

JOHN BRETT IN WALES: A PRE-RAPHAELITE ARTIST INSPIRED BY THE COAST OF WALES

Ann Sumner

Over the past fifteen years, there has been considerable new research into the life and work of the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Brett (1831–1902) which has resulted in a re-assessment particularly of his later career, with new light being shed on his landscape painting practice and his charming and individual portraits. In particular, the brilliance of his later marine painting has now been fully recognised, as well as the vital inspiration that the shoreline of Wales gave to this painter as his mature style developed. In this lecture, I will outline my involvement in this revival of interest in John Brett's work, which began some fifteen years ago now. In early 2000, I took up the role of Head of Fine Art at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff and was presented with the opportunity to look in detail at some of Brett's marine paintings and to consider a selection of the patrons who appreciated and purchased these works.

Having studied Victorian painting in the early 1980s at the Courtauld Institute of Fine Art, University of London, under Ben Read, I was fully aware of Brett's early work, upon which his reputation was based, and his relationship with John Ruskin. I remember well Brett's inclusion in the great *The Pre-Raphaelites* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1984,¹ where his biographical summary reflected the general assumption, at that time, that he was a Pre-Raphaelite painter until around 1863 when he changed direction, and that somehow his later career was less successful. I first looked at Brett's seascapes shortly after I was appointed to the National Museum of Wales, when I was asked to consider a proposal for a John Brett exhibition giving an overview of the artist's connections to Wales. The exhibition was proposed by the collector of Victorian art at the National Museum, Christopher Gridley, who I am glad to say is here in the audience tonight. Up until this time, I had only been aware of one seascape by Brett, the outstanding *Britannia's Realm* of 1880 (Tate, Chantry Bequest). The proposed exhibition would be the first to look specifically at Brett's later career after his association with Ruskin came to an end, and also the first in this country since 1893 to be exclusively devoted to Brett's work. The exhibition gradually came together under the title *John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite on the Shores of Wales* (National Museum of Wales, 2001).

Brett's luminous, atmospheric depictions of unspoilt remote areas of Wales, most especially of Pembrokeshire, immediately stuck a chord with me, especially as for many years I holidayed in the Fishguard area and spent my teenage years visiting the Gower peninsula. The exhibition of 2001, which I curated with David Cordingley and Christopher Gridley, was, I still feel, one of the most aesthetically pleasing exhibitions I have ever mounted. It was arranged both geographically and chronologically. There were frustrations – an outbreak of bovine 'foot and mouth' disease struck just as we were about to visit areas of the shoreline to photograph

1 Tate Gallery, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery/Penguin Books, 1984), p. 27.

geological locations that have changed very little over the last century – but overall we were delighted with the loans and the reaction of our visitors.

I found that the Brett I had studied at the Courtauld was a very different artist from the one I now encountered, who held a genuine affection for Wales, for the sea, and for his family who enjoyed their holidays in Pembrokeshire and on the Gower as well. I quickly discovered his talents not only as a painter but as a photographer celebrating his family's time in Wales through that medium, as well as keeping a meticulous journal, 'Early Travels of Our Children', a journal which was begun in Wales in 1879 at Penally near Tenby and written jointly with his partner Mary.² It revealed that the happy family holidays in Wales were spent swimming, sailing, fishing, and walking the coastal paths, while Brett sketched and painted. In preparing for the exhibition, we learnt much about his working practice of using his notebook and oil sketches to create large-scale marine observations in his London studio, following on from his idyllic summer visits; and we also discovered much about the changing market for his paintings and how this impacted on his lifestyle. During the course of our research, we met Charles Brett, the great-grandson of John Brett, who had already begun a detailed assessment of Brett's overall artistic output by analysing his meticulous studio log books.

The Welsh exhibition opened in August 2001 in the newly-dedicated Art in Wales Gallery (Gallery 17) at the National Museum in Cardiff with thirty-seven works on display, many of which had not been seen by the public since the nineteenth century. These luminous large seascapes, interspersed with studies and sketches, were breathtaking in the newly-refurbished space. With relatively little time to plan the exhibition – just over a year – we were fortunate to secure key loans in addition to *Britannia's Realm*, such as the large *The Isles of Skomer and Skokham* (1891) from Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums and *Pearly Summer* (1892), at the time borrowed from The Forbes Magazine Collection, New York, as well as the stunning *Fishguard Bay* (1883) from a private collection in America. A number of works were seen by the general public for the first time. The launch event was in September 2001 and it was officially opened by the great Welsh tenor Robert Tear, a great admirer of Brett's work.³ My research for the exhibition quickly revealed just how many admirers Brett still had amongst collectors at that time.

Brett's first visit to Wales was in 1866 at the age of thirty-five, when he was still a bachelor. He stayed in a cottage on the island of Anglesey owned by his friends Harry and Georgina Weldon and filled his sketchbooks with images of skies, waves, and mountains. The resulting painting he produced for the Royal Academy, *Lat 53, 15 N, Long 50, 10 W*, is now lost but was well-received. He returned to Anglesey during the winter of 1867–68, staying for three months to sketch, and when he returned again to north Wales three years after that, he came with his

- 2 John Brett, 'Memoranda of the Early Travels of Our Children, Written for them by John Brett and Mary Brett on alternate Sundays commencing in the Autumn of 1879 at Penally', unpublished typescript, private collection.
- 3 Robert Tear (1939–2011) was a distinguished Welsh singer and conductor who collected artworks, mainly watercolours, by William Blake among others. He was made CBE in 1984. At the Private View of the Brett exhibition, there was a two-minute silence to mark the 9/11 attack in New York which had happened a few days previously.

partner Mary Howcroft and their first child Michael. Although Brett's initial visits were to an already established and popular part of north Wales for Victorian artists where he found great inspiration, he was later to be more adventurous, moving away from Snowdonia and the artists' colony of the Conwy valley in order to explore the shoreline of the whole of Wales, partly encouraged to do so by the expanding train network but also because of his love of sailing, which enabled him to explore unspoilt and little-known areas of the coast of Wales. Returning to Wales in 1879, he was still exploring the coastline and stayed in the popular Tenby area where he made studies for his hugely successful *Britannia's Realm* of 1880. By 1882, having been elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, Brett made his first reconnaissance visit to Fishguard in Pembrokeshire, which was to become a favourite spot for the family to spend their summers.

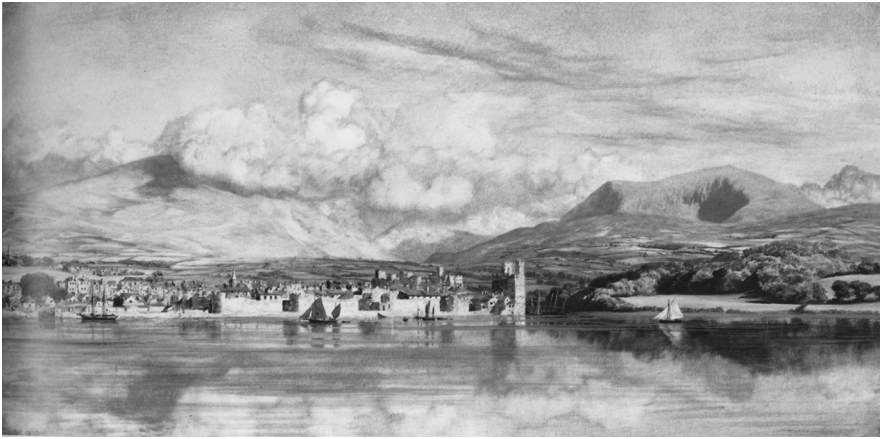
Our exhibition in Wales inspired a further similar exhibition exploring Brett's visits to the far south west of England, *John Brett in Cornwall* at Penlee Art Gallery, Penzance, curated by Charles Brett, Christiana Payne, and Mike Hickox in 2006.⁴ A previous exhibition at the Tate in 2004, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature*, included Brett seascapes such as *Near Sorrento* (1863) and *The British Channel Seen from the Dorsetshire Cliffs* (1871), thus encouraging greater interest in his sea painting. And then in 2010, I became involved with Brett again, this time in my capacity as Director of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham where I worked closely with Christiana Payne of Oxford Brookes University on a charming exhibition of Brett's portraiture – *Objects of Affection: Pre-Raphaelite Portraits by John Brett*, which opened in April 2010 and travelled on to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge later in the year. It was a pleasure to work closely with Christiana Payne who was by that time working on a new in-depth study of Brett due for publication by Yale University Press.⁵

My contribution to the Barber exhibition was an essay on Brett and Birmingham, co-written with Christiana Payne, which looked at the number of patrons Brett had in the West Midlands and the popularity of his work at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA), where he exhibited regularly. Birmingham and West Midlands industrial patrons had helped make Brett a rich and successful artist, with the walls of the homes of the Birmingham elite in Edgbaston, where the Barber Institute is situated, covered with Brett's seascapes.⁶ The Victorians had a healthy interest in the sea with the increased popularity of seaside holidays. The essay considered the appeal of Brett's works in landlocked Birmingham, a famous lecture he delivered in 1890 on art education, and his contribution to a major exhibition of living marine artists in 1894. We concentrated on the number of Brett paintings we knew actually hung on the walls of the villas of Edgbaston owned by the wealthy Birmingham industrialists, many of which were of the Welsh coast.

4 Charles Brett, Michael Hickox, and Christiana Payne, *John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite in Cornwall* (Bristol: Sansom, 2006).

5 Christiana Payne, *John Brett: Pre-Raphaelite Landscape Painter*. The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

6 Christiana Payne and Ann Sumner, 'Brett and Birmingham: Tho Inland Far We Be, Our Souls Have Sight of That Immortal Sea' in *Objects of Affection, Pre-Raphaelite Portraits by John Brett*, ed. by Christiana Payne (Birmingham: The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2010).



John Brett, *Caernarvon* (1875). Courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

For instance, this tranquil view of Caernarfon (above) seen from the Menai Straits was painted towards the end of the three months that Brett and his family spent in north Wales during the summer and autumn of 1875. The distinctive mass of Mynydd Mawr dominates the landscape to the right of the picture. The painting was purchased by the Birmingham architect J. H. Chamberlain, who was living at Grange House, Small Heath when Brett first met him. In 1879, Chamberlain was building himself a new house, Whetstone, in Edgbaston and Brett borrowed back this sketch to help him prepare for a larger work based upon it, *The Stronghold of the Seison*, which he exhibited at the Royal Academy and at the RBSA in the autumn of 1879. Brett wrote in September 1879 to thank Chamberlain for the loan of the sketch, commenting that he was particularly eager to see Chamberlain's new home: 'I have seldom felt so much curiosity as to that new house of yours.'⁷ Chamberlain moved into the house in that same month and went on to purchase four more Brett seascapes, though not of Welsh subjects. When Chamberlain unexpectedly died in 1883, Brett was a pall-bearer at his funeral.⁸

William Kenrick, an iron founder and hardware manufacturer, was brother-in-law to Chamberlain and a trustee of the Public Picture Gallery Fund at the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. He purchased two of Brett's Welsh views, *A Summer Day, South Wales*, *White Sands Bay* (1872, private collection) and *The South Bishop Rock: Anticipations of a Wild Night* (1872, private collection) for his new home, The Grove, on Park Lane, Harborne, designed by Chamberlain. Another Edgbaston patron was W. H. Smith, of the newspaper distribution family,

7 Letter from John Brett to J. H. Chamberlain, 26 February 1879 (private collection). I am grateful to Charles Brett for drawing my attention to this letter.

8 Roy Hartnell, *Pre-Raphaelite Birmingham* (Studley: Brewin Books, 1996), p. 76. The politician Joseph Chamberlain and William Kenrick, both patrons of Brett, were also pall-bearers at the funeral.

who commissioned the distinctive *Cwm-yr-Eglwys* (1882), a view of the Dinas Island peninsula in Pembrokeshire.

Brett's sales were so successful that by 1883 he was in a position to buy a yacht of his own, the *Viking*, with a crew of thirteen. Early in July, they sailed along the Pembrokeshire coastline from Milford Haven around St David's Head, past Fishguard to Cardigan, and then anchored at Holyhead. Sailing enabled Brett to enjoy the sea and to take a new approach as a painter from the unique viewpoint out at sea – sketches were made on board, for instance, for *Fishguard Bay*, which was loaned to the 2001 exhibition from a private collection in the USA. Some of Brett's most charming photographs date from this period, showing the family on board the *Viking*. His particular enthusiasm for the Welsh landscape in this area led to him to want to buy property and land, and for four years he negotiated about one particular house with land, finally buying Windy Hill Farm, at Fishguard, in 1886. The following year, after the purchase, he headed with the family back to the Gower peninsula and for four months that summer the family was based at Herberts Lodge, Bishopston, on the Gower near Swansea.

Up until this point, the popularity of Brett's paintings had enabled the family to enjoy an excellent standard of living, but Brett was starting to have concerns about his sales even at this point: 'There is however a trace of gloom over all at present because of the evident failure of the means of subsistence.'⁹ On returning to London in October 1887, he organized an exhibition in London, *Four Months on the Gower Coast*, but it was not well attended. By the late 1880s, the dwindling of interest in his marine art was obvious and there were attempts on his part to sell key large works to regional galleries as the family tightened up on expenditure. One of the first casualties was their yacht, the *Viking*, which they sold at a loss. One of Brett's most atmospheric, large-scale oil paintings on loan to the 2001 exhibition, *The Earth's Shadow on the Sky*, inspired by the Bristol Channel, was largely ignored at the Royal Academy in 1888 and failed to sell, despite its beautiful evocation of ghostly ships emerging from the mist at sunrise on the Severn. Brett noted bitterly, 'Nobody understood it, nobody asked the price.' It went to Birmingham after the RA and was given a central place but it remained unsold.¹⁰ It was eventually purchased by Sunderland Museum in 1901. Brett meanwhile was beginning work on an ambitious new home for the family in Putney, Daisyfield.

Brett's last visit to Wales was in 1891 during a troubled period when he was worried about sales of his work. The family spent the summer at Aberporth on the Ceredigion coast. Brett found the house they rented uncomfortable and yet he produced *Pearly Summer* after this visit, exhibiting it eventually in 1893. Having produced over 200 views of Wales, Brett's passion for the country was coming to an end. But despite the financial concerns of his later life, he managed to maintain a small parcel of land near Windy Hill Farm about which he wrote:

There is in short only one really satisfactory seaside place on the

9 John Brett, 'Early Travels', 10 July 1887 (private collection).

10 *John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite on the Shores of Wales*, ed. by Ann Sumner (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 2001), p. 102.

whole British coast. It is an extremely beautiful promontory cut off from the world by a high road at its base [...] There is a little port to the east of it and a mile of sand on the west flank. There are lovely mountains and trout streams. The promontory measures 47 acres. It is my own property but I am grieved to say I shall have to sell it. I bought the freehold about a dozen years ago hoping some day to build on it for a colony of friends and a summer house for ourselves but alas there is a board up now saying This estate to be sold.¹¹

This comment, made in a letter to his brother, reveals that Brett had intended to set up a colony of artists at Fishguard but this plan never came to fruition.

With the Cardiff exhibition of 2001, Brett's artistic legacy was at last re-assessed. Pamela Gerrish Nunn's review of the exhibition noted that the catalogue 'will ensure that further discussion of this artist and his contribution to the present-day understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism can continue from a more complete knowledge of his oeuvre'.¹² This is precisely what happened. Our initial work on Brett in Wales stimulated discussion and re-assessment of the artist and we now have the very thorough re-evaluation of his art by Christiana Payne in her book, *John Brett: Pre-Raphaelite Landscape Painter*. The book, which includes a *catalogue raisonné* by Charles Brett, was published to coincide with the *Objects of Affection* exhibition at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in 2010. The reputation of John Brett has been transformed and his relationship with Wales and his love of the Welsh shoreline have been celebrated in full.

While recent art criticism has tended to dismiss Brett's later career, the re-appraisal of his entire *oeuvre* has meant that the public can now appreciate the extent of his popularity from the late 1860s to the mid-1880s and the number and range of his patrons. Much of the research I initially carried out was based on primary sources, also used by Christiana Payne for her book – Brett was an artist who left diaries, letters, sketchbooks, and exhibitions which have enormously aided our understanding of him as an artist and also as a family man, who apparently never married his partner Mary but was devoted to his family in a way that is truly touching. His relationship with Wales highlighted his happy family holidays and that key aspect of his life as a parent. Both Christiana's and my research was returned for the Higher Education REF (Research Excellence Framework) in 2014 in an illuminating impact statement. Our research would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and dedication of Brett's own descendants and particularly his great-grandson Charles Brett.

- 11 Letter from John Brett to his brother Arthur (known as Bat), 5 February 1896 (private collection).
- 12 Pamela Gerrish Nunn, 'John Brett: A Pre-Raphaelite on the Shores of Wales. National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff, 14 August–25 November 2001', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 1.1 (Spring 2002) <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring02/86-spring02/spring02review/188-john-brett-a-pre-raphaelite-on-the-shores-of-wales-exhibition-and-catalogue-frederick-sandys-and-the-pre-raphaelites-exhibition-and-catalogue-frederick-sandys-18291904-a-catalogue-raisonne-by-betty-elzea-and-professional-women-painters-in-19th>> [accessed 1 December 2016].

*John Brett in Wales:
A Pre-Raphaelite Artist Inspired by the Coast of Wales*

I hope that tonight I have reminded you of the atmospheric, detailed, and accomplished seascapes Brett painted while in Wales and that the next time you are in the National Museum of Wales you might make a visit to the Welsh landscape gallery and remind yourself of the great views Brett painted of the shoreline of Wales. There are still other artists whose names we do not know so well, such as Penry Williams, a Welsh artist who actually spent most of his life inspired not by his native landscape but by that of Italy, and I am currently undertaking research on this artist so perhaps I can return to lecture to you on this subject in the future.