

W. A. Cuthbertson

Artist-Explorer Extraordinaire

An Account of the Life and Work of the Artist and
Antarctic Explorer

William Alexander Cuthbertson (1882—1968)

Robin J H Fanshawe



Castle Park Publishing

W. A. Cuthbertson – Artist-Explorer Extraordinaire

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First published 2022

ISBN 978-0-9556626-5-2

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Published by Castle Park Publishing.

www.fanshawe.org.uk

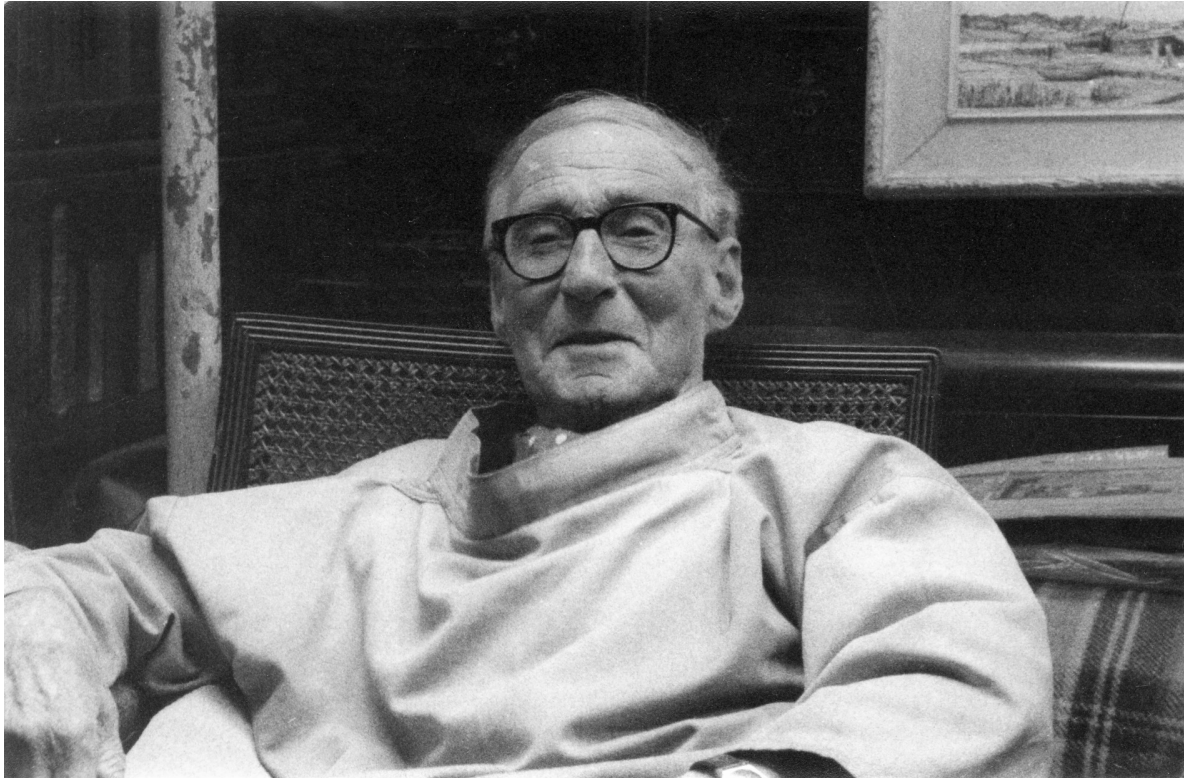
Cover illustration:

Major detail from the watercolour painting by W. A. Cuthbertson, untitled, but depicting a view from the Maldon bank of the reach of the River Blackwater towards Northey Island and Heybridge Basin. Probably painted ca. late 1950s or 1960s; 29 cm x 40 cm. (See full illustration and details on page 255). *Photograph* © collection of the author; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

Dedication page illustration:

An informal portrait painting by W. A. Cuthbertson of his wife-to-be, Grace, in a bright yellow dress, seated on the rocks by the beach in Valencia. Probably painted in 1912. 25 cm x 33 cm. (See full details on page 145). *Private collection, and photograph* © Lol Keegan; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

W. A. Cuthbertson – Artist-Explorer Extraordinaire



Photograph taken around 1960 of 'artist-explorer extraordinaire', W. A. (Will) Cuthbertson, at the age of around 78, relaxing in the saloon aboard the *'M.Y. Gracia'*, when moored at the Hythe Quay in Maldon, Essex. As always, when in casual mode, Will is seen sporting his customary fisherman's smock, but still, as always, worn over a distinctive smart silk cravat.

Hanging on the wall behind him is a rare oil landscape painting by Will, possibly depicting beached boats along the mudflats on the reach of the River Blackwater, and most likely painted not far from where the *'Gracia'* was then berthed. The photo is a delightful informal portrait of the artist, displaying many of the characteristics for which he was so well loved and respected, wearing a humorous and mischievous smile on his face, and relaxing in the environment that he treasured most, aboard his beloved houseboat, *'Gracia'* – named after his wife, Grace – his lifelong companion and support.

Photograph collection of the author; source of original photograph unknown

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Foreword

Not every mathematics graduate will go on to win the Nobel Prize in their chosen discipline. So not every art student will become as famous as Picasso, nor as technically innovative and skilled as Rembrandt.

Yet major recognition should not be the yardstick by which anyone's life is worth sharing. What survives to be passed down is one of chance and circumstance. The ability to provide details that contribute to the reconstructing of such less-familiar histories, is one of the great joys of working with a Collection as distinguished as that of the Royal Scottish Academy of Art & Architecture.

So it has been with the story of William Alexander Cuthbertson.

Until a few years ago, his was little more than a name to us. He had been a student at the Academy's Life School, where he was awarded several prizes, including the Carnegie Travel Scholarship, which took him to Spain in the opening decade of the 20th century, and where he met his future wife. Cuthbertson was also the only person ever to have been awarded the Academy's top student prize for painting, The Maclaine Watters Medal, on more than one occasion, winning it twice.

His nephew and nieces who knew him as their genial "Uncle Willy" contacted us in 2019 seeking information of his student days. Within the year, they had offered us the first of these medals as a gift. In the time since, through their generosity and infectious enthusiasm, we have come to learn more about this former student, and to receive further gifts of photographs as well as that second Maclaine Watters Medal. That the Royal Scottish Academy of Art & Architecture should so handsomely benefit, was in no small part due to the interest and backroom diplomacy of Robin Fanshawe. Robin's parents had been amongst Cuthbertson's circle of friends and associates in later life.

With direct access to Uncle Willy's descendants, and after painstaking research in our own collection as well as those of Universities and National museums, Robin has pulled together the fascinating biography of a boy from Edinburgh who took part in an Antarctic expedition and ended his days living aboard the vessel he had commanded during the First World War.

This is his story.

Robin H. Rodger

Royal Scottish Academy of Art & Architecture
Edinburgh



No. 1, Malta Terrace, birthplace of William Alexander Cuthbertson, showing the front door opening (via steps to the left) off St. Bernard's Row (now listed as no. 7). No. 2 is part of the same building but opening directly onto Malta Terrace, while nos. 3 to 9 are terraced houses leading off down the cul-de-sac to the right, with Malta House (now, confusingly, sometimes referred to as No. 1) at the far end (hidden to the right-hand side).

angles to Malta Terrace. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the property has been incorporated into St. Bernard's Row being numbered as no. 7, whilst the number 1 in Malta Terrace has subsequently become associated occasionally with the detached 'Malta House', on the opposite side of the road and at the far end of the cul-de-sac.¹

During their second year at Malta Terrace, on 18th July 1882, their first-born son arrived, William Alexander Cuthbertson – the prime subject of this work. In 1885, the family had moved house away from Malta Terrace, across the city to the Edinburgh New Town area, into a somewhat larger, but still multi-occupancy property at no 23, Dublin Street. This was just around the corner from his late father's business address at 4, Albany Street, with their home flat above at no. 2A, in which his mother and sister

for many more years to come. It may simply have been that there was plenty of business around for all of them, since from 1884 onwards they both appeared side by side in the trade directories, with William George having at the same time procured his own business premises at 10, Picardy Place to the north-east of central Edinburgh.

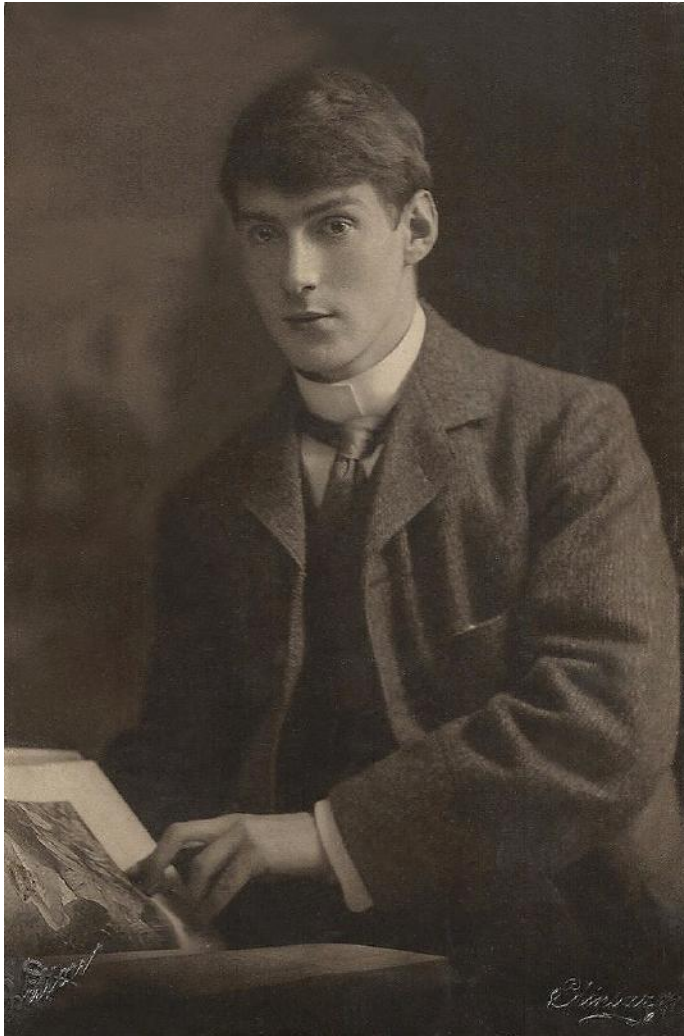
No. 1, Malta Terrace was a typical purpose-built multi-occupancy building of four apartments which, confusingly, actually had its front door in St. Bernard's Row, the road at right-



Elizabeth Cuthbertson (Née Ross) with her son William Alexander, photographed in ca. early 1883 by her father, John Maclean Ross, signed verso, 25 George Street, Edinburgh. *Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

¹ With grateful thanks to Andrew Scott at awscott.co.uk, with subsequent correspondence, for his clarification of this anomaly

At the time when he was studying at the Trustees Academy, Will remained living with his parents at 113, Mayfield Road, Newington, around three miles south of where he would be studying in central Edinburgh – so no doubt he might rather have regretted his parents' last



A formal studio photograph of Will Cuthbertson (signed by an indistinct studio, possibly Walter Britton, but perhaps rather surprisingly not by the familial John Ross). He appears to be depicted as studying a book of paintings, so this might well have been taken in around 1898, on entry into the Trustees Academy, when aged around 16 or 17 years. *Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

move from Dublin Place, just two years earlier. Will is noted to have continued to study at the Trustees Academy until late 1901, following which he ventured out on his first enterprising journey of any distance, when he applied to study abroad in Paris, at the most prestigious and indeed famous of the private Parisian art schools, the *Académie Julian*. But before departing for France, Will had submitted his first exhibition piece to the Royal Scottish Academy Annual Exhibition, which ran from mid-February to Mid-May.

This work was submitted from the 113, Mayfield Road address as *no. 634, The golfer — the approach shot*. Curiously, it was not until he submitted a similar title (in fact only his second exhibition submission) to the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts in 1906, when he was listed at the time, somewhat surprisingly, simply as ‘Sculptor’, that it was questioned as to the medium of the prior RSA

submission. Eventually the riddle is believed to have been solved (at least as far as it probably ever will be) by the later discovery of the contemporary photograph reproduced here which, in view of the 1902 date of the RSA exhibition, might indicate that it was taken perhaps around

late 1901, whilst Will was studying, and indeed possibly whilst at work, at the Trustees Academy, although the somewhat posed appearance of the photo might perhaps suggest a photographic studio – maybe to commemorate the event of his first exhibition. Another possible reason for capturing the image is that, on close-up inspection, the figure does look as if it could well have been modelled on Will's father – who was himself, by all accounts, a keen golfer.

It is quite possible that Will's Paris move could have been recommended seriously by his masters at the Trustees Academy, as an important step towards widening what must have been to date, his undoubtedly somewhat closeted experience of life – not only of art and training in their broadest terms, but also in experiencing everything else of importance in the wider world for a young art student of his age, and necessary to influence the future direction of his own personal artistic career. Undoubtedly though, the proposition of Paris would likewise have appealed immensely to William too.

One major advantage that the *Académie Julian* had over the even more prestigious and historic national *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, was that it avoided the stringent French language



Will Cuthbertson photographed with probably his first exhibition work, 'The golfer — the approach shot' possibly in late 1901 at the Trustees Academy (from the backdrop), or might possibly be a staged image in a photographer's studio. *Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

expedition. Despite costing around ten times Bruce's initial estimate to refurbish her, '*Scotia*' would turn out to be more than up to the job, and truly proved herself to have been an excellent choice.

The vessel was a 140-foot barque-rigged auxiliary screw-steamer of about 400 tons, drawing around 15 feet of water. She had been fitted with new engines and boiler, giving a top speed of 8 knots – although in order to save on coal, the average speed when under steam was normally kept to around 6 knots. The vessel was of immense strength, typical of the finest whalers, with no less than 9 feet of solid timber at her stem, whilst her sides at their thinnest point amidships were two feet thick, being constructed in three layers of timbers – essential to withstand the pressures of pack-ice. The newly-fitted accommodation included a carefully designed scientific laboratory, dark room and recording spaces, plus an impressive steam-winch 6,000 fathoms (10,975 metres) of triple-stranded wire on reels for deep sea dredging via the specialist Lucas automatic sounding apparatus. One naval architect described the conversion as '*the most perfectly conceived of all the ships used for Antarctic explorations*'. But Bruce was only interested in fine-tuning her formidable oceanographic capabilities and had very little interest in Sir Clements Markham's Royal Geographical Society obsession with the 'Race to the Pole'.

Another inspired and certainly providential choice, that harked back originally to Bruce's involvement on the 1892 Dundee Whaling Expedition, was that of Captain Thomas Robertson as captain of the '*Scotia*'. Robertson hailed from Peterhead and descended from a father and grandfather, both of whom had been whaling captains. He served his apprenticeship on a Peterhead merchant trader sailing to China and Australia, before settling on the whaling and sealing industry, in which he worked in the Arctic – gaining valuable knowledge of handling the early, entirely sail-driven, ships through the ice-laden northern seas. This would eventually prove invaluable to Bruce and to the '*Scotia*' operating solitarily in the southern oceans and Antarctica, mainly under sail, but with her auxiliary steam power.

On the Dundee expedition, Robertson had been captain of the '*Active*', one of the smaller of the five ships on that expedition, while Bruce was aboard the '*Balæna*'. But they subsequently met again five years later in mid-1897, when Bruce was zoologist aboard the steamship '*Windward*' on the 1896 Jackson-Harmsworth Expedition to Franz Josef Land in the Arctic (financed by the newspaper proprietor Alfred Harmsworth). By chance, Robertson also called in there, this time coincidentally, and perhaps ironically, as captain of Bruce's earlier ship the '*Balæna*', along with two other Dundee ships, Robertson's own previous '*Active*' and the '*Diana*'. It was from this Franz Josef expedition that Harmsworth eventually, and very helpfully, donated the sledges for Bruce to take on the SNAE voyage in 1902.

Robertson immediately accepted Bruce's invitation to captain the '*Scotia*', and he became probably one of the greatest assets to the overall success of the expedition, through his almost miraculous ability to anticipate and navigate the ship through all the inherent dangers of the

region, and in particular his understanding and respect for the behaviour of Polar ice and how to work with it to advantage. He also got on remarkably well with Bruce, who has frequently been described by many as having been irascible, and their mutual respect was paramount to a content ship, with the two men never seemingly to have fallen out.

As noted earlier, the captain, ship's officers, and all staff had apparently been appointed by early summer of 1902, and were all helping with the preparations from thereon. If this timing applied equally to Will Cuthbertson as well, then he must in fact have spent little more than six months in Paris, but it may be that his appointment had been handled in a different manner somehow. The full contingent consisted of William Speirs Bruce (aged 35 at departure date) as leader plus six other scientific staff: the four only slightly older and experienced 'seniors' would undoubtedly have all been hand-picked and known to Bruce early in his planning: Robert N. Rudmose Brown (23), botanist; Dr James H. Harvey Pirie (25), geologist, bacteriologist and medical officer; Robert C. Mossman (32), meteorologist and magnetic scientist; and David W. Wilton (30), zoologist (who had also been on the Franz Josef Land expedition with Bruce). Of the two younger 'junior' members of the scientific team, William A. Cuthbertson was artist – and at just 20, was also the youngest member of the whole ship's company, whilst the taxidermist appointed was another student named Alastair Ross – a medical student at Edinburgh University, and just eight months older than Will, at just under 21 years.

As an interesting comment aside, Will was known, even in the 1950s, to claim that he believed that he was still the youngest member of any Antarctic expedition when he departed, although he probably had little proof of the fact, in view of the typically very young ages described for some of the most junior crew-members and cabin-boys who might very well have sailed in the few preceding recorded voyages. It was believed, however, that in 1902 he was pretty certainly the youngest member of any 'scientific team' ever to have travelled to Antarctica, and possibly throughout what was subsequently referred to as the 'Heroic Age' of Polar exploration, but it is unknown for certain whether this is in fact the case. But nonetheless, in more modern times, some even younger people, of both sexes, have now traversed the South Pole on skis with the aid of modern equipment.

The '*Scotia's*' crew of 26 men with a wide variety of skills was selected and captained by the incomparably experienced 47-year-old, Thomas Robertson who was ably supported by five ship's officers, all with significant experience of ice navigation. In addition, his First Engineer, Allan Ramsay, was particularly adept in manoeuvring the ship through thick ice, until the latter sadly became the one and only casualty of the expedition when he died from a previously undetected natural heart condition in August 1903, just half-way through the voyage. One other member of the crew who would feature on a lighter note from time to time, was the ordinary seaman and also lab-assistant, Gilbert Kerr, who at the same time, and most importantly, was the ship's piper!

* * *



The Cuthbertson family's invitation to attend the Bruces' reception onboard 'Scotia' in Troon Harbour. *Courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*



Photograph taken aboard the 'Scotia', probably at the reception dated 24th October 1902, just prior to setting sail for Antarctica. From left to right are Will's brother Duncan and sister Dorothy, his mother Elizabeth, an unknown gentleman (possibly James Coats), Will's father William, WAC, and an unknown lady (possibly Mrs Coats). The cream-coloured dog is assumed to be William Bruce's Samoyed named 'Russ', which remained with the expedition throughout. *Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

With the 'Scotia' fully fitted out and ready to depart, and the scientists and crew all in place – including Bruce's Samoyed sledge-dog named 'Russ' – Bruce organised a reception aboard the ship moored in Troon Harbour, on Friday 24th October 1902, between 2pm and 5pm. Although the precise nature of the reception is not noted, it is reasonable to assume that it was arranged for the benefit of all the subscribers to Bruce's fund-raising appeal – and possibly just to encourage them further to consider a bit more support for the still cash-strapped expedition.

The photograph inserted left is in the possession of Will Cuthbertson's family descendants and shows him with his parents, William and Elizabeth, plus his brother, Duncan, and sister, Dorothy, along with two other unnamed guests onboard the 'Scotia' at what is understood to have been the above-mentioned reception. It

is believed that the other couple in the photo are in fact the expedition's benefactor, James Coats and his wife; but as a reportedly camera-shy family, there is no immediate way of confirming this for sure. There is, however, a fine portrait of James Coats, painted in 1905 by Sir James Guthrie, then President of the Royal Scottish Academy, and now hanging in the Paisley Museum and Art Galleries, which bears a reasonable resemblance to Coats' somewhat enigmatic, almost 'resigned', facial expression in the rather 'grainy' photograph reproduced opposite.

It is possible that the date of 24th October might have been chosen to lead into the 'official' date of 25th preferred by the illustrated press to depict their images of the '*Scotia*' steaming proudly down the Clyde, surrounded by all manner of celebrating yachts; although, in actual fact, the following week was spent still in port completing the final stocking, loading and packing away of stores and supplies aboard the ship. So, in reality, the ship slid out rather more quietly – and far more to the taste of the ship's company – on the following Sunday, 2nd November 1902. They were accompanied by the skirl of their own piper on-board, and two of their sponsor James Coats' private yachts, the '*Gleniffer*' and the '*Triton*', which would accompany the '*Scotia*' for the first few days of the journey across to Ireland.

The ship first headed for Dublin, where the scientists were entertained by a visit to the renowned chemical and bacteriological laboratory of the brewers, Guinness – no doubt of interest to the scientists, at least – but equally importantly, they were introduced to the brewery itself, where they were presented with two barrels of stout for the journey – no doubt of rather greater interest to the crew! They then set sail proper for the South, heading initially for



Detail from a photograph of Will with the 'Chief', William Speirs Bruce, at the stern of '*Scotia*'. Taken by David Wilton and dated 27th November 1902, in calm waters between Madeira and the Cape Verde Islands [Note; the false illusion of 'land' to the rear of Will's right shoulder is, in fact, part of the ship's after boom support] Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cutbbertson.

Madeira to collect another 'donation in kind' – this time in the shape of a stock-up of essential coal donated by the Union Castle Line. James Coats' yachts escorted them out from Dublin Bay

company had any previous knowledge at all of skis or skiing – despite skiing having been a Scandinavian sport, already practised for nearly 100 years, and that (as we now know, but of course, the discovery was still in the crew’s future) rock paintings and sets of skis preserved in bogs have been found dating back to the period between 8000-6000 BC. Nonetheless, Cairn Gorm had also already become the home to Scottish skiers since the late 1890’s, but maybe with more of a northern Scottish interest that didn’t extend so much to Edinburgh and Dundee. Nevertheless, David Wilton was already an expert skier – learnt in the Russian north as well as on the Franz Josef Land expedition, along with Bruce also, who is recorded as having made the special effort to improve his skiing and self-preservation techniques at the Cairn Gorm centre in advance of the expedition.

Amusingly, Rudmose Brown mis-described skis as ‘Norwegian snow-shoes’, and with almost naïve delight, applauded the simplicity and effectiveness of skiing as a form of travel, and how quickly and easily all seemed to master the basics, and then even to ‘discover’ the delights of actually enjoyable exercise through ‘ski-running’ and down-hill racing! The only down-side appears to have been the number of early mishaps, seemingly caused by their apparent failure to have yet discovered the advantages of using two sticks rather than one.

One of the first major projects was, of course, the construction of the three structures required for their onshore Base: These would be built in a line across the highest part to the south-west



Detail from a photograph taken of Will Cuthbertson on skis, standing in front of the ice-trapped ‘*Scotia*’ in Scotia Bay, Laurie Island, during the Antarctic winter of 1903. A relative novice to skiing, this photo of Will was evidently taken early on in their ski-learning days, when they were still using just one hefty single pole to get along. The ‘*Scotia*’ appears quite comfortably encased in the ice, and indeed remained thus and entirely undamaged until naturally being released when the weather improved. *Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

side of the beach. First, there was the stone-built ‘house’; next, about 100 yards away was the central surveying cairn needed, which was rapidly completed in stone to a height of 12 feet in just two weeks, and finally, there was the wooden magnetic hut, clearly isolated and devoid of any iron or steel, where the magnetic scientist, Robert Mossman would do his work. It was painted a brilliant scarlet red, and named the Copeland Observatory after the eminent Edinburgh astronomer; but most importantly, it was understood by all that access should be generally avoided and given a wide berth at all times to avoid any interference with readings.

The ‘house’ was, of course, primarily designed to accommodate the landing party that was designated to remain ashore during the following spring, whilst the ‘*Scotia*’ made the necessary



Above: photograph of the newly completed Omond House with its original ‘sailcloth’ roof, and three unnamed crew on perhaps an early attempt at skiing with a single pole each.
Photograph courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson

Below: Omond House in its present extant state of ruin, still thus preserved at the Argentinian Orcadas Base



trip back to civilisation for a refit and some minor, but essential, repairs. By maintaining a scientific presence on land while the ship was away would permit a continuous and unbroken chain of the essential readings and observations. Bruce was also already formulating his plans to persuade the Argentinian government to take over in due course the important work he and his colleagues had started and with which they had already made such progress.

Although at this stage, the final party to remain behind had not yet been finalised, Will Cuthbertson was an obvious contender. Not only was his work necessarily ‘reactive’ to what others trawled up, discovered, or otherwise needed him to record, but he was one of the younger members of the team and ever-increasingly enthusiastic with it. His specialist skills would be little required on the refit journey, so he would be an eminently suitable candidate and, as it turned out, was

One further point of relevance here is that, throughout his life, Will much enjoyed working in pastel, and other references to this will crop up below. He also, incidentally, instructed Grace in this medium, and she became a proficient, albeit always insistently amateur, *pastelliste* in her own right, and did exhibit regularly at the Maldon Art Club annual exhibitions. Unfortunately though, it has been impossible to date to trace any surviving examples of her work

But to return to the end of the first decade of the 1900s, and apart from the small amount of recorded detail that has already been noted above, there is not a great deal more that is known about how Will's – or, indeed, Grace's – time was spent in Spain, apart from extant examples of his output of work from that time, which appears almost exclusively to have been influenced by his 'discovery' of Joaquín Sorolla and an environment dominated by the brilliance of an everyday light, the likes of which he had never previously experienced – other than, perhaps, in Antartica – albeit far from every day, and in a very different glaring way, due to the snow cover.

It is quite evident that Will became strongly influenced to experiment with the technique that Sorolla had perfected, but whilst he evidently also worked very hard at capturing the light and movement in a similar manner, he didn't perhaps always succeed entirely to his own highest standards, and just some of the works certainly appear a trifle tentative and laboured – which indeed they probably were. But the majority of other compositions from this period, though, were considerably more successful, and must have pleased him somewhat as he continued to pursue and develop the style for at least a further three years.

This period of his work, then, should clearly be considered to be just another element of his own self-imposed learning régime. Undoubtedly, once he had returned home, and without the brilliant light of the Valencian sunshine and the beaches busy with fishermen, boats and the simple leisure activities of bathers, he must have found it impossible to replicate the necessary environment to carry on developing his direction of the past four years. But equally, he also returned to a country that was on the brink of war and inevitably became embroiled in all that that entailed – after which his life, as with almost everybody else concerned, would never quite be the same again.

In the meantime, though, he had met Grace, and she equally would also change his life immeasurably. She was a good few years younger than Will when first they must have met, probably sometime around 1910, when she would have been just 18, while he was nearly 10 years her elder at 28 years old. But this seems hardly to have worried either of them, at a time when greater age differences between men and their aspired partners were still considered quite the norm. Thus, and perhaps somewhat inevitably, Grace quickly became his muse and – as far as one can tell – his sole female model at the time and indeed, predominantly thereafter as far as we can tell for as long as he continued with figurative work.

The purpose here is not to critique Sorolla's work, but merely to relate this to some ways in which it may have given thought to what was evidently a significantly influenced diversion from

anything else that Will had previously attempted. Apart from the brilliant light, heat and movement, the thorough loosening of brushwork must have been challenging. Just as an example, when looking back at Will's ca. 1904-1906 painting of *'Scotia' Discovering Coats Land*, his new 'Valencia' treatment of the sea still retains just a little of his earlier precision, but with a distinct relaxation of detail. The sea is an all-important element of the *'Scotia'* painting – albeit that the sea as depicted is really quite placid for the Antarctic – whereas in the Valencian paintings, the sea is usually merely incidental, although he still portrays it as actually quite rough for the Mediterranean shoreline.

The other major obstacle that Will would probably never have been able to overcome was that of scale. To date, the *'Scotia'* painting had, in Will's terms, been quite large in scale at 51.5 cm x 61 cm, while his Valencian *'On the Beach'* (illustrated below), is only 24 cm x 31 cm. In



'On the Beach', W. A. Cuthbertson, oil on canvas laid on board, 24.1 cm x 33 cm, bequeathed in 1983 to Ulster Museum, Belfast. Date unknown, but possibly ca. 1912. The model is Grace Prince (later Cuthbertson) and the painting epitomises many elements of what Will Cuthbertson was aiming to achieve while painting on the beaches of Valencia, from his study of the work of Joaquín Sorolla. The figure is typically heavily back-lit by brilliant sunlight and is surrounded by numerous everyday elements of regional fishing life. The treatment of the sea still bears reminiscences of his earlier experience of the Antarctic seas, but employing a much freer use of brushstrokes. *Image courtesy of the National Museums Northern Ireland. © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

contrast, for example, Sorolla's 1906 painting *'Maria en la Playa de Biarritz'* (also illustrated below for comparison) at 63 cm x 92 cm, is nearly eight times the size; but at the same time, even those dimensions were still actually quite small relative to his frequently gigantic standards.



'Maria en la Playa de Biarritz', 1906, by Joaquín Sorolla, 63 cm x 92 cm. In this instance the subject figure (Maria, his eldest daughter) is side and back-lit as reflected from across the sea, by perhaps an evening sun.

Sorolla by this time, was of course at the pinnacle of his lucrative career and had been painting in his finely-honed style for some decades. In contrast, it has to be remembered here that, at this point in Will's career, and apart from painting no more than a handful of predominantly commissioned portrait paintings, most of Will's work would have been made under tutorial guidance. And, furthermore, through his own approach to what he had found in Valencia, plus the fact that he was only in Spain at all (presumably) courtesy of his travel

scholarship, he himself evidently considered that he was still on a substantial learning curve, so that the cost of materials for painting canvases on any much greater scale would have been unthinkable.

Sorolla's compositions of figures on the beach were often painted as named portraits in greater facial and other clearly defined detail, with the artist frequently looking from a downward perspective above his subject, making the sea the background and eliminating any horizon and sky, and thus foreshortening and focusing the depth of field. Alternatively, the figure often becomes secondary to an overall seascape composition and is thus painted in a much less-detailed and impressionistic manner, while there is more often a fuller portrayal of land, sea and sky. The figures are frequently directly lit from front, side or back for ultimate and striking emphasis.

Will Cuthbertson, in his experimentation, tended to paint his beach scenes somewhere between the two, where the figure may, for instance, still be entirely recognisable as Grace, although painted with no great detail, but with a full seascape background – as in the Ulster Museum painting *'On the Beach'* illustrated above. In contrast to Sorolla's side-lit *'Maria en la Playa de Biarritz'*, Will's subject has been back-lit by choice. In Will's other subjects, he displays greater freedom of independent handling, whilst continuing to pursue the general theme of expression that he was discovering.

It is not hard to identify what Will was trying to achieve. He was evidently forcing himself to paint quickly and loosely, but in many cases his results were somewhat mixed: some certainly appear laboured and not entirely successful, but others show sometimes delightful results

although never seemingly even attempting to emulate Sorolla's most frequently 'polished' results. But Sorolla also changed his pattern to suit the occasion, utilising a more mixed approach to the extent of detail from time to time, emphasising apparently minor elements in some complexity, with figures somewhat less so – as may be seen further below.

In the meantime, though, we are fortunate to have available one other striking painting that Will made of Grace in a bright yellow dress, beside the Valencia Beach – in this case a



A delightful informal portrait painting of Grace in a bright yellow dress, seated on the rocks by the beach in Valencia. Probably painted in 1912. 25 cm x 33 cm. The work has not been inspected, but the stated medium is (unusually for this period) that of watercolour – in which case it would appear perhaps to be gouache, in fact. This suggestion may be borne out by the closely visible, but very flat, brushwork and soft, slightly 'chalky' finish – at a time when Will was generally employing a lot of impasto in his oil work. *Private collection, and photograph © Lol Keegan; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

delightfully informal and relaxed portrait composition in which Grace is sitting on the rocks by the seashore. The sea is cleverly devised not only as a backdrop, but extending high into the background to frame her figure entirely, leaving the horizon at the very top of the painting.

While this painting is plainly a portrait of Grace, it is also clearly a naturalist setting pursuing the style of Joaquín Sorolla's similar plein-air portraits. It is tempting to relate the vivid

colour of the dress with Sorolla's (albeit interior) portrait of his daughter Elena, painted in a similarly vivid yellow gown in 1909 (illustrated in the following chapter for comparative portraiture purposes). But what is of particularly significant interest here is that Will also painted a later, virtually identical copy of this painting, some 50 years after the original, which he exhibited at the annual exhibition of Maldon Art Club in June 1960. Will was both principal teacher as well as President of the club over many years and exhibited several new paintings each year, so it is of further fortune that we also have a promotional photograph taken at the opening of the exhibition, in which Will is depicted as discussing the painting with a group of club members – the full image of which will be inserted in the relevant chapter below covering his later years.

The detail of this later painting as also illustrated here is extracted from the original photograph, but since the painting in that photograph was taken from a sharply angled



A detail extracted from a photograph taken at the Maldon Art Club Annual Exhibition in June 1960, of a new copy of a painting that Will Cuthbertson had made of his wife, Grace, the original of which he had made around 50 years earlier in Valencia. In the original photograph, Will is shown commenting on this work to club members (Size estimated at ca. 60 cm x 75 cm. Medium not recorded, but probably in oils) *Photograph* © collection of the author; *Original painting* © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

perspective, it has only been through the facilities of today's technology that it has been possible to transform the image sufficiently to portray it here, in order to identify the various points of both similarity and difference.

The close similarities are fairly obvious, but there are also a number of significant differences too. Primarily, the later copy is estimated roughly to be nearly four times the size (by area) of the original painting, and has also been signed to the bottom right, whilst the original was signed lower left. The

proportional relationships of figure to background are also slightly different, with more space to the left of the figure in the original, and a greater depth of sandy shore too, giving rather greater prominence to the figure. But finally, the facial features in the later work are painted with a rather more delicate and evidently experienced hand, whilst Will has also 'improved' the angle



Painting of Valencian fishermen cleaning their creels or fish traps, oil on board, 17 cm x 24 cm. Apparently unsigned, so possibly not completely finished. *Private collection and photograph © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson*



Photograph of the painting that Will Cuthbertson presented to his father on the occasion of his second marriage to Lizzie Dean in September 1919. It is signed and dated 1912, and although untitled, depicts fishermen bringing in their catch on the Valencia beach in Spain. Size and present location unknown (Lizzie reportedly gave away the painting after William snr's death in 1935). *Photograph and © courtesy of the Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

creels or fish traps at the end of the day. The work is unsigned, and may possibly also not be completely finished to the artist's satisfaction either; but regardless, the handling reverts to a looser style of brushwork with concentration mainly on the light once again – so this may in fact be a slightly earlier work in what was, overall, Will's relatively brief period of around three years spent evolving such a work-style. Purely out of interest and by way of a comparison, Sorolla, by his own admission, had

The Years Surrounding the First World War

right next door to 'Elmhurst' in St. Peter's Road, Croydon. Will was just approaching his 34th birthday, while of course, Grace, at just 24, was almost 10 years his junior. Grace's uncle, the Rev'd. Percy Prince, officiated at the service, whilst Will's father, William snr., had travelled from his new residence at 'The Cedars' in Rickmansworth to attend as one of the principal witnesses, along with Grace's father, Cecil Waller Prince.

Unfortunately though, any real honeymoon was going to have to wait, as Will was back on service duty just two days later, on 1st July, when he had been assigned for a course of 'intensive instruction in Motor Boats'. He had been instructed to report to '*HMS Hermione*', an old Astræa-class protected cruiser, assigned at the outbreak of WW1 to be 'guard ship' for Southampton, and the HQ (i.e., 'Mother Ship' to '*HMS Resourceful*') for all Motor Launches and Coastal Motor Boats.

This course lasted until early August when, at last, he was assigned for live experience to the crew of his first ML (No. 191), followed shortly after, on 24th August, to ML 332, all for full acclimatisation to the specific type of boat that he would eventually command.

Then finally, one month later in September 1917, he was assigned to ML 349, the boat of which he was awarded his first full command, and on which he would serve for the rest of the war.

Will's war record shows no exceptional 'excitement' or incidents recorded from this period, which is far from unusual, but after three months service, on 13th January 1917, he was re-appointed in command of ML 349 following his promotion to the new rank of Temporary



A formal studio portrait photograph of Lieutenant William Cuthbertson, RNVR, at the time of his promotion and re-appointment in command of ML 349 in January 1917. *Photograph courtesy of The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

Lieutenant (at a salary, it was noted, of 12 shillings¹ per month). Then, according to the brief recorded details on his service record, this remained his status-quo for the rest of the war.

There are no specific documented accounts as to what duties or where Will and ML 349 operated, but Will did remark guardedly on rare occasions that he had largely been ‘around the North Sea’. Finally, in April 1918, he appears to have been sent to the HQ ‘*HMS Hermione*’ once more for a few weeks until 21st May, when he was noted as having returned to the command ML 349 as once more ‘fit for duty’, so presumably he had suffered an unspecified health issue – and, maybe, a precursor to that which affected him during his last extended months of service.

On 11th November 1918, Germany surrendered and the Armistice was signed at 11.00 a.m., but Will’s war service was not yet over, as he had evidently volunteered his personal services



Although there are no traceable ‘action’ photographs of the Motor Launch ML 349 that was under Will Cuthbertson’s command throughout WW1, the ca. 1917 image illustrated here is her identical sister-ship, ML 350, heading out on patrol from a port on the South Coast (believed possibly to be Newlyn).

along with his ML 349 to be assigned to support the international Mine Clearing Service initiative in the North Sea. For this, on 27th January 1919, he was sent off for mine-clearance instruction to ‘*HMS Actæon*’, the shore-based torpedo and mine training establishment. This was to be a very short course of instruction, as he was already very much back on duty by 7th February, when he and his boat immediately became involved in the rescue of the paddle

minesweeper ‘*HMS Erin’s Isle*’ when she herself was struck by a drifting mine whilst at anchor off the Nore bank in the Thames Estuary. Although she sank within minutes with the loss of 23 ratings’ lives, they did manage to save and rescue a further 28 crew members.

The International Mine Clearance Committee was set up in early 1919, with 26 countries represented, although by far the major participant was Britain. It was dedicated to clearing leftover mines from 40,000 square miles of sea – much of it comprising the North Sea, which

¹ Approximately equivalent to £70 in 2020 [source: Office for National Statistics].

The Inter-War Years

Following on from these, we have three more etchings, all depicting fully-rigged ships once again, typically in full sail, but in each case this time, untitled, and with two unsigned as well. The first of these etchings is a very small-sized print that was again a gift to Major and Mrs Fanshawe; and whilst it is signed, this time it was also framed, albeit without any inscription.

However, from comparison with the previously believed later state prints, this small work appears equally to fall into that same category, with greater emphasis on depth of line, including much more cloud detail, and again some plate tone. It is thought perhaps to be a smaller bows-on version of the not dissimilar subject subsequently-illustrated immediately below it, which appears to depict a stern view of a typical nineteenth-century 'East Indiaman' or 'tea-clipper' of the type chartered by the British East India Company.¹ This somewhat larger work clearly displays



Quite a small etching thought perhaps to depict a typical *East-Indiaman* or 'tea-clipper' of the British East India Company under full sail. 55 mm x 115 mm. Probably ca. 1925-1935. Possibly a later state, following the previous criteria above. Photograph © collection of the author; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.



A rather larger etching of another three-masted fully-rigged clipper of the 19th century, this time viewed from a rear quarter view and shown with a gaff 'spanker' set from the aft mast. 170 mm x 280 mm. Probably ca. 1925-1935. Photograph © collection of the author; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

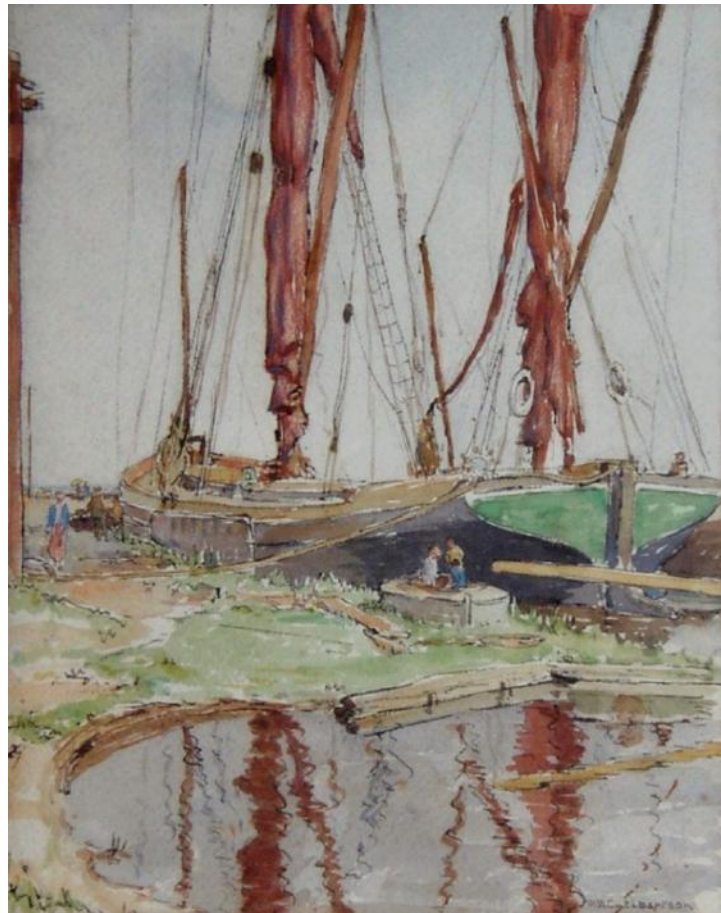
¹ 'East Indiaman' was a general name applied to the armed sailing ships of the 18th and 19th centuries that carried both goods and passengers under charter or licence for any of the East India Companies of the major European trading powers. Perhaps the best known, and sole survivor today, is the '*Cutty Sark*'. Many ships were little larger than the not greatly dissimilar (apart from her rigging layout) 140-foot whaler barque, the '*Scotia*', in which Will Cuthbertson gained his own Antarctic sailing experience – the largest East Indiamen being round 175 feet long.

The Inter-War Years

'The Drinking Pond' is the title of yet another watercolour of Heybridge Basin depicting two Thames barges berthed side by side (albeit only the mast of one is visible) on the north bank of the basin. The 'Drinking Pond' is the pool in the foreground dug for the benefit of the canal barge towing horses. The corner of the old Granary, adjacent to Lock Hill, is also just visible forming an edge to the left side of the painting. Probably painted around 1930-1935. 35 cm x 24 cm

The watercolour below is rare in being both signed and dated '1923', making it very early after the Cuthbertsons' first arrival in the Basin. Of interest also is that it is painted very close to where the *'M.Y. Gracia'* was berthed on the south bank of the canal.

Both paintings: *Previously private collections.* © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.



paraphernalia. We can be fairly certain, with such a prolific painter as was Will, that in addition to the recognised and recorded titles listed above, there will be numerous other works from the docks and around yet to be unearthed – as there will also be, no doubt, from the year or so



Two watercolour paintings depicting the sombre busyness of the Royal Dockyard at Chatham from along the Medway; one from a distance, the other a closer-up internal scene, with the smoking funnels of warships under maintenance or repair berthed within the various docks and dry docks.

Both signed and 27 cm x 38 cm. Left: Probably ca. 1944; and below, dated 'August, 1944'.

Both: *Private collection and © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*



Through the Second World War

immediately after the cessation of hostilities when Will remained painting in the area, having decided to stay put for a short while. These paintings include the two further views below, painted around Strood, on the north of the Medway, the first of which depicts two Thames sailing barges moored to the quay at low tide on the mud on the northern bank at Strood. The overall tone and colouring of the painting is redolent of Will's early paintings of Thames barges on the canal at Heybridge Basin, albeit the hand has become rather more delicate and less 'impressionistic' and the detailing finer – a trend that would continue to evolve from hereon.



Above: detail from a photograph taken in 2013 on the Saltings at Hoo in Kent, showing the sad remains of the Thames sailing barge, 'Felix'.

© Mick Nolan, and with thanks to the Thames Sailing Barge Trust, Maldon.



Watercolour painting entitled 'Sailing Barges at Strood' depicts the Ipswich-registered Thames sailing barge 'Felix', moored at low tide to the quayside at Strood on the Medway, Kent. Probably painted in 1946; 29 cm x 37.5 cm. Private collection and © photograph; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.

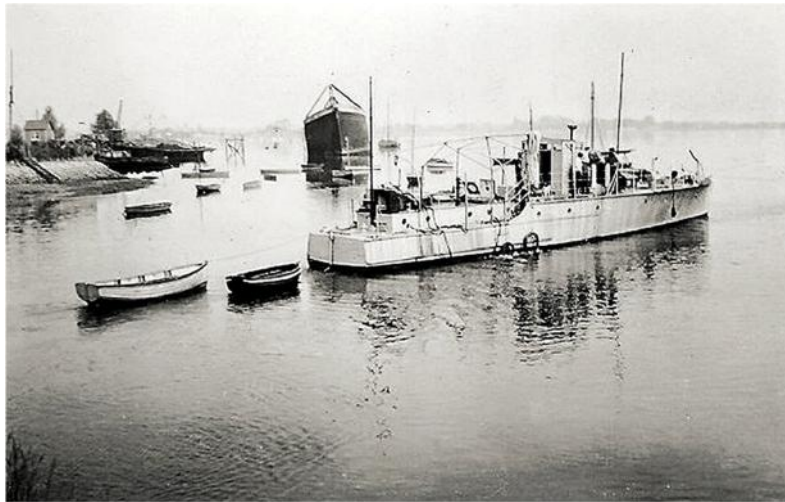
The nearest barge is clearly identifiable as the sailing barge 'Felix' of Ipswich, which was built in 1893, so was in fact 11 years younger than Will! At the date of the painting, around 1946, she was under the ownership of Cranfield Bros.,¹ a major firm of flour millers and bakers based at the docks in Ipswich, Suffolk. Cranfield Bros. eventually closed down in 1999.

¹ The *S.B. Felix* was sold by Cranfield Bros, in 1954 to Laphorn & Co. of Hoo, who first motorised her, then later sold her out of trade in 1972. After going through a number of private ownerships, but moving no farther away, and despite some refitting at Hoo, she was moved in 2008 to her final resting place on Hoo Saltings, where she remains today, albeit sadly now little more than a sorry decaying hulk.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Later Years

When Will and Grace did finally return to Heybridge Basin after the war, the ‘*Gracia*’, their permanent home for the past quarter-of-a-century since around 1921, was still safely embedded in her ‘mud-berth’ just outside the sea-lock that connected the Basin to the tidal estuary of the River Blackwater. But instead of moving the boat back to her old berth on the Canal, they decided (for no known particular reason) to make a



Photograph taken from the sea wall near the sea lock-gate at Heybridge Basin, of the M.Y. ‘*Gracia*’, gracefully on a very placid rising tide, preparing to leave her temporary wartime ‘mud-berth’ outside the sea wall on the River Blackwater, to be towed by a small local tug for the approximate one mile up-river to her new and final berth at Shipways in Maldon. She has her tender and Will’s sailing dinghy in tow, with Will and Grace just visible on the fore-deck. By this time the couple had become long-standing and popular members of this small community, and there is quite a crowd of onlookers watching proceedings on the sea wall to the left. *Photograph courtesy of The Estate of William A. Cutbbertson.*

change and seek out a new berth at the ancient Saxon port of Maldon, just a short distance away at the head of the River Blackwater estuary.

For this job, an old friend, as well as locally renowned fisherman and overall ‘Basin character, named ‘Tubby’ Wright, was employed to tow the ‘*Gracia*’ around the short river headland to the new berth that they had secured for her at the Hythe quay area of Maldon – as was recently recalled by ‘Tubby’s’ own (by then) octogenarian

that the realist in Will could never escape from including the many minor and precise details of interest. The painting was a gift from Will and Grace Cuthbertson to the then Librarian, Sidney G. Deed, M.A., (previously long-time Headmaster of the Maldon Grammar School) and his wife, on the occasion of their Golden Wedding anniversary in 1951; and thus, the watercolour was quite probably painted at around that date. The work was subsequently kindly donated to the library by the Deeds' descendant family.

The next painting to be illustrated (right)



Watercolour of small sailing yachts and dinghies, evidently moored on a rising tide in the Blackwater. Painted from the Maldon side of the reach, looking towards the trees around Heybridge Basin in the left middle distance. (Unsigned); 38 cm x 28 cm. Personal gift from Grace Cuthbertson. *Private collection; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*



Watercolour showing several figures, including one fishing, along the tow-path of the canal leading out from Heybridge Basin. Probably painted ca. mid-1950s. 15¼" x 11½". *Previously private collection; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

returns to Heybridge Basin with a view painted across the canal from the south bank towards the tow-path, at a location a short distance along from the basin itself, and showing around six figures – one of whom is fishing. The colouring and style probably place the painting chronologically close to the previous Dutch works illustrated, and sometime around 1950.

Then to follow this, we next have just a few examples of paintings that were all made during Will Cuthbertson's productive latter years, when he relaxed into his most peaceful and most generally

moored to the near southern side of the bank and one of the not infrequent decaying wrecks capsized onto its side in the mud along the far northern bank. Probably painted with a little elevation above the seawall to enable the depth of detail at all distances, Northey Island is prominent to the right, while Heybridge Basin can still be seen to the far left in the distance, clearly displaying the masts of a Thames barge moored-up in the basin, while the river curves away round to the right again past Mill Beach.

These few emblematic watercolours are, as has already been intimated more than once, just a brief glimpse of the considerable volume of such paintings that Will Cuthbertson produced in his final two decades. It is hoped that this may re-awaken in some a new recognition of the delightful powers of observation that the paintings contain – perhaps ‘re-awaken’ due largely to the ease and comfort with which one can grow almost oblivious and blasé to living with the



Oil on canvas portrait of a young boy of around eight years, signed top right as was Will's custom with portraits, and fully ascribed with the sitter's full name and dated 'August 1954' verso. 59 cm x 48.5 cm. Unfortunately, the current location of this earlier recorded work cannot now be traced. *Previously private collection; © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson.*

tranquillity of Will's paintings on one's walls. In others, maybe it will simply serve to help recognise their art with more appreciation of the fascinating life that had been led by the man behind the work.

But before finalising matters generally, there are just a few other areas of Will's work, and in a variety of other media, which he continued throughout his life – albeit inevitably somewhat as an adjunct to his main devotion to watercolour painting. The first of these has to be his early predilection for portraiture, for which he continued to take just a small number of occasional commissions. Since these tend to remain in private family hands, they are relatively rare and difficult to trace. Most that have arisen

for sale in past decades have been from his much earlier years, but one more ‘modern’ portrait came to light in 2015 (see above). This was signed top right (as was Will’s custom for portraits) and fully ascribed verso with the sitter’s name and dated ‘August 1954’. It is a particularly sensitively painted portrait of a young boy of around eight years or so, showing the somewhat enigmatic expression of his new-found situation as a portrait sitter! In this respect, and despite its much more modern style, its sensitivity alone makes it well worth comparing with Will’s earlier portraiture illustrated many chapters above.

Then it was in 1959, just five years after the above portrait was made, that Will was commissioned by his sister, Dorothy Stewart, to paint another version – or rather, an exact copy – of the watercolour portrait of her late husband (who had died in 1937) that Will had first painted in around 1919. Will wrote back tellingly and in great detail in a letter to Dorothy, dated 29th October 1959, about the difficulties he had experienced in producing the second portrait, and it is worth quoting verbatim a significant portion of this letter, as it also clearly describes Will’s *modus operandi* and goes some way towards illustrating his character ‘from the horse’s mouth’:

‘... Herewith the photograph of Donald. As I told you on the phone I’ve had great difficulty in making the portrait. Donald was a very fine looking man, big & strong, & at the same time, kind & good. I got all that, I think, in the first version, but somehow it would not come in the copy. I would work on it for hours. I have put it away in despair. I return to it again after a few days, & try once more, & so on for months, but the nobility always eluded me. It was quite a good likeness, but it lacked the things I wanted to convey. However, I’m sure it’s right now, I’m so glad you like it.



Copy made in 1959 of an earlier ca. 1919 painted watercolour [see the illustration of the original painting on p.194 above] of Will’s brother-in-law, Donald Day Stewart, commissioned by Will’s sister, Dorothy, from a photograph. 28 cm x 16.5 cm. *Private collection and © The Estate of William A. Cuthbertson*