

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



ERIC RAVILIOUS: DRAWN TO WAR
(Language: English)

Director: Margy Kinmonth, 2022. Running time: 87 minutes
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 7 February 2024.

There's a sharp observation, delivered in Alan Bennett's soft tones, that sums up the reputation of the painter Eric Ravilious: "Because his paintings are so accessible, I don't think he's thought to be a great artist. It's because of his charm. He's so easy to like and things have to be hard, if they're not hard, then they're not great."

Veteran arts documentary director Margy Kinmonth makes an excellent argument for elevating the status of watercolourist and etcher Eric Ravilious in this lovingly crafted biographical film. Her account begins with Ravilious' dramatic end; an official war artist, he went missing in action while flying with the RAF over Iceland in August 1942. He was only 39 and left behind his artist wife, Tirzah Garwood and their three young children. Extracts from Garwood's autobiographical writings and the letters that flew between the couple over the years, voiced by Tamsin Greig and Freddie Fox, bring the story to life.

Ravilious' early death while undeniably tragic, had a certain aptness as he loved planes both as objects and as a means to sketch the world laid out below. Aircraft feature in many of his eerily composed wartime watercolours, which functioned both as a pictorial documentary record and lyrical propaganda. Kinmonth has cast her net wide, revisiting landscapes and juxtaposing Ravilious' images in a lyrical style. She has also gathered together some diverse interviewees; pilot Mark Miller stands on a rainy airfield and talks about how Ravilious included the bespoke tents put over the resting engines of a De Havilland Dominie to protect from the sub-zero temperatures. Without his painting, that feature would never have been recorded.

Sixty years after his death, Ravilious' life is reconstructed on screen through readings, archival images and the memories of family and friends. There is lavish use of the artist's haunting images. Occasionally, and with the lightest touch, Ravilious' paintings are briefly animated on screen. The effect is a little disconcerting, a static figure comes to life, but it's not overdone and quite charming. Curators and artists – including Ai Wei Wei, Grayson Perry and David Hetherington – put him in context and appraise his work. Writer Robert MacFarlane admires Ravilious' evocations of the English terrain, particularly

the countryside in Kent, Sussex and Essex where he lived. The artist also captured the bleak beauty of Scapa Flow and the coast of Scotland where he was stationed with the navy during manoeuvres. MacFarlane describes one image as being both profoundly serene and profoundly disturbing, emphasising his status as a modernist.

Ravilious' wartime paintings remind me of Michael Powell's contemporary portrayals of Britain in films like *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *49th Parallel* and *A Canterbury Tale*. Both men shared a deep love of the English countryside and a genius for creating haunting images when straight propaganda was all that was officially required of them.

Ravilious was born in Acton, the son of an antiques dealer who wasn't successful in his business dealings. After art school under Paul Nash, he made a living creating intricate woodcuts celebrating cricket and high street shops and providing designs for Wedgwood mugs. But this widely reproduced work as a graphic artist may have led to him being dismissed by a snobbish art establishment as too decorative and commercial.

Money was always a concern, especially with three small children to support. His surviving daughter Anne has been very generous, allowing Kinmonth access to her parents' letters, even when they detailed his infidelities. Many of his greatest paintings were lost at sea when they were being sent for an overseas show aimed at encouraging support for the war. All that is left of one of his greatest pieces, a vast mural in London's Morley College, are some tantalising photographs after the building was destroyed in an air raid. A superbly mounted retrospective at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2015 helped raise Eric Ravilious' reputation in the art world; let's hope that this ingenious and beautiful documentary will help even more.

Saskia Baron, *the arts desk.com*, 27 June, 2022

He was the first war artist to die on active service in the second world war – and one of the greatest. Now, a new film, featuring Alan Bennett and Ai Weiwei, uncovers his complicated life.

On 2 September 1942, a plane on a search-and-rescue mission off the coast of Iceland crashed into the sea, killing its pilot and 39-year-old passenger. The passenger was Eric Ravilious, whose final letter to his wife, three days earlier, had extolled the deep shadows and leaflike cracks of the subarctic landscape.

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



He was one of 300 artists hired by the War Artists Advisory Committee to cover the second world war, and the first to die on active service.

Back home in their dank Essex farmhouse where she was marooned with their three young children, his wife, Tirzah Garwood, was struggling: she had recently been operated on for the breast cancer that would kill her nine years later. The pressures of illness and domestic life had put paid to her own successful career as an artist. But each evening, after putting her children to bed, she would sit down to type out her autobiography.

It was addressed directly to her future readers: “I hope you may be one of my descendants,” she wrote, “but I have only three children, and as I write a German aeroplane has circled around my head taking photographs of the damage that yesterday’s raiders have done, reminding me that there is no certainty of our survival.”

The reputation of Ravilious as an artist of any worth very nearly didn’t survive at all. By the time of his death, one great mural, at Waterloo’s Morley College, had been bombed into oblivion, some of his war paintings had been censored, and dozens more had been sunk at sea on their way to an exhibition on the art of propaganda in South America. For more than 30 years, most of his surviving works lay forgotten under a bed in a house that he and Garwood had once shared with the artist Edward Bawden, leaving only the mass-produced legacy of playful alphabet mugs commissioned by Wedgwood and a woodcut of top-hatted gentlemen players that for years graced the cover of *Wisden Cricketers’ Almanack*.

But a new film, *Eric Ravilious: Drawn to War*, sets the record straight, drawing on an impressive array of advocates – from Grayson Perry to Alan Bennett – to make a case for him as one of the great British artists, whose engravings broke new technical ground while his watercolours carried the tradition of Turner into the 20th century. The film is a passion project for its author and director, Margy Kinmonth, who began to research it 15 years ago, but was repeatedly knocked back by funders who insisted nobody had ever heard of Ravilious.

Kinmonth’s previous film was a 2017 documentary about the artists of the Russian revolution, but when the pandemic struck, she realised she would have to set her sights closer to home, so returned to the snippets of interviews she had already recorded with surviving members of the Ravilious family. “They call

arts the tumbleweed of television,” she laughs, “but fortunately cinema and art go very well together.”

Her persistence has paid off. A circle of “friends” chipped in to help with the finance, and more than 70 cinemas have already signed up to screen a film, which is both a warts-and-all account of a passionate but unconventional marriage and a persuasive curatorial tour around a body of work whose quiet surfaces are never quite what they seem.

The nature writer Robert Macfarlane, who featured Ravilious in his bestselling book *The Old Ways*, points to the way the artist would frame bucolic watercolours of the rolling southern English countryside with strands of barbed wire. “I think Ravilious is an example of the fatal Englishman, along with the mountaineer George Mallory and the poet Edward Thomas: they didn’t have to go to war or climb Everest, and all of them died in their 30s living out lives they had dreamed of as children. It’s this old, fatal love for the landscape.” The result, says Macfarlane, is that “both Thomas and Ravilious are thought of as quaint ruralists when really they’re not – they’re modernists”.

A Wiltshire landscape that is one of the artist’s best-known works shows a jaunty red van approaching the junction of a road that stretches towards an ominous future (it was created for Artists Against Fascism). A domestic scene of a deserted outdoor tea table beneath an umbrella is titled *Tea at Furlongs* but could be called Munich 1938, reflects Alan Bennett in the film, quoting WH Auden’s prewar poem *The Witnesses*: “Something is going to fall like rain / And it won’t be flowers.” Most strikingly, a letter to Garwood describing his shock at witnessing the drowning of a young airman in a military exercise is juxtaposed in the film with a painting of biplanes seen through a window bobbing benignly on the sea.

The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei admits he knew nothing about Ravilious until Kinmonth approached him because of his installation *History of Bombs* at the Imperial War Museum. “I was curious to know how a war artist worked, so I accepted the invitation to participate in the project,” he says. He was astonished by what he discovered. “His expression is very calm, and he has such an innocent and almost naive painting style. I was deeply moved by the authenticity, attention to detail, and humanitarianism expressed in his artworks about war. He is able to observe and express in an extraordinary way. Although a lot of his works are watercolour paintings that seem like an understatement, they are profound, rigorous and meticulous. I think that Ravilious is one of the best artists in the UK.”

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY 2023/24 SEASON



The film begins and ends with the doomed plane bleating out a mayday signal that was never heard, before looping back to Ravilious's childhood in the Sussex countryside where he took pleasure in sketching commonplace objects – a brush and bucket, his father's collar and tie, as well as the planes flying over the chalk hills. He went on to get a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, and was teaching at Eastbourne School of Art when he met Garwood, a colonel's daughter who was studying wood engraving, and whose parents were snobbishly opposed to their relationship.

The story is semi-dramatised, with the task of voicing Garwood falling to Tamsin Greig, whom Kinmonth approached after seeing her in a play at Hampstead theatre. Greig was also unfamiliar with Ravilious's work. "The reason I was drawn to the film is because really it's a love story between two human beings who share a similar passion, but there is a cost in the partnership of two artists, which someone has to bear," she says. "They're trying to hold together the wildness of creativity but also living within the constraints of societal systems."

In her autobiography, *Long Live Great Bardfield*, Garwood is open about the impact on her of two affairs that Eric publicly pursued, starting while she was pregnant with the first of their three children. Her account is painful but never self-pitying. "I like that combination of deep feeling that's written on a very thin epidermis," says Greig. "I find Margy's storytelling very tender and elegiac."

Part of the story is told by Ravilious and Garwood's daughter, Anne, who was a babe in arms when her father was killed (in her autobiography, Garwood recalled the effort of trying to lift her to wave a final goodbye) and just 10 when her mother also died. As Kinmonth points out, the film would not have been anything like as layered had she not made available the couple's personal correspondence and all the letters between her father and his two lovers, which she inherited after their deaths.

For all the turbulence and injustice of their relationship, there is a balance between Ravilious and Garwood as artists that is made clear in two of their pictures. Both were of third-class train carriages travelling across the countryside. But whereas Ravilious's watercolour carriage is empty, giving centre stage to the white horse carved into the hillside beyond, Garwood's woodcut is crammed with passengers.

Poignantly, it falls to the couple's granddaughter, Ella Ravilious, now a curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, to read out Garwood's passage bequeathing her book to posterity, should it have survived. "If you are not one of my descendants," the passage continues, outside the film, "then all I ask of you is that you love the country as I do, and when you come into a room, discreetly observe its pictures and its furnishings, and sympathise with painters and craftsmen." This might be the story of a great man, but it is a tale told by women."

Claire Armitstead, *The Guardian*, 24 June 2022.