

'HOW I SURVIVED MY FATHER AND BECAME A STAINED GLASS ARTIST'

The first lecture of 2010 at the Art Workers' Guild was given by BSMGP Fellow Joe Nuttgens. The rather tongue-in-cheek title, Joe explained, reflected his aim in this talk to make sense of and put into perspective his rebellion against his father [J. E. ('Eddie') Nuttgens and elucidate his artistic and cultural influences and subsequent work, in which he felt he had to escape his father's presumptions.

He began with painting a verbal picture of the world of his father. Eddie had been born in Aachen in 1892, the child of a German tailor's cutter who emigrated when he was 3 years old. He had left his Catholic school at 14, then learned drawing in evening classes at Harrow School of Art. He subsequently became an apprentice for 5 years to the former Hardman's designer and painter Arthur Orr. Commuting between Harrow and Baker St, he was concussed in a train crash, and ever after talked incessantly. His desire to learn the stained glass craft led him to study at the Central School in London, where he was much affected by Christopher Whall and the Pre-Raphaelites particularly Edward Burne Jones, and William Morris. Through the former he became involved with the Glass House, where he met and worked for several artists who became major influences on his work – notably Karl Parsons, whom he assisted, Martin Travers and later Herbert Hendrie. From there he went to work at Chipping Campden, and consequently moved to Coppice Hill in the Chilterns, then Piggotts Hill, which was near to Eric Gill's studio. Here, he embraced the culture of the Catholic agrarian Distributist ('Back to the land!') movement, of which Gill and G. K. Chesterton were patrons. It was in this atmosphere of 'proud' rural poverty that Joe, his eleven brothers and sisters grew up.

Eddie went on to design and make some 300 windows in his own studio, of which examples were shown and the evolution of his style discussed. In the 1930s in St Theresa's RC church in Beaconsfield, his palette was restricted to reds, blue and white as Eddie then believed he didn't have a good colour sense; in a 'Virgin and Child' window in Derbyshire one can see how his work became sharper and more linear after meeting Gill. His great East window at St Etheldreda, the only Pre-Reformation Catholic church in London, demonstrated his ideas of symmetrical order, and the relationships between colours.

After World War II, following the death of his first wife, Eddie moved to North Dean, where he built a house and studio, and met Joe's mother. There the large family lived an eccentric, spontaneous, gypsy-style lifestyle. Joe, born in 1941, recalls that, at the age of 7 in a school run by Dominican monks, his father would arrive at half-term in a dirty old car complete with tea-making gear and lavatory buckets! Joe did not, however, flourish academically at school, and so the age of 15 he left for Wickham art school, at his father's suggestion. There, after an exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery, he developed an enthusiasm for Jackson Pollock, modernism and American Expressionism. Countless arguments with his father followed. 'Anyone can be original', was typical of Eddie's dismissive attitude to the modernist movement.

As a student at the Central School, then the RCA in the 1960s, Joe rebelled against his father's Catholic 'Gillism' – and as a result he virtually abandoned stained glass until 1978. Instead, he was carried along by the exciting wave of modern art exemplified by David Hockney and others. His teachers, Lawrence Lee and Keith New, were concerned he wasn't formulating his own style.

For 9 years after leaving college, Joe worked in Wormwood Scrubs, where he found he could draw and had a reputation for drawing prisoners' portraits. At the same time, he began to paint in flat colour. Finally, he found himself wanting to work in stained glass – but could not do so with his father as their ideas were so different. However, an opportunity then presented itself in the person of Patrick Reyntiens (who, himself, had started with Eddie): he had just moved house and was in need of an assistant to execute John Piper's window designs. So, finally, Joe began to work in the medium. Patrick introduced him to the German glass

artists, and from 1978 to 1982 Joe worked for him on Piper windows, mainly for Robinson College, Cambridge, and the Benjamin Britten Memorial in Aldeburgh Church. (Later, in his own studio, he made the John Betjeman Memorial window for Farnborough Church in Berks to Piper's design.)

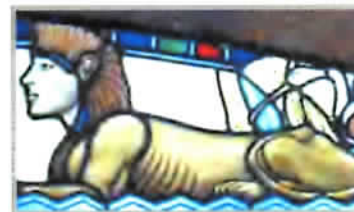
By 1982 his father, aged 90, was terminally ill with cancer but still designing; he received a request from Linda McCartney for a window based wholly on wild flowers. Eddie agreed to provide it, but because of his health could not make it ... so, for the first time in his life at the age of 40, Joe made a window to his father's design. Eddie died a month after its completion.

After his father's death, Joe finally began to find his own way in the medium. Amongst his first windows was one for St Martin's, Basildon, vaguely based on the Thames Barrier, in which he used unpainted glass to obtain the effects of the transmitted light on the walls. Other windows were based on grids, or geometric forms, and used sheet steel. However, his attempt to get right away from religious glass was not successful in economic terms, and so he had to come to terms with this fact and began to accept religious commissions.

Joe went on to show a selection of his subsequent work, including windows at St Matthew's in Addis Ababa (1986), and the Millennium 'People's window' for Durham Cathedral south



quaire depicting the relationship between church and industry, in which he used much local Hartley Wood glass. There was one in the extension to St Theresa's in Beaconfield, depicting the kings who and those who rejected Christ – echoing his own rejection of his father's Catholicism. Another project was 12 skylights in the cupola of the modern Church of the Holy Redeemer at Wexham near Slough (one above). He also made the 'Fire Restoration' window after the fire at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, in which St George is the central figure, and corrected an earlier, badly done restoration of windows in King's College Chapel, The Strand, with free interpretations of the original Clayton & Bell windows. Notable amongst these commissions were his 'humanist view of the Crucifixion', done at the time of Kosovo, when Kosovan men were found strung up in trees, and a panel at St Mary's Newcastle showing the decline of its manufacturing industry – veritable historical records in their own right. There was too a body of work from private clients, including panels for a house designed in Egyptian style by John Outram, complete with sphinxes (detail right). Another private commission was a design for 'Liberty' House at Great Missenden, entirely etched in blue glass.



In addition, Joe revealed a selection of his 'Outscape' drawings and paintings – described as 'abstract sensory landscapes' evoking a feeling of 'spring awakening' as experienced during a walk through the woods, or musically by a Mahler symphony. These works also expressed his realization that he would never get his father's appreciation of what he was doing with his stained glass; so he must ultimately validate himself.

Chris Wyard