



# DERMOD O'BRIEN: A PARIS APPRENTICESHIP

Dermod O'Brien was born at Mount Trenchard, Co. Limerick, in 1865. He was the eldest son of Edward O'Brien, landowner, of Cahirmoyle, Co. Limerick, and Mary Spring Rice, and grandson of the Young Ireland leader, William Smith O'Brien. Both of his parents were amateur artists. His mother died young. He was educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1886, he first visited Paris, 'studying pictures' in the Louvre, and the next year, while staying in Rome, he decided to make painting his profession, and joined the Antwerp Academy to work under Verlat. He was deeply attracted to Rembrandt, whose influence shows at an early stage. A striking self-portrait of 1889, however, reflects nothing but contemporary influence. In 1891, he moved to the Académie Julien in Paris, where he first met William Rothenstein, and two years later he went to the Slade. In London, his friends were literary and artistic ... He painted romantic subject pictures and portraits while in London, and was an admirer of Steer and Rothenstein. He went to live in Dublin in 1901, taking a house in Mountjoy Square, at first with his sister Nellie O'Brien, an ardent Gaelic Leaguer, who painted miniatures. In 1902, he married Mabel Smyly. After Osborne's death, Sarah Purser was, for several years, his rival as successor in the field of portraits ... He was active in public and cultural affairs in Dublin and Cahirmoyle, which he inherited in 1907, and later sold, to settle in Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin. He failed to become head of the School of Art, or director of the National Gallery, a post which went to Hugh Lane. His style in portraiture, landscape and still life is generally formal and academic, except for works painted during the mid-twenties, when he visited the South of France, and some refreshing Irish landscape sketches. He died in Dublin in 1945.

After leaving school, Dermod O'Brien<sup>(1)</sup> studied at Cambridge. He was older than most of his contemporaries when he decided to study art. Unlike them he does not appear to have studied first in Dublin, before going to the Continent. He considered Rome, the oldest art school in Europe, but his father was keen for him to study French or German, and encouraged him to choose a school in France, Belgium or Germany. He visited Paris in 1886, studying in the Louvre, and visited the galleries in Italy in 1887.<sup>(2)</sup>



Dermod O'Brien: self-portrait, 1889.

O'Brien's father favoured Belgium, for he could give him an introduction in Antwerp. He may also have felt that Dermod would receive a more conventional training in Antwerp than in Paris. O'Brien may also have wished to follow the example of his friend, Walter Osborne. He was one of the last Irish students to study at Antwerp, and spent four years there (1887-91) – longer than the others. The status of the Academy had changed in 1885, and there were less foreign students there. No doubt its importance had been eclipsed by Paris.

In 1887, O'Brien enrolled for the summer course at the Royal Academy, Antwerp,<sup>(3)</sup> (not apparently St. Luke's Academy, as his biographer Lennox Robinson says), painting and drawing from the antique. He and Henry Allan were in the life class in the winter session

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1887-88. O'Brien's address was given as 58 Minderbroedersrui. He studied in the figure class under E. Siberdt in the 1888-89 winter season. He won fourth prize in drawing from the live model in 1889, and first prize in the life drawing in 1890.<sup>(4)</sup> He remained in the Academy in 1891, and met Osborne, who was visiting Antwerp that year.<sup>(5)</sup> Even though he spent longer than his compatriots in Antwerp, O'Brien complained to his father about the unsatisfactory teaching at the Academy, and the laziness of the students. But he must have benefitted from Verlat's sound instruction in drawing, and factual approach:

*Draw what you see, don't draw what isn't there<sup>(6)</sup>*

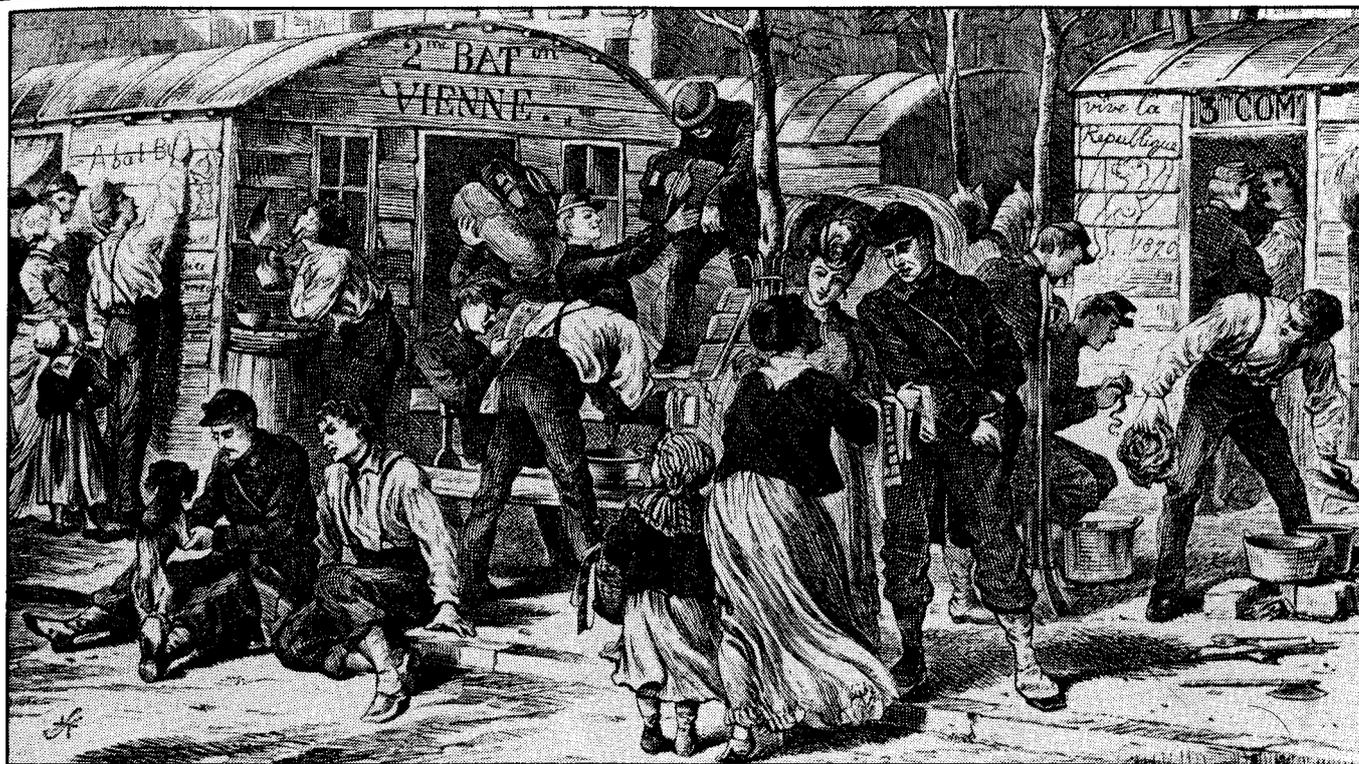
for he later gave the same advice to his own students at the R.H.A. Verlat may also have influenced O'Brien in his later choice of animal subjects.

Thomas McGreevy describes O'Brien as 'a conservative artist' who 'stuck to the technique that he learned in Antwerp and mastered as the years went on.'<sup>(7)</sup> He looked to the Old Masters rather than to contemporaries, for example the Flemish Rubens, Van Dyck and Matsys, and above all Rembrandt, whose methods he tried to imitate. O'Brien's fellow students were obviously in awe of Whistler, but O'Brien believed that as a painter and etcher Rembrandt 'overshadows Whistler and Co.'<sup>(8)</sup>

There are a number of his Antwerp portraits and interiors extant, in which his precision of drawing and traditional use of chiaroscuro is evident, showing him to have been an accomplished academic painter. He also painted a number of Flemish landscapes and genre scenes, for example *The Wash and The Clog Maker's Shed*,<sup>(9)</sup> with a 'Dutch' darkness of tone and chiaroscuro, showing the influence of Israëls and the contemporary Dutch School. He went out into the countryside, and made little studies of domestic landscapes, a back garden or windmill for example, which have a freshness and colour which his 'official' portraits lack.

O'Brien was dissatisfied with Antwerp and, following his father's suggestion to continue his studies in Paris, he arrived in Paris in 1891. He entered the Académie Julian, where he was taught by Robert-Fleury and

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*Kerbside artists: a Paris street scene.*

Flameng. Among his fellow students he became friends with William Rothenstein and Connard, but in spite of enjoying Paris night-life, he missed Antwerp, and country life.

*Paris was not his 'milieu' ... Artist though he was, he was also an Irish gentleman and he could never feel at his ease in the bohemian crowd.<sup>(10)</sup>*

He was older than his fellow students and lamented that

*one's apprenticeship drags on and on,<sup>(11)</sup>* and that he was learning little that he had not already learned in Antwerp. Robinson suggests that O'Brien might have been a better painter if he had gone straight to Paris rather than Antwerp:

*'A touch of the French School might have done him all the good in the world ... but he reached Paris too late, he was*

*too set in his method.<sup>(12)</sup>*

In 1893, O'Brien moved to London, and in 1894 exhibited his first portrait at the R.H.A. His daughter-in-law states that he did not in fact study at the Slade School in 1894, as his biographer claims.<sup>(13)</sup> In London he continued his friendships that he had made in Paris, and met Lavery.

After his return to Ireland in 1901, and his family estate, he painted pastures and parklands, often with cows and sheep, identifiable by his use of chromatic green, but lacking the breadth and ease of, for example, Nathaniel Hone. A French influence is apparent in *Sheep-shearing* (Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery) of Pissarro's 'pointillist' rural scenes or, according to George Moore:

*an Arcadian simplicity that reminds me a little of Puvis.<sup>(14)</sup> (de Chavannes).*



*Spreading the news in Paris.*

#### NOTES

1. See the biography of Dermot O'Brien by Lennox Robinson, *Palette and Plough*, (Dublin, 1948).
2. *The Studio of Dermot O'Brien*, P.R.H.A., in 1865-1945. Exhibition, Cynthia O'Connor Gallery, Dublin, March - April, 1983.
3. *Registre d'Inscriptions*. R.A. Antwerp. St. Lukes Academy is sometimes mentioned in connection with Irish artists in Belgium. But Dr. Guido Persoons, Librarian of the R.A. Antwerp says that St. Luke's was in Brussels, not Antwerp.
4. *Rapports Annuel*, R.A., Antwerp, 1889 and 1890.
5. Robinson. *op. cit.*, p. 61.
6. *Ibid*, p. 55.
7. T. McGreevy, 'Fifty Years of Irish Painting', *Capuchin Annual*, (1949).
8. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
9. See *Dermot O'Brien* Exhibition, Dublin, 1926.
10. Robinson. *op. cit.*, p. 61.
11. *Ibid*, p. 62.
12. *Ibid*, p. 54.
13. O'Brien's daughter-in-law, the late Kitty Wilmer O'Brien, says that he visited the Slade, but did not become a student there. I am very grateful to her and the artist's son Dr. Brendan O'Brien for talking to me about O'Brien, and showing me their collection of paintings.
14. George Moore, *Reminiscences of the Impressionist Painters* (Dublin, 1906), p. 45.

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