

William Logsdail, Blue Plaque Unveiling, 13 July 2013

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Born in Lincoln in 1859, William Logsdail was a gifted painter whose career illustrates the fact that it takes more than raw talent to become well known. Necessary also are the skills of self-marketing and the cultivation of advancement via professional connections, qualities Logsdail did not possess to any great degree. The commemoration through the Blue Plaque here in Noke today is, therefore, an important recognition of Logsdail's contributions to British art, the sort of recognition lacking in his own time — and it represents a small victory for Logsdail, who despite his reserved disposition, is achieving a visible place in history at last.

Logsdail's painting both warrants and rewards close, attentive looking. His style, a skillful amalgamation of the English and Continental trends of the day, is assured to the point of invisibility, appearing to be no style at all and creating an immediacy that brings the viewer into his pictures. Yet he worked hard at his craft, and from a young age received prizes for his work in Lincoln and in Antwerp, where he went to study at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts between 1878–1880. Indeed, it initially appeared that Logsdail was destined for rapid success at the highest levels of the art world, since from the mid 1870s his work was accepted at the Royal Academy exhibitions in London and one of his paintings was bought by Queen Victoria in 1880.

Logsdail's first important work was produced in Venice, entitled *Piazza of St. Mark's*; when shown in London at the RA in 1884, it created a sensation, and from this point art critics began to predict his imminent election as an Associate of the Royal Academy. Intent on accurate portrayals of the architecture and atmosphere of his scenes, he worked *en plein air*, or “out of doors,” clearly relishing his experience doing so, as he recounts: “In Venice I had set up my easel anywhere and everywhere. So accustomed are its people to painters, so friendly, understanding and sympathetic, and I had so hardened myself to the discomforts of working in a crowd, that often I painted on a big canvas in St. Mark's Square, without interference, when the café tables outside were packed and the people promenaded up and down listening to the band.”

Returning to Britain in 1887, Logsdail hit on the idea of painting London in the same way and acquired a studio in Primrose Hill. This program of London scenes constitutes a remarkable and distinctive vision of the city in the 1880s, although Logsdail himself did not receive the acclaim he deserved at the time. He noted, “I always thought that London, of all

places in the world, ought to be painted, but it appeared too formidable, too unassailable and with no room for a mere painter to take his stand in the midst of its swarming and hurrying millions, intent on their own job. I do not wonder that so few have even dared to touch it. However I did take courage to try and leave a few records of it, only, after very few years, to acknowledge myself beaten.”

Logsdail struggled to record London as he saw it, hiring cabs and vans to park in heavily trafficked areas of the city. For perhaps his most well-known picture called *St Martin in the Fields* of 1888, now in Tate Britain, he sat in Trafalgar Square, through a harsh winter with his feet tucked in straw on the floor of his vehicle. For another painting, *St Paul's and Ludgate Hill*, Logsdail recalled memorably:

We drove thru the empty streets to the City in the pure clear air of dawn and I was generally at work at my post ... by 4 o'clock. To quote Wordsworth, "Good Lord! The very houses seemed asleep and all that mighty heart was lying still." All the broad open space in front of the façade was silent and empty except perhaps for some homeless wretch who would lurch up, breathe heavily over my shoulder for a moment and pass dumbly on; or a couple of stalwart policemen on duty who came up to give me a cheery "Good Morning." They were talking at my back one morning when a rat slipt across the road. At sight of it they drew their truncheons and gave chase after it, like a couple of boys, down Ludgate Hill. With such exceptions, I was quite alone until just before six, when a few workmen passed. Then came a lull again until about eight o'clock, when an increasing stream on the pavement and the arrival of the first buses gave warning that I must pack up and go, or be swept away by the oncoming tide of traffic of a new day. I returned to my studios to find my friends about to start work, and I hope they were not put off or reproached by my air of superior virtue.

As a self-consciously modern painter, Logsdail struggled with the same issues as the Impressionists in France, trying to find meaningful subjects in the everyday urban world and to make them aesthetically powerful. He also often took up social issues of the day, as in *St. Martin-in-the-Fields*, which depicts a poor flower girl. The backdrop of ecclesiastical architecture in this picture constituted a subtle way to meditate on the role of religion in a new world, as well as on the contrast between London's past and its present. Logsdail's strongest paintings, including all of his London series, raise questions about contemporary society while producing aesthetically innovative visions of modern urban life.

Indeed, with such a concerted campaign of well-wrought London scenes exhibited in London institutions, one would have assumed that Logsdail's success was assured. Yet the honor of becoming an Associate of the Royal Academy, the ultimate imprimatur of success in

his era, eluded him. In his memoirs Logsdail addressed this failure openly, noting that it takes more than mere rote skill and innate inspiration to climb the rungs of an elite hierarchy: he remarked ruefully, “[Academy Membership] was not to be, partly no doubt through my own fault. I only knew two Academicians intimately and I am afraid I do not make friends easily and was always too retiring to make myself personally known to others of them... I never called on Royal Academicians from a natural reserve and a fear of being inopportune ... [and] I never mentioned my wish to my dearest friends [including the artists Frank Bramley and John William Waterhouse]. Logsdail’s modesty and inability to play politics and woo the powerful Academicians by petitioning them led to his remaining to some extent on the sidelines.

The *Ninth of November* of 1890 – now in the Guildhall – was Logsdail’s last London scene, as he noted: “I could not go on. I was no better financially than when I began [the London paintings] and for some time I had been having attacks of giddiness and was in such a nervous state that I dare not cross a street without assistance.” Luckily the artist recuperated fully after a stint on the French Riviera, even producing a one man exhibition of some 70 images of the region at the Fine Art Society, New Bond Street in 1891.

Returning to London, Logsdail married Mary (known as May) Ashman in 1892. By all accounts they had a happy marriage, and his shy disposition blossomed in home life. In photographs and portraits, Logsdail appears handsome, with middling brown hair, large eyes, a high forehead and widow’s peak, never without his pipe or other smoking material – a man of kind humor and calm demeanor. For a time, he and Mary lived in Italy, where he painted landscapes. In 1894 their first child Mary was born, joined by brother Edward William in 1896 and Stuart in 1907. From 1902 the family returned to London, and in 1907 Logsdail’s career took a new turn, as he began to receive numerous portrait commissions from the nobility and other wealthy families after exhibiting a portrait of his daughter May entitled *An Early Victorian* at the RA in 1906. In 1922 the Logsdails moved here to Noke, a village near Oxford, where he continued to paint portraits, scenes in Oxford, and pictures of flowers and gardens. After a very contented and fulfilling twenty-odd years, Logsdail died in 1944 in this house. He would have been delighted to know that, despite his lack of self-promotion, in the end his talent ensured that he was not forgotten some seventy years after his death.