sequence of images in French periodicals of the period 1870-1930 which artists like Delaunay picked up on. The tourist maps essentially take the structure of the map and decorate it with images that are not to scale whereas an artist like Delaunay tends to have a focal point and then rhythmically arrange the other images around it. You seem quite consciously to ignore focal points. Why?

DL: Well, they are I suppose more map-like than anything else, and maps don't really have a single focal point. One of the things I am trying to do is to 'map' some of the action that is going on, to create a sense of excitement. If you look at 'City of Culture 3', there's the pub where I meet with my friends, the Treaty Stone, and the Castle, the Presbyterian Church, the door of the cathedral, the City Hall, the four pit bull terriers which I often come across when cycling to the University, and the little walking man is lifted from Grosz! The river is there in all the prints in the series. You are right about the scale too – I love to distort the scale, highlighting what's of interest by increasing the scale and shrinking what is not of interest. Jim Savage once wrote that my maps were not so much to find your way by, but to get thoroughly lost in.

BMcA: Your 2009 book *Walking Drawing Making Memory* is an unusual and highly successful example of prints and drawings that are close to basic notation, or working notes. That sense of being in and through the landscape chimes somewhat with Richard Long or Hamish Fulton, but both of them are travellers, imperialists in a sense. How do you see yourself?

DL: Certainly not as an imperialist traveller! More a tourist. I love walking, especially through the landscape of the West of Ireland and I love to draw. I got into the habit of drawing while I was walking. When drawing you can look at what you are interested in and you ignore the rest. It's also a way of keeping a mental note of what catches your imagination. As a historian once told me, if you're given access to a resource, you should get all the relevant information first time round – you may not get a second chance. The method suits my personality – I prefer to be moving on rather than sitting in one spot. The original idea for the book was a facsimile of a sketchbook of drawings made in Connemara, but over time that idea appeared limited, so, along with a designer friend of mine Mary Nagle, and Jim Savage, we designed a book with more variety – mixing lots of the original, as you say, quite notational drawings with some more elaborate, finished drawings and prints. You mentioned focal points – in one sense the use of watercolour and chine-collé does that. It gives extra structure to the thing.

BMcA: When you went to Trinity College (1969-73) you read History and Political Science, so the obvious questions are what, if anything, had you been doing as an artist up to then and did History and Political Science leave any imprint upon your subsequent work as an artist?

DL: I enjoyed art at school, even won a few prizes at the Texaco Art competitions but I didn't think of myself as an artist. I didn't consider art school! I would have had to be much more organized than I was to make a case for that path. My father had been to Trinity and was keen that I should go too and I was happy to do so. At the time I was very interested in history. I studied Philosophy, English and History in first year (in Trinity), and then changed course to History and Political Science after that. The experience has indeed influenced my subsequent work as an artist. I liked history at school. My teacher, Eileen Webster was a Quaker and a pacifist. She was not impressed by the 1966 celebrations so I was introduced to revisionism early. In the library

4 TWO
CONNEMARA
PONIES 2013
charcoal chalk
20x30cm

5 PARADISI
PORTAE
CLAUSAE SUNT
1978 drypoint,
watercolour
Chine Collé
45x60cm





BY THE TIME I FINISHED TRINITY IT WAS CLEAR TO ME THAT I WOULDN'T BECOME A PROFESSIONAL HISTORIAN

there were some wonderful titles like *Irish Peasant Society* by K H Connell that dealt with topics like Illicit Distillation, Illegitimacy Before the Famine and Ether-Drinking in Ulster.

The special subjects I studied at Trinity still hold a fascination for me and appear from time to time in my work. One was the Williamite/Jacobite wars of 1690/91, taught by J G Simms, which ended in the siege of Limerick. The 'War of the Three Kings', especially the part played out in Limerick, was the inspiration for my exhibition *The Usurpers Habit* in 1998 (Fig). Another subject I followed was Revolutionary Ireland 1913-35 with David Thornly. Again references to events that happened in Limerick find their way into my cur-

rent work: I live beside Cleevess factory – the site of the Limerick Soviet.

My granny told me that one day during the Civil War, Republicans and Free Staters were shooting across the river at each other and she had to put the children onto the landing to avoid stray bullets. A third special subject I followed was Renaissance Italy, which led I suppose to the desire to visit Italy. By the time I finished Trinity it was clear to me that I wouldn't become a professional historian. In fact I thought it was presumptuous of me to be making comments on great figures like Parnell, though I remain interested in history, and learning about research was invaluable.

BMcA: In 1972 you went to the *Scuole d'Arte* in Urbino to study lithography. This seems a rather abrupt transition from Trinity. Why Urbino and not, say, the Royal College of Art in London, did you know Italian, and what kind of teaching did you get there?

DL: It was the summer of 1972 while I was still at university. I had heard about the course from friends. It seemed a nice way to visit Italy. I didn't know anything about lithography and I didn't speak Italian before I went. The art school was extraordinary – set in the ducal palace in Urbino. It was difficult enough at first as no one spoke English and the Professor, Professor Cecci, was a bit dismissive of people who didn't speak Italian. Luckily there was one nice lady there who worked in UCD who translated for me. The students included both amateurs like myself and professional artists. The main emphasis was learning different ways of drawing on the stone. Working closely with a technician, over the course I produced four editions of prints.

As part of the course there were all sorts of trips: to see Piero della Francesca in Sansepolcro, Giotto in Assisi, The Uffizi in Florence, to Bologna and Milan – I was seeing all of these things that I had only seen before in books. We also saw an exhibition of Henry Moore etchings in Florence, too 'loose' for the Prof but I thought they were wonderful.

I went hitch-hiking a lot which was a good way of learning Italian – what you learnt in the first car you practised in the second one and so on. I also spent a week in Venice visiting the 1972 Biennale. One of the highlights for me was Alechinsky, who represented Belgium that year, who as well as paintings showed a series of unforgettable lithographs.

BMcA: From 1974-77 you were at Limerick School of Art and Design, presumably teaching lithography. Again the transition is striking – from academia to art college via Urbino inside two years! Why go back to Limerick and why an art college?

DL: When I left Trinity I borrowed some money and intended to go back to Italy, though I went to London first, staying with friends. It was a complete eye-opener: so many wonderful museums and galleries like the Tate, the Hayward, the National Gallery, the National Museum, the V&A, the National Portrait Gallery – I never got to Italy. Instead I got a job at Beefeaters Gin Factory in Elephant & Castle and stayed in London for a while – I hadn't enough money to move on. I went back to Limerick for Christmas. While I was there I heard that they were looking for life models in the art school, so that's what I did! I enquired about the possibility of studying lithography. There was no lithographic press in the art school but there was an etching

press, and that's how I got involved. At art school, at the time, students studied for the ATC, the Art Teachers' Certificate. I learnt how to do etching with Dietrich Blodau. During that year they were thinking of setting up a diploma course, Dietrich encouraged me to sign up. I went to the principal Jack Donovan and he said 'Six pound please' and I was in! In the beginning they were making the course up as they went along, so I did everything. It was very open-ended and it suited me.

BMcA: Somewhere around 1977-79 you were in the Netherlands. Why did you leave Limerick again, what did you do in the Netherlands (where state support of the artist is much better than in Ireland or the UK), and what art there had an influence on you?

DL: I graduated in both Graphic Design and Printmaking, I was very interested in Design at that stage and I had the idea that I might find some work in Holland. I first went to Amsterdam. While I was there I made some prints in the print workshop – the Amsterdams Grafisch Atelier. It's a beautiful city. I loved the modern art museum – the Stedelijk is just brilliant. One of the first things I saw there and which are still an influence on me, were the prints of Anton Hyboer. Enormous big drypoint prints, scratched into rough zinc, gutsy, maybe six foot high – they really attracted me. Wonderful stuff. Hyboer lived with five wives and was a

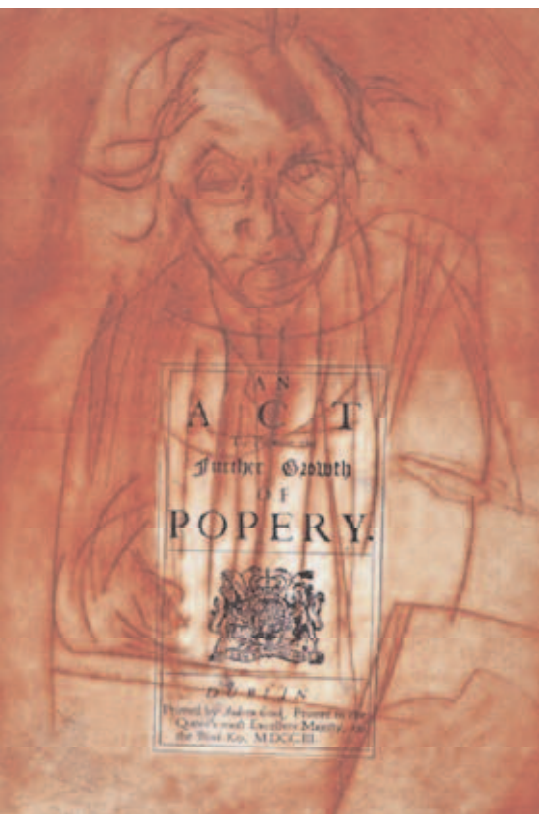


notorious tabloid figure in Holland, but he's not that well known outside Holland. I went back to the Stedelijk recently. I had written to them asking to see Hyboer's work, which at the time, were no longer hung in the museum. They agreed. They were stored outside NW Amsterdam in a huge warehouse. It was great to see them again. I also came to develop an interest in the artists associated with the COBRA movement – Karel Appel, Alechinsky, Asger Jorn, Corneille. I spent six months in Amsterdam. I then got a position with the Design Department of Philips in Eindhoven. I worked there for about eighteen months. There is a good modern art

6 CITY OF CULTURE III
2014 drypoint
50x60cm

7 ROMANIE AND CASPAR I (DETAIL) 1991
Monoprint
56x114cm

8 POWER STATION, TARBERT 2007
pencil and oil on paper 47x52cm



9



10

THE CLIENTS AT THE LIBRARY WERE LOOKING FOR A VISUALIZATION OF THE BOOK THAT WOULD BE INTELLIGIBLE BOTH TO VIEWERS WHO WERE EXPERTS IN JOYCE AND THOSE WHO HAD NEVER READ HIM

museum in Eindhoven too – the Van Abbe. While there I lived for a time in a converted cow shed in Nuenen near Van Gogh's house. It is now a museum.

BMcA: You returned again to Limerick in 1979, teaching either at Limerick School of Art until 1983. Was this a productive period for you as an artist?

DL: I came back to Ireland with Romanie, then my Dutch girlfriend, now my wife. We went to Galway. I hadn't lived there before, it was by the sea and it had a bookshop. In the beginning we spent most of the time working in the garden, though I did some work in Graphica II, a small intaglio workshop in UCG run by Laura Vecci. During that period someone from Limerick art school rang me and asked would I be interested in teaching printmaking. That's when I really got my working method sorted out. I was teaching simple printmaking with the First Years. I started making mono-prints myself. That led on to a very productive period.

BMcA: I assume that after 1983 you worked freelance as a designer as you are listed as a member of the Institute of Designers in Ireland. What kind of work were you doing, and what was happening to your art?

DL: From 1980 to 1983 I was teaching part-time and doing some freelance design work. In 1983, we already had one

child, so I got a job as graphic designer in the University of Limerick. I have been working there as a designer ever since so I've never had to earn my living from art. I work for the university on all sorts of projects – book design, exhibition design, posters and brochures for conferences, concert posters, house styles for research centres. My own work, for practical reasons, was centred round the domestic scene and the landscape close to wherever we were living at the time. We lived in a number of lovely places in the countryside of Co Limerick: Lough Gur, Adare and Ballyclough. I was working predominantly on large-scale colour monoprints that eventually led to my first one-man show 'Homeground' in 1991.

BMcA: With the Irish artist Mike Byrne you established Art Network Europe, I assume around 1992 as you had an Arts Council award in relation to it in 1993. How did this come about? What were its aims?

DL: The initial prompt was a comment from Marielle van den Berg, the Dutch girlfriend of a friend of mine who was visiting at the time. She noticed from the CVs that a lot of my close friends and I were only exhibiting in Ireland and encouraged us to exhibit in Holland. Through Marielle's contacts we linked up with an artist collective (Kunst Centrum Melkfabriek) in Sittard, in the south of Holland. They had already organized a number of successful exchange

exhibitions with groups in Poland, France and Germany.

We received a Kaleidoscope grant – from the then EEC – to help set up Art Network Europe. To comply we needed to have three countries involved, so our first project which we called 'On Tour' involved Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium. We brought an exhibition to Holland, and later to Zutendaal in Belgium. Dutch and Belgium artists later visited Ireland showing in Limerick and Dublin.

The initial aim was simply to exhibit our work somewhere else outside of Ireland but it developed into a very productive cultural exchange involving three separate projects that ran, as you say, till 1995. The other two projects were 'Grond' a Belgium-Irish venture and a Russian exchange, which involved Russian artists exhibiting in the Limerick City Gallery of Art and Irish artists exhibiting in the central Artist's House in Gorky Park in Moscow. Apart from Mike and myself, the other artists involved in Art Network Europe from our side were Jim Savage, Jill Denis, Joe Wilson, John McHugh and Nick Fleming.

As a result of our involvement in Art Network Europe, Mike and myself were invited to a number of other exhibitions in the Netherlands, including an artist's book exhibition and an exhibition of sculpture (Observatorium) in Bredevoort – a beautiful old town on the German border in 1995 and 1996). It was an exciting time, enriching for the artists – particularly for those who travelled with the shows. We set up and took part in a number of workshops. All the exhibitions were covered in the national media and were very well received at the local level.

BMcA: Together with Jim Savage you founded, and still run Occasional Press, which publishes art books, presumably around 2005. What was the thinking behind this?

DL: Jim and I had had been talking for a long time about doing something to promote drawing and the possibility of publishing. Jim was a lecturer on drawing at the art school at the time. Our first project was *Drawing Texts* an anthology of texts on drawing by artists, art critics, art historians and others, which we published to coincide with an exhibition on drawing by lecturers from the Limerick, Dublin and Cork art schools (LSAD, NCAD and the Crawford School of Art and Design), in 2005. We designed the book, bought the paper, printed 200 copies, got them bound, and sold them at six pounds each, printed another batch, sold them... Eventually we printed 800.

We had three essays by John Berger in *Drawing Texts*. This led on to our second book *Berger on Drawing*. Cork was European City of Culture. We got a grant from them to produce it, (the only time we have asked for or received a grant.) It is still our best seller (it's on its third printing).

We've printed ten books so far. We have three projects on the go: *The Celtic Zoo* by Tom Fitzgerald, a facsimile of twenty-four satirical paintings on the Celtic Tiger which includes a poem *Soundtrack to The Celtic Zoo* by Theo

Dorgan. It is due out shortly; *Flying Skirts* by John and Yves Berger and a book of Joe Wilson's drawing in the Twelve Bens in Connemara. That will be published in collaboration with Ballynahinch Castle in Connemara.

BMcA: Your 'Ulysses' series is much more regimented than usual, easier to read and with a clearer narrative. How do you deal with the practicalities of a commission that requires a more overt accessibility?

DL: The 'Ulysses Maps' series was commissioned by the National Library of Ireland as part of an exhibition celebrating James Joyce and Bloomsday. The clients at the library (which included the Joyce expert Luca Crispi) were looking for a visualization of the book that would be intelligible both to viewers who were experts in Joyce and those who had never read him. One of the ideas was to enlighten visiting Joyce experts on Dublin and visiting Dubliners on the book. I enjoy commissions. The constrictions can often lead you to new ways of working. In this case I had to carefully read the book, which was something I had wanted to do for ages. I wanted to make the work 'Joycean' in the sense that it would be packed with information, some of it overt, more of it hidden. Just as Joyce parodied different styles of writing I tried to parody different visual styles and conventions. ■

Brian McAvera is an art critic.



9 ORANGE CARD drypoint, Chine Collé 28x18cm

10 THE KINGS ARE OUT 2013 drypoint, watercolour 50x70cm

11 THE USURPERS HABIT 1994 drypoint 200x150cm

