

## RICHARD WILSON REVISITED

*Oliver Fairclough*

The lecture on which this article is based was a tercentenary reflection on the eighteenth-century landscape painter Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782). It was occasioned by research for the exhibition ‘Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting’ and its accompanying catalogue.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was shown at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut and Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales in 2014. That both museums felt a need to mark this anniversary may not seem surprising. Wilson was a key figure in the development of landscape painting in Britain into an art form that expressed a range of emotion and meaning far beyond the topographical record of place. He was also, of course, the first artist from Wales with a pan-European reputation, and both Cardiff and New Haven hold large collections of his work.

Although Wilson made his career in Italy and in London, he was born in Penegoes near Machynlleth in 1713 or 1714, and he was to die at Colomendy near Mold in 1782. To the Museum’s first Keeper of Art, Isaac Williams (1875–1939), who took up his post in 1912, the art history of Wales began with Richard Wilson, and the first major work of art purchased by the National Museum was an autograph version of Wilson’s *Caernarvon Castle*, acquired for £380 in 1913.<sup>2</sup> Although Williams wrote little about Wilson, he collected his works as assiduously as the Museum’s meagre funds and the generosity of its supporters would allow. By his death in 1939 he had assembled a comprehensive collection of prints after Wilson and had acquired by gift or purchase no less than twenty-five oil paintings.

Many of the latter are indifferent works by imitators, but they include two major works, *Pembroke Town and Castle*, acquired from the Vaughan family in 1930 for £1,800, and *Llyn Peris and Dolbadarn Castle*, bought in 1937 for £525. The Museum’s files for this period are full of enquiries about works by Wilson, and it did much to champion his work. From 1945, the Keeper of the Department of Art was John Steegman (1899–1966) who had worked at the National Portrait Gallery in London for nearly twenty years. Steegman was an eighteenth-century specialist and a friend and correspondent of the Wilson scholars W. G. Constable, Douglas Cooper, and Brinsley Ford. Until 1952, when he left to become Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal, Steegman took a scholarly interest in Wilson and was to transform the range and quality of the Museum’s holdings.

Steegman was fortunate to be doing so at the bottom of the post-war depression in the art market. Many of the Williams-Wynn paintings from Wynnstay were sold in 1947, when Steegman acquired the portrait of Wilson by Anton Raphael Mengs

- 1 *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, ed. by Martin Postle and Robin Simon (London and New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales and Yale University Press, 2014).
- 2 Oliver Fairclough, ‘An Artist in his Own Country: Richard Wilson and Wales’, in Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, pp. 161–71.

(Fig. 1), discussed below, for just £105. *Rome from the Ponte Molle* (Fig. 2) of 1754 was bought for £750 in 1950, and two more works from Wilson's years in Rome (1751 to 1757), *Landscape with Banditti around a Tent* and *Landscape with Banditti: The Murder*,<sup>3</sup> followed in 1953 soon after his departure. Thereafter interest in Wilson dwindled in Cardiff, just as Paul Mellon (1907–1999) was beginning to assemble the outstanding collection of eighteenth-century British art that he later gave to the Yale Center for British Art. Richard Wilson was one of Mellon's favourite artists and the Yale Center has eighteen paintings by Wilson, among them the two great oils *Dinas Brân from Llangollen* and *View near Wynnstay* painted in 1770 for the Cymmrodorion's second Penllywydd or chief president Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn (1749–1789), and bought by Mellon in 1971, as well as twenty-three of his drawings.

Before the Yale and Cardiff exhibitions of 2014, the last major exhibition of Wilson's work had been Professor David Solkin's ground-breaking 'Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction' held in 1982–3 in London, Cardiff, and New Haven.<sup>4</sup> This is remembered today as a key episode in the development of the so-called 'new art history' which emphasized the intellectual and social context of a work of art as well as its formal qualities of colour or line and connoisseurial issues of authorship. This exhibition, and especially its catalogue, presented Wilson as the artist of the mid eighteenth-century British patrician elite. When another show was mooted for 2014, reaction among museum colleagues in Cardiff and in some of the Welsh media was one of puzzlement. Wilson was now almost forgotten in Wales, ranked ninety-second in Culturenet Cymru's list of one hundred Welsh heroes in 2004 (he got just fifty-six of the 80,000 votes cast).<sup>5</sup> He seemed an enigmatic, contradictory figure, now overshadowed by his pupil and fellow artist Thomas Jones (1742–1803).

The tercentenary was nevertheless the moment to look again at Wilson, and to bring together strands of research developed over the previous few years. These included a technical investigation of how Wilson painted carried out by Kate Lowry, formerly Chief Conservator, Art, at Amgueddfa Cymru;<sup>6</sup> the contextualization of Wilson within the art history of Wales by Peter Lord;<sup>7</sup> much work by Martin Postle, Deputy Director at the Paul Mellon Centre in London, and Professor Robin Simon, editor of *The British Art Journal*, which relocated Wilson

3 Bought in Rome in 1752, by Ralph Howard, later 1st Viscount Wicklow, for about £8 each. Wilson supported himself by selling paintings and drawings to British visitors to the city.

4 David H Solkin, *Richard Wilson and the Landscape of Reaction*, exh. Cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1982).

5 <<http://www.100welshheroes.com/en/homepage>> [accessed 21 November 2016]. The 100 Welsh Heroes on this site are the result of an online poll between 8 September 2003 and 23 February 2004. Culturenet Cymru received over 80,000 votes in their quest to find the greatest Welsh men and women of all time.

6 Kate Lowry, *Wilson at Work: Techniques of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Painter*, exh. Cat. (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 2001) and 'Richard Wilson: Methods and Materials', in Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, pp. 187–201.

7 Peter Lord, *Richard Wilson: Life and Legacy*, exh. Cat. (Conwy: Royal Cambrian Academy, 2009).



Fig. 1: Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–1779), *Richard Wilson*, 1752, oil on canvas, 84.6 x 75.2 cm.

Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales, Cardiff. Presented by the National Art Collections Fund, 1947. © National Museum of Wales. Reproduced with permission.

within British and northern European art of the mid-eighteenth century;<sup>8</sup> and a new scholarly *catalogue raisonné* of Wilson’s paintings and drawings compiled by Paul

8 Robin Simon, ‘Richard Wilson, Rome and the Transformation of European Art’, and Martin Postle, ‘Inspiration and Imitation: Wilson, London and “The School of Rome”’, in Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, pp. 1–33 and pp. 119–47.



Fig. 2: Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782), *Rome from the Ponte Molle*, 1754, oil on canvas, 98.3 x 134.5 cm.

Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales, Cardiff. Purchased, 1950.

© National Museum of Wales. Reproduced with permission.

Spencer-Longhurst, also of the Paul Mellon Centre, and subsequently published electronically as *Richard Wilson Online*.<sup>9</sup>

The tercentenary exhibition, ‘Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting’, was held at the Yale Center for British Art from 6 March to 1 June 2014 and at Amgueddfa Cymru from 5 July to 26 October 2014 in celebration of the 300th anniversary of Wilson’s birth. It explored the artist’s work in broad European contexts, focusing on his transformative experience in Rome where he spent almost seven years during the 1750s. The exhibition addressed fundamental questions about changes of taste in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, which saw the ‘rise of landscape’ as an independent genre that challenged accepted academic hierarchies of painting. It also investigated how Wilson, the ‘father of British landscape painting’, marketed his landscape art upon his return to England and how his work was understood after his death, influencing a generation of artists including John Constable (1776–1837) and J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851). The exhibition was extensively reviewed, and therefore met its key

goal of encouraging a critical reassessment of Wilson's life and legacy.<sup>10</sup>

As Keeper of Art at Amgueddfa Cymru and one of the exhibition's co-curators, I was particularly interested in how Wilson has been regarded in Wales over the last three centuries. His family connections in north Wales underpinned his early career as a portrait painter in London during the 1740s.<sup>11</sup> Several of his Welsh landscapes of the 1760s and 1770s were commissioned by Welsh patrons, and Thomas Pennant references two of them in the second part of *Tours in Wales* (1781). Nationally, his once considerable reputation had already begun to fade in the ten years prior to his death in 1782, but by 1816 he was already a hero to the artist Edward Pugh who laments in his *Cambria Depicta* the lack of a 'national memorial' in Wales to 'a great and principled artist' who would not 'adopt a mode that was foreign to nature and offensive to true taste'.<sup>12</sup>

As Peter Lord has shown, there was among the writers of the nineteenth-century Welsh cultural revival both pride in Wilson's growing reputation as the father of modern landscape painting and resentment that his contribution to the development of the English School had perhaps been undervalued.<sup>13</sup> Some were also to claim Wilson's genius was peculiarly Welsh and spiritual in that the ordered composition of his landscapes revealed the true beauty of nature and the rationality of God's purpose. In the late nineteenth century, the National Eisteddfod returned regularly to the theme of Wales's perceived backwardness in the visual arts. Wilson was the great exception – shown frequently in *eisteddfodau* art exhibitions, he remained the archetypal Welsh artist and the validator of more recent art into the twentieth century. When the National Eisteddfod came to Mold in 1923, the artists of Wales, led by the sculptor Sir William Goscombe John (1860–1952), walked in procession to lay their wreaths on Wilson's grave.

Wilson's cultural significance in nineteenth-century Wales is also attested by the proliferation of his image. This was derived from the portrait of him painted by Mengs in Rome in 1752 (see Fig. 1 above) and first engraved in 1789, soon after it came into the possession of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn (1749–1789).<sup>14</sup> In the 1840s, when it hung in the library at Wynnstay, it was already described as 'The original Portrait of Wilson the Artist'.<sup>15</sup> It had by then been copied by John Taylor and by Edward Penny, and engraved again as the frontispiece of Thomas Wright's *Some Account of the Life of Richard Wilson, Esq. RA*, published in 1824.

10 For example, by Duncan Robinson in *The Burlington Magazine*, 156 (2014) and Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian*, 3 July 2014.

11 See Rosa Baker, 'The Family of Richard Wilson RA and its Welsh Connections', *Flintshire Historical Society Journal*, 35 (1999), 85–105; also Fairclough, 'An Artist in his own Country', and Robin Simon, 'Wilson's Family and his Early Training', in Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, pp. 331–3.

12 Edward Pugh, *Cambria Depicta: A Tour through North Wales* (London: E. Williams, 1816), pp. 344–5.

13 Lord, *Richard Wilson: Life and Legacy*, pp. 30–33.

14 Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, cat. no. 1, p. 206. Most of the landscape works by Richard Wilson cited in this article were included in the exhibition.

15 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Wynnstay MS, Box W, 37, 'A List of Paintings in Wynnstay Mansion', undated but after 1840.



The Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn of the day allowed the Welsh artist William Roos to paint a copy of it in oils in 1846.<sup>16</sup> The original was shown again at the British Institution in 1848, at the ‘Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition’ of 1857, and at the ‘Wrexham Art Treasures Exhibition’ of 1876. As Wilson became a household name in Wales, it was increasingly reproduced, for example as the frontispiece of *Hanes Bywyd Richard Wilson yr Arlunydd Cymreig Enwog* (c. 1870), one of a series of great Welsh lives published by Hugh Humphreys of Caernarfon. Wilson is the central figure in T. Mardy Rees’s *Welsh Painters, Engravers, Sculptors (1527–1911)*, published in 1912 and written to celebrate ‘the marvellous achievements of Welsh artists’. Here Wilson is equated with Inigo Jones as ‘the father of modern architecture’ and the nineteenth-century designer Owen Jones as ‘the creator of modern ornamental decoration’.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Wilson presented later nineteenth-century Welsh writers with a conceptual difficulty that could not be ignored. Were Wilson and his paintings properly and truly Welsh? It could be claimed that the beauty of Wales had inspired him to become a landscape painter, but Welsh nationalists of the late nineteenth century centred their aspirations on what they perceived to be the ordinary or ‘true’ people of Wales, seen as pious, Non-Conformist in religious belief, sober, and Welsh in language and culture. Had Wilson been any of those things? He came from a gentry background, his forebears were Anglican clergymen, he had allegedly been undone by drink, and he had spent almost his entire working life in England and in Italy. His images of Wales were also deemed inappropriate. The now-forgotten Denbighshire landscape painter Samuel Maurice Jones (1853–1932), the son of a Calvinistic Methodist minister, wrote of them in 1893:

The influence of the splendour of the old masters and the cloudless firmament of Italy had paralysed Richard Wilson to such an extent that he did not possess the appropriate forms and images to portray the wildness of his native country. He is found setting calm to rule in the house of the storm, and portraying the etched slopes of Snowdonia without a single cloud to cast a shadow over their nakedness.<sup>18</sup>

In short, Wilson’s images were illusions that falsely presented Wales as an idealized classical arcadia, and its people as happy innocents. In *Modern Painters* (1843–60) John Ruskin (1819–1900) had also worried about the originality of Wilson. Were his paintings ‘mere diluted adoptions from Poussin and Salvator, without the dignity of the one or the fire of the other’?<sup>19</sup> However, Ruskin had concluded in 1883 ‘that with the name of Richard Wilson the history of sincere

16 Illustrated, Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, Fig. 133. Untraced, 2014, but in 1949 this work belonged to Major R. H. Jones-Evans, Penallt, Machynlleth.

17 T. Mardy Rees, *Welsh Painters, Engravers, Sculptors (1527–1911) Arranged Alphabetically* (Carnarvon: The Welsh Publishing Co Ltd, 1912), pp. 3, 158–83.

18 Samuel Morris Jones, ‘Yr Arlunfa Gymreig’, *Cymru Fydd*, 4 (1891), p. 25.

19 *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and John Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903–12), III, p. 189.

landscape art, founded on a meditative love of Nature, begins for England: and I may add, for Europe'.<sup>20</sup>

A goal of the 2014 exhibition was to examine Ruskin's assertion that Wilson made a definitive contribution to the art of landscape painting. It also sought to explore how that contribution was influenced by Wilson's continuing engagement with Wales for much of his career. Wilson is not a traditional Welsh surname, and research by Rosa Baker published in the *Flintshire Historical Society Journal* in 1999 has established that his family were English immigrants who settled in Arwystli, the area around Llanidloes and Trefeglwys in Montgomeryshire, probably in the middle part of the sixteenth century.<sup>21</sup> His forbears were accepted as gentry but supported themselves by farming at Bwlch-y-Llyn and Y Ffinnant, in the parish of Trefeglwys. His grandfather Hugh Wilson (1651–1687) was a second son who became a clergyman and was vicar of his home parish of Trefeglwys and of Llangurig, a few miles away. On Hugh Wilson's death in 1687, his estate was valued at the fairly large sum of £377 9s 4d, much of this in farm stock and money out on loan. He left to his young son John 'all my study of books, pamphlets, scriptures, papers and manuscripts, as also all my silver plate, instruments of medicine, all my fowling pieces and pistols, my bowes and all my quivers'.<sup>22</sup> John Wilson (1682–1728), the artist's father, was brought up at Y Ffinnant, and also went into the Church. He was ordained in 1703, and in 1709 he became Rector of Gwaunysgor in Flintshire. While in north-east Wales he married Alice Wynne (1685–1765), a daughter of George Wynne, an impoverished country gentleman who owned the Leeswood estate near Mold, in Flintshire, but in 1711 he returned to his native Montgomeryshire on his appointment as rector of Penegoes, near Machynlleth.

The first child of the marriage, another John, was born in 1710. The next child was another Hugh, followed by Richard in 1713 or 1714, by George in 1718, by Elizabeth, and lastly by Peter, born in 1727, who died in infancy. There is no record of Richard Wilson or his two elder brothers attending a school and they were probably educated at home by their father. All three – and their sister Elizabeth – were clearly literate in English and Richard is said to have had a good knowledge of Latin. They would also have understood and spoken some Welsh. On the death of their father in 1728, their widowed mother had to leave the rectory at Penegoes and she returned to Mold in 1729. Respectable middle-class livelihoods had to be found for her four surviving sons.<sup>23</sup> In January 1733, John Wilson was appointed to a post in the Corwen Division of the Excise, the government department responsible for collecting the duties levied on taxable commodities such as malt

20 In a lecture, 'The Art of England', delivered in 1883. See Cook and Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXXIII, p. 378.

21 Baker, 'The Family of Richard Wilson RA and its Welsh Connections'.

22 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Bangor Probate Records, 1576–1858, B1750-155 <<http://hdl.handle.net/10107/1038685>> [accessed 21 November 2016]. Hugh Wilson made his will on 30 August 1687.

23 The daybook kept from 1728 by Hugh Lloyd (1688–1749), vicar of Mold (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS 598E), provides new information about the Wilson family during the 1730s. Lloyd was married to Alice Wilson's niece.

and cider. Hugh Wilson was apprenticed to a tobacconist (or snuff manufacturer), probably in nearby Holywell. Hugh appears to have been living with Richard in London by 1735, and he later emigrated to America and worked as a corn dealer in Philadelphia before returning to Mold where he died in 1750.<sup>24</sup> Richard's younger brother George also had to make his way in the wider English-speaking world. With financial help from a relative, Hugh Lloyd, the vicar of Mold, George Wilson attended St Mary Hall, Oxford (later incorporated into Oriel College). He was then ordained a clergyman in the Protestant Church of Ireland, and died in 1754.

Family support also shaped Richard Wilson's career. One of Alice Wilson's nephews, George Wynne (1700–1756) became spectacularly rich during the 1720s when lead was found on his land at Halkyn. Created a baronet in 1731, Wynne was MP for the Flint Boroughs from 1734 to 1742. Later described by Hester Thrale as 'madly magnificent', he was to squander his new fortune, lavishly extending Leeswood Hall and fighting three expensive elections in the Whig interest, but for some fifteen years he was able to use his wealth and influence to help his relations.<sup>25</sup> Wynne was clearly instrumental in arranging Wilson's apprenticeship to the portrait painter Thomas Wright in 1730, as his own London address at the time was 'at Mr Wrights att the corner of the Little Piazza in Great Russell Street, Covent Garden'.<sup>26</sup>

North Wales patronage also played a role in the development of Wilson's independent career as a portrait painter after he left Wright's studio in 1736 and set up his own – also in Covent Garden. In 1738, he made a now-lost portrait of John Myddleton (1685–1747) of Chirk Castle in Denbighshire.<sup>27</sup> Surviving portraits of Welsh sitters include Richard Owen (1684–1760) of Ynysmaengwyn in Merioneth; Edward Lloyd (1709–1795), a Flintshire gentleman who held a government post as Under Secretary at War; John Jones, Pentre Mawr, Abergele; and Walter Griffith (1727–1779) of Bron-Gain, Montgomeryshire, a Captain in the Royal Navy.<sup>28</sup> However, Wilson's association with Leeswood may have done him few favours in a gentry society that was predominantly Tory in sentiment. His most significant patrons of the 1740s seem to have been the Lyttletons of Hagley Hall, Worcestershire, a well-known Whig family with links to the Court and the Navy. He may have obtained their support through his cousin Charles Pratt (1714–1794), a political ally of the family, and later Lord Chancellor and 1st Earl Camden.

During the 1740s, Wilson probably supported himself as a dealer and restorer of paintings, in addition to his portrait practice. Only about thirty paintings

24 NLW Bangor Probate Records, 1576–1858 <<http://hdl.handle.net/10107/103868>> [accessed 21 November 2016].

25 Peter D. G. Thomas, *Politics in Eighteenth-Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 40–42.

26 NLW MS 598E, Hugh Lloyd's daybook, p. 31. See also p. 262: '1729–30 Feb 1 Dick Wilson [went to] Mr Wright to London.'

27 W. M. Myddleton, *Chirk Castle Accounts (Continued)* (Horncastle: privately printed, 1931), p. 501.

28 The portraits *Richard Owen* and *Edward Lloyd* are in the collection of Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales, and *Captain Griffiths* in that of the National Library of Wales. For *John Jones*, see Peter Lord, *The Tradition: A New History of Welsh Art* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2016), p. 86 and Fig. 88.



survive from this decade and nearly half of these are landscapes, such as *Dover Castle* (1746–7, versions in both Cardiff and New Haven).<sup>29</sup> This work suggests a familiarity with seventeenth-century Dutch painting, especially the townscapes of Jacob Ruisdael. The artist himself is seated painting at the lower left, implying the picture was executed from nature. In fact, this was painted in his studio in the conventional manner but we know that Wilson drew extensively out of doors, and may even have sketched in oils, as some of his pupils certainly did. The foreground figures of genteel tourists and labouring quarrymen, and incidental details such as rustic fencing and washing on a line, may reflect the influence of Canaletto, who had arrived in London in May 1746. Canaletto was to stay in England for nearly a decade, his presence helping to raise the status of landscape painting there. Wilson also painted Caernarfon Castle in the mid-1740s which suggests that he travelled in Wales in the earliest stages of his development as a landscape painter, when the Welsh mountains were still generally regarded as ‘barbarous’ and devoid of visual interest. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the revival of literary and antiquarian interest in the Celtic past, and a new awareness of the aesthetic possibilities of the mountains and ruined castles that dotted its landscape, did Wales become a destination for tourists.

In 1750, Wilson decided to go to Italy. He planned to go for several years, and his aim was to advance in his profession by studying both classical antiquities and European paintings of the more recent past. He also hoped to find patrons among the wealthy British and Irish tourists for whom Rome was the highpoint of their Grand Tour. Within a year he had settled in Rome, where he lived in considerable style with a large studio with British, German, and Danish pupils. Almost immediately, he abandoned portraiture completely in favour of landscape. With his pupils he spent much time exploring the countryside around Rome and drawing ancient remains. He soon evolved a landscape style that was quite different from that of his *Dover Castle* paintings, which was essentially topographical. This new style was derived in part from the idealized, grand, classical landscapes of his seventeenth-century predecessors in Rome, Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682) and Gaspard Dughet (1615–1675), whom he greatly admired.

Unlike Claude Lorrain and his earlier British imitators such as John Wootton (c.1682–1764) and George Lambert (1700–1765), Wilson’s classical landscapes are not simply idealized, they are based on the observation and study of actual locations in and around the city. Cardiff’s *Rome from the Ponte Molle* of 1754 (Fig. 2, above) has the golden light of Claude and some of the compositional features of the classical landscape (the framing tree, the dark foreground, water in the middle distance, leading the eye to a distant sun-lit horizon), but Wilson has plotted the features and buildings of the scene very precisely, and despite the vaguely classical figures in the foreground it is an accurate view. The location here would have had a profound meaning to its original Grand Tour purchaser (probably John Rolle-Walter [1712–1779]), as in the eighteenth century this ancient Roman bridge over the Tiber was the one used by all visitors from the north. During his years in Rome,

29 Tim Barringer and Oliver Fairclough, *Pastures Green and Dark Satanic Mills: The British Passion for Landscape*, exh. Cat. (New York Federation of Arts, 2014), no. 30, pp. 116–17.

Wilson applied the same formula of depicting actual locations in the City and in the Campagna in a Claudean manner, while also painting narrative history paintings such as *The Destruction of the Children of Niobe* (first version, 1754–5), which place figures derived after classical sculpture in a dramatic landscape setting, derived from Dughet and Salvator Rosa (1615–1673).

When Wilson returned to London in 1757, he set up another substantial studio in the north-west corner of the Covent Garden piazza, taking several pupils. Here he was initially very successful, painting Italian subject landscapes but also increasingly turning his Roman formula, of combining direct observation with the compositional principles of the classical landscape, to the landscape of Britain – including Wales. One of the earliest of these works is *The River Dee near Eaton Hall*, painted in about 1760 for Eaton's owner, Lord Grosvenor. This is a directly observed scene, drawn on a visit to the area when Wilson's mother and elder brother John were still living in Mold.

Soon after, in 1761–2, he painted two large canvases for Lionel Tollemache, 4th Earl of Dysart (1708–1770), another major Cheshire landowner. Both of these, *The Valley of the Dee with Chester in the Distance* and *Holt Bridge on the River Dee*, are now in the National Gallery, London.<sup>30</sup> The latter is a vista along the River Dee in the direction of the distant Clwydian hills. The panorama is from the English side of Holt Bridge, which links Denbighshire and Cheshire. The small village of Holt in the Welsh county of Denbighshire is on the spectator's left and the larger village of Farndon, with the tower of St Chad's church, in Cheshire, on its red sandstone cliffs is on the right. This is a place that Wilson knew well, and although he exaggerated the proportions of the Farndon Cliffs, the scene is otherwise topographically accurate.

We suggested in the 2014 exhibition that *Holt Bridge* was directly inspired by Claude Lorrains's *Rome in the Ponte Molle* which was in a London sale in March 1760. If this was the case, *Holt Bridge* may be seen as an 'imitation' in the eighteenth-century sense of a work that pays conscious homage to another. A drawing survives, perhaps at least begun on the spot, and Wilson retained in the painting his precise observation of the sky and clouds, with rain approaching from the west. This attention to meteorological detail as well as a specific location is quite extraordinary for the early 1760s and was to be one of Wilson's principal legacies to Romantic landscape art, and the reason why he was to be revered after his death by both Turner and Constable.

Wilson was already familiar with much of north Wales from Holt across to his birthplace near Machynlleth, and he was to make a more extensive tour of Wales in 1764 or 1765, visiting Glamorgan and Pembroke in the south. A number of Welsh subject pictures resulted. These, while still composed on Claudean principles, were also an identifiable rendering of place. They seem to celebrate the antiquity of Wales and the claim of its people to be the original Britons, contrasting the

30 For *Holt Bridge on the River Dee*, see Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, cat. no. 75, p. 262, and the National Gallery website <<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/richard-wilson-holt-bridge-on-the-river-dee>> [accessed 21 November 2016].

warlike past with the peaceful present. They include *Pembroke Town and Castle*, *Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle* and *Cilgerran Castle*, as well as *Llyn Cau*, *Cader Idris*, all apparently commissioned or acquired by landowners in north Wales with antiquarian interests.<sup>31</sup> *Pembroke Town and Castle* (Fig. 3), the birthplace of Henry VII, may have been painted for William Vaughan of Cors-y-gedol, Merioneth, the Cymmrodorion's first Penllwydd or chief president. Engravings of this group, as well as of Caernarfon Castle and of the new bridge at Pontypridd, were published as a set of six Welsh views by John Boydell (who was himself from Flintshire) in 1775, and sold well. However, the paintings themselves were rather less popular than Wilson's Italian subjects, with only *Lyn Peris and Dolbadarn Castle* existing in multiple versions.

Wilson was also fortunate in attracting the interest of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn (1749–1789) late in 1769, when his twenty-year-old patron's extravagance was unlimited and he himself was still able to rise to the opportunity that this presented. Williams-Wynn was the richest Welshman of his day, with an income of over £20,000 a year, who had recently returned from an exceptionally extravagant Grand Tour. He commissioned two vast canvases, six feet high and eight feet wide, at a cost of 200 guineas each. Because the Dee valley is more heavily wooded today, it is difficult to find the place where Wilson drew the first of these, *View near Wynnstay* (Fig. 4). Robin Simon has identified it as a rock above a cliff at Nant y Belan at the edge of Wynnstay Park, which in the eighteenth century afforded a dramatic prospect westward along the Dee valley to Dinas Brân at Llangollen, which was described by Thomas Pennant soon after:

Nanty Bele, or the *Dingle of the Martin*, lies about a mile from hence, and merits a visit from every traveller. From a rock at its extremity, is a magnificent view of the Dee, rolling awefully in a deep chasm fringed by woods [...] Towards the north is a great view of the conic mountain, and the rude fortress of *Dinas Brân*, rising amidst a fertile vale, and bounded by the barren *Alps*.<sup>32</sup>

Behind Dinas Brân the mountains of the north-eastern range of Snowdonia (Pennant's 'Alps') are visible. The warm light from the west shows that this is an evening scene, and the woman on horseback with her male companion descending the slope in the centre is homeward bound. Its companion, *Dinas Brân from*

31 The paintings of Pembroke, Snowdon, and Cilgerran belonged to the Vaughan family of Nannau and Rûg when seen by Joseph Farington in 1800 and are said to have been commissioned by William Vaughan (1707–1775) of Cors-y-gedol, first President of the Cymmrodorion. However, Cors-y-gedol had been inherited in 1791 by Sir Roger Mostyn (1734–1796) of Mostyn, Flintshire (who probably owned the first version of *Llyn Cau*, *Cader Idris*). Since Farington wrote, 'Reig [...] formerly Mr Price's,' (*The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. by Kenneth Garlick and Angus McIntyre [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979], IV, p. 1441), their purchaser may have been John Pugh Pryse MP (1739–1774). Farington also recalled meeting Colonel Wynne (MP for Caernarvonshire and later 1st Lord Newborough), perhaps another Welsh patron, at Wilson's studio.

32 *Tours in Wales by Thomas Pennant, Esq.*, ed. by John Rhys (Caernarvon: H. Humphreys, 1883), I, pp. 369–70.



Fig. 3: Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782), *Pembroke Town and Castle*, c. 1765–6, oil on canvas, 102.7 x 128.2 cm.

Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales, Cardiff.

Purchased with the assistance of the National Art Collections Fund, 1930.

© National Museum of Wales. Reproduced with permission.

*Llangollen* (Fig. 5), is a morning scene looking east along the river Dee towards Llangollen with its fourteenth-century bridge and the tower of St Collen's church at the right, overshadowed on the left by Dinas Brân. Llangollen was essentially Sir Watkin's town, though Dinas Brân itself belonged to the rival Myddelton family of Chirk. The painting is constructed to suggest an unchanging world of balance, harmony and, through its contented and employed peasantry, paternalistic benevolence. The two canvases were presumably complete when Wilson submitted his bill on 5 June 1770 and cost the substantial sum of £210 each.<sup>33</sup> Sir Watkin hung them not at Wynnstay but in his London house in St James's Square where they announced to his visitors 'this is my country [...]'.

33 NLW Wynnstay MS, box 115/25, 11. The bill was not receipted until 3 July 1771. It included a copy of Chandler, Revett and Pars's *Ionian Antiquities*, published in 1769, and the total came to £430.



Fig. 4: Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782), *View near Wynnstay, the Seat of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn, Bt.*, 1770, oil on canvas, 180.3 x 244.8 cm.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, presented, 1976.

© Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. Reproduced with permission.

The Wynnstay pictures are a complete contrast to Wilson's *Llyn Cau, Cader Idris* (Fig. 6) of about 1765, in Tate Britain, London. This is a bleak scene near the summit of the mountain. Wilson was the first person to paint on Cader Idris which is a few miles from his birthplace at Penegoes, and which would also have reminded him of the volcanic lakes he had painted at Nemi and Albano in the Roman Campagna. The view is taken from the slopes of Mynydd Moel, about a mile from the lake of Llyn Cau near the summit of Cader Idris. The valley of the Dysynni runs to the left below the cliffs of Craig Goch, and beyond, at the horizon, Cardigan Bay is visible. The precipice of Craig Cau in the centre is heightened and schematized to emphasize the drama of the scene, but again the view is essentially accurate.

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) had suggested that there is a kind of pleasurable terror in the immensity or turbulence of Nature. Even so, the bareness of the scene would have unsettled contemporary viewers. A version belonged to Sir Roger Mostyn and is mentioned by Mostyn's brother-in-law Thomas Pennant when describing





Fig. 5: Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782), *Dinas Brân from Llangollen*, 1770, oil on canvas, 180.3 x 244.8 cm.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, presented, 1976.

© Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. Reproduced with permission.

the summit of Cader Idris in the second volume of *A Tour of Wales*: ‘At a nearer distance I saw *Craig Cay*, a great rock, with a lake beneath, lodged in a deep hollow; possibly the crater of an antient *Vulcano*. This is so excellently expressed by the admirable pencil of my kinsman, Mr. *Wilson*, that I shall not attempt the description.’<sup>34</sup>

It is primarily through *Llyn Cau*, *Cader Idris* and through his *Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle* (Fig. 7) that Wilson established a new canon of landscape imagery, opening the way for the aesthetic appreciation of the wilder parts of the natural world. The latter is a view from the western end of Llyn Nantlle, where a stream flows out of the lake in the right foreground. Again, this is a place Wilson knew. Pant Du, the house of his cousin, Richard Garnons, was one mile to the west, at Wilson’s back as he looked toward Snowdon across the waters of Llyn Nantlle. Framing the view to the left is the sharp profile of Craig y Bera and to the right the outline of Y Garn and Mynydd Drws y Coed toward the end of the Nantlle Ridge. As Robin Simon notes, ‘Wilson’s strong sense of design and tonal value invests

34 Rhys (ed.), *Tours in Wales by Thomas Pennant, Esq.*, II, p. 232.



Fig. 6: Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782), *Llyn Cau, Cader Idris*, 1765–7, oil on canvas, 51.1 x 73.0 cm.

Tate Britain, London, transferred from the National Gallery, 1955.

© Tate Galleries, London. Reproduced with permission.

their rugged grandeur with a timeless dignity, emphasized by the distant smoke seemingly suspended in the atmosphere and rendering the human activity in the foreground and on the lake insignificant and transitory.<sup>35</sup>

This picture, sold, like *Pembroke Town and Castle*, from Nannau in 1930, may also have belonged to William Vaughan, Cors-y-Gedol. In *A Tour in Wales* (vol. II, 1783) Thomas Pennant enthused the year after Wilson's death: 'From hence is a noble view of the *Wyddfa* which terminates the view through the vista of *Drws y Coed*. It is from this spot Mr. Wilson has favoured us with a view, as magnificent as it is faithful.'<sup>36</sup> In this painting Wilson has fused the precepts of the classical landscape of Claude and Dughet with a concern for the particular in nature, which became one of the mainsprings of Romanticism. This is what made his work so original and so admired by his successors, especially Turner who toured Wales in Wilson's footsteps in the 1790s. Wilson was the first artist to appreciate the sublime qualities, the raw, emotional power of the Welsh landscape, and he has influenced the way Wales has been seen ever since.

35 Postle and Simon (eds), *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, cat. 79, p. 265.

36 Rhys (ed.), *Tours in Wales by Thomas Pennant, Esq.*, II, p. 350.



Fig. 7: Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782), *Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle*, 1765–6, oil on canvas, 101 x 127 cm.

National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, purchased, 1935.

© National Museums Liverpool. Reproduced with permission.

In the end, though, Wilson the man remains an enigma. He never married and only a handful of his letters survive. We know of him mainly from his pupils, especially Joseph Farington (1747–1821) and Thomas Jones, and from his pictures. At their best, these address fundamentals, the power of nature, the passage of time, the decay of temporal pomp, and the consolations of philosophy – and that is why the work of Richard Wilson still matters after three centuries.

### *Acknowledgements*

I am profoundly grateful for the help of Robin Simon, Martin Postle, Kate Lowry, Beth McIntyre, Peter Lord, Scott Wilcox, and Paul Spencer-Longhurst, and to Professor Prys Morgan who first aroused my interest in the culture of eighteenth-century Wales.