

Landscape in distress: Edward Burra's late landscape paintings in the context of British post-war recovery

Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London



Valley and River, Northumberland, 1972 (Cat.387) © Tate Gallery

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Contents:

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Introduction		Page 2
Literature Review		Page 3
Chapter I	Burra's personal Landscape	Page 6
Chapter II	The Mobile Landscape	Page 15
Chapter III	Post-war art and Identity	Page 34
Chapter IV	The iconography of Despair, Unquiet times in Art	Page 47
Chapter V	An English road Journey	Page 53
Conclusion		Page 56
Bibliography		Page 59

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Introduction

This dissertation will place the landscape paintings of Edward Burra (1905-1976) from the 1950s until his death, in the context of both a defining moment in British art, and of the fears and anxieties felt for the perceived destruction of landscape in the extended post-war era.. His late landscapes are relatively unknown yet comment on a critical time for the land and will be shown as both a threnody for a landscape that had defined British identity, and a commentary on the degradation of places across the country through road building, abandoned industrial sites, Ministry of Defence detritus and as a rage against institutional and private greed. This lament will be as viewed from the non-space of the new roads through the windscreen of a vehicle - an important stimulus for Burra's paintings in the '60s and '70s when his own mobility was limited by a rare form of arthritis. It will show how Burra commented, often with camp humour, on these environmental concerns, in parallel with other contemporary artists, writers and poets who have also charted road journeys through the British landscape.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the race for modernity, the natural capital – the land, was in danger of being squandered and the sense of place, so important to the British identity could have been lost forever. It is recorded that Burra felt a sense of impotent outrage at changes to the countryside taking place, and it is this sensitivity to the threat posed by modernisation that is evident in the body of work completed in the last years before his death.

British identity, so closely connected with landscape, will also be referenced in the wake of great changes to a strongly hierarchical class system. Those families who owned land, the 'landed gentry,' had not only owned great swathes of the country – employed generations of workers who lived in cottages tied to that work, but sat in Government too – the ruling classes. This system had relied on a lack of education for the poor to maintain the status quo, until The Elementary Education Act of 1870 set out to provide universal education – access to literacy and numeracy for the whole population. For many intellectuals the idea of mass education was considered dangerous and could encourage indoctrination and foment revolution by the lower classes. This fear of 'the masses' is demonstrated by the writer H. G. Wells (1866-1946) who referred to 'an extravagant swarm of new births, ...as the essential disaster of the twentieth century.'¹ Professor John Carey in his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses* argues that 'the purpose of modernist writing and art can be seen as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly

¹ H. G. Wells, *Kipps*, (London: Fontana Books, 1961) p.240

large reading public created by late nineteenth-century educational reforms – to preserve the intellectuals' seclusion from the mass'.²

It is in this maelstrom of post-war anxiety around cultural change, land ownership, intellectual snobbery and sexual diversity, that Burra, privileged, frail, sickly and queer, the antithesis of superman, painted some of his finest paintings.

Literature Review

Andrew Causey's 1985 *Complete Catalogue* has been the key text on the work of Edward Burra and gives access to his entire artistic output.³ Causey suggests that the turning point for Burra came after visiting *The Romantic Movement* exhibition, Tate Gallery, July 1959 which renewed his interest in landscapes and the evocation of mystery. This coincided with his own lack of mobility, and the increasing use of the motor car.

The Catalogue to *Edward Burra* an exhibition at The Hayward Gallery, London in 1985, published by The Arts Council of Great Britain is mainly concerned with his better-known early paintings. It has a short chapter by Andrew Causey on the late landscapes, though not relating them to concerns for the perceived loss of British identity. He wrote that nature might be 'the ultimate refuge' for Burra but fails to mention the uncanny and disquieting tenor of the paintings – far from providing spiritual refuge. Burra's biographer, Jane Stevenson, provides a comprehensive and well-written account of his privileged family life, his friendships and influences and is a valuable insight into his complex, infuriating but curiously magnetic character.⁴ Stevenson does however avoid the obvious homoerotic element of Burra's paintings. Invaluable insights are also given into his relationship with his doughty and devoted sister and his strong lifelong friendships. Burra's own published letters also give an insight into his character and sensibilities, as does William Chappell's collection of the remembrances of Burra's friends.⁵ In contrast, books by Catherine Jolivette and Margaret Garlake provide academic insight into post-war art in the context of social and political turmoil. Jolivette mentions Burra briefly but inaccurately stating that he was a WWI war artist: he would have been nine at the outbreak of

² John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1992) preface

³ Andrew Causey, *Edward Burra, Complete Catalogue*, (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985).

⁴ Jane Stevenson, *Edward Burra: Twentieth Century Eye*, (London: Pimlico, 2007).

⁵ William Chappell (ed.), *Well Dearie! The Letters of Edward Burra* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1985); *Edward Burra, A Painter Remembered by his Friends* (London: Andre Deustch in collaboration with the Lefevre Gallery, 1982).

hostilities.⁶ The exclusion of Burra in their works could be explained by the fact that his lesser - known landscapes came to the public's attention following an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1985 or because he 'had been treated simply as an eccentric on the fringe of the main body of English art'.⁷

More recently, to coincide with an exhibition at Pallant House, Sussex, Simon Martin's well-illustrated publication sheds new light on Burra's status as an outstanding artist, with a comprehensive chapter written on Burra's landscapes by Andrew Lambirth.⁸ Lambirth discusses what he calls the 'keep on trucking' invasion of the countryside by heavy vehicular traffic which so concerned Burra.

In relating Burra's work to post-war concerns, a number of books on new towns, building suburbia and the need for fast, well-engineered roads have provided invaluable evidence of the argument for protecting the past and/or embracing the modern. In architecture and infrastructure, architectural critic, Ian Naim's manifesto, *Outrage*, a call to action on the mediocrity of lax planning regulation, is an impassioned and highly subjective response to the mediocrity of the suburban sprawl that was despoiling the country. His car journey from Southampton to Carlisle documenting his point that the outskirts of one city are indistinguishable from any other, has led to the concept of the journey through the landscape as seen through the windscreen of a vehicle. Peter Merriman's wonderfully comprehensive academic work on all aspects of motorway history and its relationship to culture and landscape, does include a brief reference to Burra's painting *English Country Scene II*, (Fig. 6) as one of several on the theme of mass tourism and the personal use of the motor car.⁹

Christopher Neve in his book, *Unquiet Landscape*, came the closest to understanding Burra and his uniquely subversive view of the landscape. Neve interpreted the artist's intention to unsettle and provoke the viewer into having some imaginative, impassioned feelings of their own.¹⁰

The catalogue to the exhibition, *Queer British Art 1861-1967*,¹¹ at Tate Britain in 2017 provides perhaps the most relevant, and previously unmentioned blind spot in art history, between Burra's camp sensibility and the queer aesthetic most obvious in his early work. To quote the catalogue, the exhibition, 'explores coded desires in aestheticism...of seedy dives and visions of arcadia' and critically, discusses Burra's work in this context.

⁶ Catherine Jolivet, *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2009) P. 95.

⁷ Andrew Causey, *Edward Burra*, catalogue to Hayward Gallery Exhibition, (London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985) p. 33.

⁸ Simon Martin, *Edward Burra* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2012).

⁹ Peter Merriman, *Driving Spaces, A Cultural Historical Geography of England's M1 Motorway* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

¹⁰ Christopher Neve, *Unquiet Landscape*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990) P. 153.

¹¹ Clare Barlow, Ed. *Queer British Art 1861 –1967* (London: Tate Publishing, 2017)

Contemporaneous books such as Sylvia Crowe's *The Landscape of Power*, and *The Landscape of Roads* provide a pragmatic and sensitive approach to design problems posed by new roads, power stations and pylons in terms of scale. Crowe's approach was to achieve the 'enjoyment of fast travel is the sense of penetrating swiftly into the heart of the landscape.' Contemporary art offered parallels and paradigms for these solutions.¹² In *The Landscape of Man*,¹³ Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe revealed the source of many of his creative inspirations to be the art of modernists such as Jackson Pollock and Ben Nicholson, whose work showed the close affinity between geometry and landscape. Jellicoe notably incorporated the work of both Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson into the garden design of Sutton Place, Guildford in 1980-86.¹⁴

There would appear to be no publication specifically linking Burra's late landscapes with post-war concerns and anxieties for what was happening to the landscape. The relevant work of other artists, poets, writers and landscape architects who shared these anxieties will also be cited. As Burra never discussed the meaning of his work, this dissertation will set out to show how the extraordinary changes to the country, from grim austerity to 'never had it so good'¹⁵ and to the vast social, infrastructure and house building programmes to sustain a 'New Britain,' informed his work. Conclusions are problematic as his work was deliberately provocative, ambivalent, but best summed up by the writer, broadcaster and art critic, Rachel Cooke as a 'giant postcard from a man who could not ignore what was happening to England, even if it is sometimes hard to tell if her changing landscape was more a source of regret or delight.'¹⁶ It is the intention of this dissertation to show how Burra painted these strongly felt anxieties, where others such as Ian Nairn, wrote about them, from the perspective of a road journey.

¹² Marc Treib, Ed. *The architecture of Landscape*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) p.77.

¹³ Michael Spens, *The Complete Landscape Designs and Gardens of Geoffrey Jellicoe*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994).

¹⁴ Jeffrey and Susan Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987) pp. 343-346.

¹⁵ The Rt. Hon. Harold MacMillan, speech at Bedford Town's football ground on 20 July 1957.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3728000/3728225.stm.

¹⁶ Rachel Cooke : <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/23/edward-burra-pallant-house-review>. Accessed 19.4.21.

Chapter 1 Edward Burra – his personal landscape

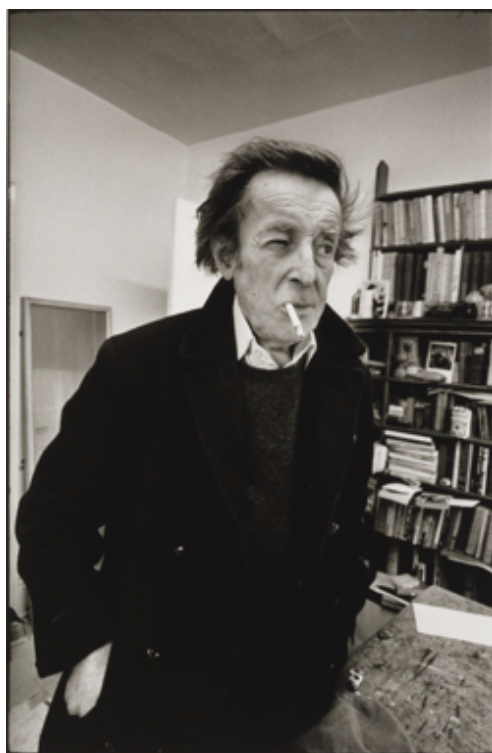


Fig. 1 Edward Burra, 1970 © Neil Libbert, National Portrait Gallery

*'Like an exotic and conceivably poisonous flower thrusting its way through a field of daisies'*¹⁷

This chapter will explain the influences that shaped Burra's character by setting out his family background. Born into a highly affluent, conservative and respectable milieu, from a young age he was different, keen to distance himself from its conventional sensibilities, crossing lines of social class with great ease, whilst at the same time being entirely dependent on the family support structure. His fertile imagination was clear from his childhood, much informed by his painful and disfiguring physical condition. He was a small frail child in constant pain, surrounded by large houses and brooding gardens, refusing to be defined by his disability.

¹⁷ Bryan Robertson in Robert Littman (ed) *The Paintings of Edward Burra and Paul Nash, A Sense of Place*, Exhibition Catalogue, (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Centre, 1982) p. 9.

Burra's family home, Springfield Lodge, at Playden on the outskirts of Rye was an imposing three storey Victorian mansion, set in 11 acres of land and with a staff of eight.¹⁸ His father, Henry, had trained as a barrister but found he no longer needed to work, coming as he did from an affluent banking family. Edward's inherited disability as well as his looks came from his vivacious mother, Emyntrude (Trudy), musical, delicate and with a waspish sense of humour. Burra was the second son, an older brother, Henry, had died in infancy, and a beloved sister, Betsy died of meningitis at the age of twelve. A younger sister, Anne, was to be his dutiful and compliant companion in elaborate, imaginative childhood games involving the building of toy towns made of their father's old Gold Flake tobacco boxes and pieces of wood painted by Burra with the buildings' names above the doors. Anne describes the 'town' being 'ruled by two strange women called the Dilly Sisters who were two small dolls on whose naked china bodies Edward would model splendid garments of coloured wax'.¹⁹ As the editor of *Edward Burra, a Painter Remembered by his Friends*, William Chappell notes that 'this childish game adumbrates the images of (Burra's paintings) in the future'.

For a family who had already lost one child, the Burras were understandably indulgent of their second, who from a young age was precociously articulate, determined to live his life on his own terms. At the age of fourteen, Burra witnessed the death of his much-loved sister Betsy. The repressed trauma of this event on an adolescent boy may well have been responsible for his interest in the uncanny, representations of which appear as ghosts, body parts or spirits in many of his paintings. Sigmund Freud wrote a paper on the Uncanny in 1919, a theory related to aesthetics 'meaning not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling'.²⁰ Many artists such as Man Ray and Paul Nash who were associated with the Surrealist Movement drew on this description and made artworks that combined familiar things in unexpected ways to create uncanny feelings.²¹ Paul Nash, in his autobiography, *Outline*, mentions similar uneasy childhood feelings for an ancient Beech tree in Kensington Gardens. He writes of it having 'a magical presence...haunted... creating a mystery and enchantment'.²²

Springfield Lodge was to be the Burra family's home until 1953. The long driveway, recounted by Burra's friend, William (Billy) Chappell as being 'a curved canyon of green-black walls of hedges, some 20 feet high...of laurel and rhododendron', the leathery leaved sombre evergreens so loved by the

¹⁸ Jane Stevenson, *Edward Burra: Twentieth Century Eye*, (London: Pimlico, 2008) p.2.

¹⁹ William Chappell, ed. *Edward Burra, A Painter Remembered by his Friends*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982) p. 17.

²⁰ Jamie Ruers, contributor to the catalogue for *The Uncanny: A Centenary*, (London: Freud Museum, 2019) p.39.

²¹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/t/uncanny> accessed 18.7.21.

²² Paul Nash, *Outline*, (London; Lund Humphries, 2016) P. 27.

Edwardians, as were the cedars, (fig. 2) wellingtonias and sinister monkey puzzle trees planted elsewhere in the large garden.²³ Records show that the extended Burra family had owned a considerable number of properties and land around Rye for many years.²⁴ Property ownership had been part of the family portfolio, including many imposing houses on the outskirts of Rye designed by the architect, Sir Reginald Blomfield,²⁵ (1856-1942) who married (Anne) Frances May Burra, Edward's aunt.

Edward Burra, the frail, maverick child of solid upper middle-class parents could be described as a benign changeling, a mischievous spirit who might be found hiding in the ominous clouds of his later work, not in a deeply conservative corner of East Sussex. Much of his childhood was spent below stairs, preferring the company of more colourful family servants, finding their interest in the salacious popular press, such as the now defunct *News of the World* and *The Police Gazette* more to his liking. His taste for the gruesome and the macabre was also fomented by his nurse, who would read popular horror stories to him of disasters and gruesome murders, with accompanying graphic illustrations.²⁶

Too delicate to continue his conventional secondary school education (he was destined for Eton), he enrolled aged sixteen, at Chelsea Polytechnic, where he met a group of people whose sensibilities perfectly aligned with his own. They shared interests in the performing arts, gossipy innuendo, fashion and Jazz and revelled in a theatrically camp aesthetic, uniting them and remaining steadfast and supportive friends throughout their lives. They typified a generation who considered themselves 'modern,' exemplified by a more relaxed attitude to contemporary roles for young men and women by championing sexually liberal values and accepting homosexuality.²⁷

²³ Chappell ed. In *Edward Burra, a Painter Remembered by his Friends*, p. 24.

²⁴ <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/browse/rh/8705d208-8874-4324-8ae0-c5a1080a75d8> (accessed 16.11.20).

²⁵ *Great British Garden Makers: Sir Reginald Blomfield*, *Country Life*, 23.8.2010 <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/gardens/great-british-garden-makers-sir-reginald-blomfield-1856-1942-21432> accessed 31.3.21.

²⁶ Jane Stevenson, *Edward Burra: Twentieth-Century Eye* p. 41.

²⁷ Andrew Stephenson, *New Ways of Modern Bohemia: Edward Burra in London, Paris, Marseilles and Harlem: Rothenstein Lecture*, in *Tate Papers*, no.19, Spring 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/19/new-ways-of-modern-bohemia-edward-burra-in-london-paris-marseilles-and-harlem>, accessed 26 May 2021.

Although suffering from Still's disease²⁸ and spherocytosis,²⁹ Burra went on to travel extensively to southern Europe and America despite constant pain and perpetual fatigue, drawn to those having 'a natural vitality unawed by social conventions.'³⁰ His earlier paintings had been satirical depictions of racially diverse communities on the margins of society, of homoerotic sailors, transvestite barmaids, louche jazz clubs and underground opium dens, a way of escaping both the limits of his own body and his place in the rigid British class system. Escaping too from the genteel tea shops and small-town mentality of Rye, where his father was a Justice of the Peace and sometime Mayor, which given Burra's latent homosexual sensibilities, would have been beyond every-day acceptability in the 1920s. It is now recorded that Rye ('ducky little tinker belle towne – quayte dead') attracted many creative gay writers and artists, including the novelists Henry James, E. F. Benson and Radclyffe Hall, whose novel *The Well of Loneliness* had been found to be obscene by Bow Street Magistrates in November 1928, but which continued to be a great success. An audio trail, researched by Dr Diarmuid Hester Fellow in English at Cambridge, on Rye's place in queer history leads one through the cobbled streets ending at Burra's penultimate home, Chapel House overlooking the Ypres Tower and Romney marsh.³¹ It is recorded that Burra knew of Radclyffe Hall and her lover Una, Lady Troubridge through their friendship with Paul and Margaret Nash, and from widespread gossip about the flamboyant pair, but perhaps not of Rye's place in homosexual history.

Susan Sontag, (1933 – 2004) in her 1964 essay *Notes On Camp*,³² defines a vision of the world in terms of camp style as being 'the love of the exaggerated, the 'off of things being what they are not' which captures Burra's sensibility to so many aspects of his life and work. Sontag cites Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening*, 1954, which emphasised that 'you're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it' a quote which applied to Burra's early work observing the vitality of the Latin *demi-monde*, and in his hilarious letters to friends full of affectionate but camp witticisms and risqué sketches. Mockery and sarcasm were part of Burra's survival armoury, a way of dealing with the pain and emotion in a hostile, judgemental world.

²⁸ <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/clinical-manifestations-and-diagnosis-of-adult-stills-disease>.

²⁹ HEREDITARY SPHEROCYTOSIS, [HTTPS://RARE-DISEASES.ORG/RARE-DISEASES/ANEMIA-HEREDITARY-SPHEROCYTIC-HEMOLYTIC/#REFERENCES](https://rare-diseases.org/rare-diseases/anemia-hereditary-spherocytic-hemolytic/#REFERENCES) ACCESSED 11.11.2020.

³⁰ George Melly, Forward to *Edward Burra, Catalogue to Hayward Gallery exhibition 1 August-29 September 1985* p.13.

³¹ Against our vanishing <https://climateart.org.uk/events> Accessed 22. 8 .21.

³² Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, *Partisan Review*, Volume 31, No. 4, New York 1964.

Burra uses the detachment of the onlooker to add a tension to his narrative, inviting us to share the view as though through a viewfinder of a camera. He adopted carefully framed viewpoints to lure one into the strange perspective, only to confront the viewer with a shadowy wraith hidden by a bulging rocky outcrop or lurking provocatively behind a cloud. Avant-garde magazines which featured photography, such as the Surrealist-orientated *Der Querschnitt and Variétés* (subscriptions to which he shared with Paul Nash) and photographic post cards were to influence his earlier work as *aides-memoir*.³³ As his biographer Jane Stevenson observed, the camera was a good metaphor for Burra's strictly guarded privacy, as 'the one thing camera won't show is the person behind the viewfinder'.³⁴

The transition from observing the sexually liberated and decadent night life of the *Bals Musette* to the evocation of disquiet in bleak, unpopulated and mystical landscapes of post-war England may seem paradoxical, but Burra was ready to address his new reality and that of the changing mood of the country. Having witnessed what depravity man can inflict during war, Burra told his friend, Billy Chappell 'the very sight of people sickens me, I've got no pity'.³⁵ For Burra the post war era was a time of awareness not only of his own mortality, but that in the race for progress and modernity, man was disturbing the balance of nature. As David Low, the political cartoonist, commented 'what can a satirist do with Auschwitz?'³⁶

His singular vision was often at odds with the mainstream art world, and in his later life he turned to painting very large landscapes in a way unlike any other artist of his generation. It is recorded that he felt a sense of outrage at changes to the British countryside taking place in the extended post-war era, while relishing the graphic opportunities it gave him. It is this outrage that is evident in the body of work completed in the last years before his death.³⁷ As Andrew Stephenson wrote in *Tate Papers*, it was his 'camp humour and piercing irony that Burra marshalled effectively throughout his life that made his work so unique'.³⁸ He saw things differently and anticipated the worst.

Andrew Lambirth, then art correspondent of *The Spectator*, suggested that 'the world had become 'so truly nightmarish it was no longer possible to satirize it in the same way, so Burra turned to landscape for consolation'. Far from consoling, these landscapes show a disillusionment with the human world and

³³ George Melly, *Edward Burra*, (London: Arts Council Catalogue, 1985) p.61.

³⁴ Stevenson, *Edward Burra: Twentieth Century Eye* p. xiv.

³⁵ Simon Martin, *Edward Burra* (Farnham: Lund Humphries in association with Pallant House Gallery, 2011) p.67.

³⁶ John Rothenstein in *Edward Burra, A painter remembered by his friends*, William Chappell ed. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982) p. 47.

³⁷ Andrew Causey, *Edward Burra, Complete Catalogue* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1985) p.78.

³⁸ Andrew Stephenson, "New Ways of Modern Bohemia": *Edward Burra in London, Paris, Marseilles and Harlem: Rothenstein Lecture*, in *Tate Papers*, no.19, Spring 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/19/new-ways-of-modern-bohemia-edward-burra-in-london-paris-marseilles-and-harlem>, accessed 13 June 2021.

provoke questions about the relationship between man and nature, nostalgia and progress, life and death. To paint was to be free from pain so he painted whatever had emotional potency for him, not what the art market (or anyone else) wanted. He did not set out to please. Once cited by the Jazz musician George Melly as a 'gregarious recluse.'³⁹ in later years Burra's physical vulnerability made him wary of crowds, fearful of falling. To be safely enclosed in the carapace of a car with his Betjemanesque sister as doughty facilitator would have enabled him to experience the changing landscape reeling past him.

An early oil painting (fig. 2) *Cedars at Springfield*, 1927, (Cat. No. 25) shows Burra's ability to imbue a sense of spatial unease into his work even in his sunlit Sussex garden. The view of the ageing cedar is closely cropped, threatening, the limbs outlined in black, (a possible reference to Vorticism) and needing support, and an upper branch appears as a distorted claw-like hand reaching out towards the viewer. As a child Burra may have been given *English Fairy Tales*, with illustrations by Arthur Rackham for Christmas, where trees are personified, replicating human movement, with whimsical and grotesque gnomes and goblins in the tangle of branches, vivid images that imprint themselves on a young impressionable mind. Given the knowledge of Burra's arthritis, the painting could also be interpreted as the artist seeing the topography of his own body in that of the tree, or more possibly, of nature capable of being 'up to no good'.

When Edward Burra could no longer undertake foreign travel as he had prior to 1939, his need for visual stimulation was sated by car journeys through rural England with his sister, and sometimes his close friend, the dancer William (Billy) Chappell (1907-1994). It is well documented that Burra would stop the car at some remote location where he would sit passively and observe the scene, as with a long exposure on a wide format camera, a view to be developed and reinterpreted later. In Burra's skilled mastery of watercolour, the 'pure' landscape paintings remain at first sight melancholy, limpid and luminous, greens, greys and blues portraying the wilder, less populated parts of the country. A more critical examination gives one a sense of unease.

An insight to Burra's character is graphically demonstrated in a rare filmed interview commissioned by The Arts Council of Great Britain.⁴⁰ Unlike the standard reverential film on the artist's life, this conveys the impression of the artist as resembling a somewhat recalcitrant and derelict version of Richard III,

³⁹ Louisa Buck quoting George Melly in BBC4 *Front Row*, 20.10. 2011.

⁴⁰ Peter Smith Dir, Carol Smith, producer, *I never tell anybody anything: The Life and Art of Edward Burra*. Balfour Films for The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1973. <https://vimeo.com/20763625>.

and decidedly reluctant interviewee. This representation of him as lonely, isolated and enigmatic is to misunderstand the rich, mischievous character of Burra, who simply disliked talking about himself and his art. The hapless interviewer questions him about changes to the countryside to which Burra responds with a tirade against main roads, suburbanisation and 'too many gnomes and carriage lamps' voiced in his sardonic mock Cockney drawl, aptly described by his friend George Melly as being like 'an elderly but game Edwardian tart propositioning from the shadows'.⁴¹ He did however admit to admiring the views from arterial roads, a perspective device he used to great effect in his paintings of the north of England, roads sweeping and curving towards infinity with exaggerated brio. This ambivalent view of landscape being simultaneously shaped and destroyed by the movements of a diverse range of mechanical devices, with no understanding of what is being lost, is a key point in understanding Burra's late work.

On the Road

In 1957, Jack Kerouac published his iconic book, *On the Road*. Themes of freedom, norms and counterculture, homoeroticism, prejudice and privilege were played out against a background of Jazz that would have resonated with Burra and his interest in American culture. The American love affair with the motor car was also the subject of paintings and films during the post-war decades and one that Burra incorporated into his work following his own road journeys.

For Burra the new roads were both interesting and demonic, providing a keloid scar through the landscape, and a vehicle for depictions of American style juggernauts to 'eat' their way through the countryside. These trucks and their drivers were, he said, quite to his liking, grinding through the hills as if on some nefarious mission, but the tourist *charabancs* intruding into the narrow, cobbled streets of Rye for day trips were decidedly not. There is a certain amount of self-interest in this statement. Rye being a mediaeval town, the narrow streets were difficult to negotiate and any influx of tourists made Burra's arthritic shopping trips hazardous, and ultimately fatal.

When failing health finally prevented further independent travel, he turned from urban realism to painting enigmatic landscapes, facilitated by his sister, Anne, Baroness Ritchie of Dundee, (1909 - 1989) who drove him to observe the wilder parts of the country, where Burra would stare intently at the view. Travel had always invigorated him, and now his preference was for the North of England – 'it's

⁴¹ George Melly, Forward to *Edward Burra: a painter remembered by his friends*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982) p.8.

not nearly so cosy, better, much better.⁴² The North provided the stark contrast between abandoned and eerie industrial sites – the ‘dark satanic mills’ of William Blake’s *Jerusalem*, and the perceived ‘decadence of the South, where beauty assumed the form of a deception, symbolising the unstable but repressive structures of society.’⁴³

That vibrant Jazz age scene of the ‘20s and ‘30s so loved by Burra and his friends had declined through World War II, and Burra’s health had also declined during his enforced war time confinement in Rye. Burra had seen European society’s decay following the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and been deeply affected by the atrocities he had witnessed, so he took the road to the hills of Yorkshire, Northumbria and the valleys of Wales, the antithesis of the crowded urban milieu that had inspired him previously, in search of inspiration and solace.

Artist and critic, Christopher Neve wrote that ‘he watched the countryside as though craving extremes and painted it as though something terrible was going to happen’.⁴⁴ Neve was referring to something more metaphysical, supernatural – Burra’s own demons perhaps, but terrible things had already happened following World War II to swathes of the English countryside as a result of bomb damage, of hastily built housing estates and the need to transport goods and services at speed by a new network of roads, as in America and Germany. Progress was not the whole problem. Andrew Causey states that Burra disliked the Juggernaut, although it could be argued that Burra was ambivalent in his opinions when it suited him.⁴⁵ His evident dislike for the increase in the personal use of cars and its effect on the South East of England tallied with those who were also concerned with the increase in sprawling, often mediocre housing developments, and road building that was quickly changing the identity of the British landscape, to be discussed in Chapter II.

The relevant work of other artists, poets, writers and landscape architects who shared these anxieties will also be cited. As Burra never discussed the meaning of his work, this dissertation sets out to show how the extraordinary changes to the country, from grim austerity to ‘never had it so good’⁴⁶, and to the vast social, infrastructure and house building programmes to sustain a ‘New Britain,’ informed his

⁴² Edward Burra talking in <https://vimeo.com/20763625>

⁴³ Alan Powers, Chapter 3, *Landscape in Britain* in Marc Treib, Ed. *The Architecture of Landscape 1940-1960* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) p. 57.

⁴⁴ Christopher Neve, *Unquiet Landscape*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020) p.153.

⁴⁵ Andrew Causey, *Edward Burra, the Complete Catalogue*, (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985) p. 78.

⁴⁶ The Rt. Hon. Harold MacMillan, in a speech at Bedford Town’s football ground on 20 July 1957.

work. Conclusions are problematic as his work was deliberately provocative, ambivalent and mocking but perhaps best summed up by the writer, broadcaster and art critic, Rachel Cooke as a 'giant postcard from a man who could not ignore what was happening to England, even if it is sometimes hard to tell if her changing landscape was more a source of regret or delight'.⁴⁷



Fig. 2. Edward Burra, *Cedars at Springfield*, 1927. (Cat. 25) One of Burra's few oil paintings.
The close - cropped angle of view intensifies the feeling of menace

⁴⁷ Rachel Cooke : <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/23/edward-burra-pallant-house-review>. Accessed 19.4.21.

Chapter II The Mobile Landscape



Fig. 3 Pennine Tower Restaurant, Forton Service Station, Lancashire, 1965 designed by T. P. Bennett & Partners, now Grade II listed. Assessed in the Domesday book as one plough land, later upgraded to '2 oxgangs of land where twenty-four plough-lands made a knight's fee,' is now an endless continuum between conurbations, an unhappy place for the pedestrian. Photo ©RIBA

The following chapter will place Burra's disquieting work in the context of a period that changed the face of both the British cultural and physical landscape, through a post-war programme of extensive regeneration projects, the building of motorways and the increase in personal use of the motor car. Burra's biographer, Jane Stevenson, points out that the motorway became an important source of inspiration for his work during the '60s and '70s, providing a view from the passenger seat of vast vistas

of grey tarmac seen through the windscreen of a car. Whilst initially these roads offered a sense of adventure and glamour to the motorist seeking an 'alternative reality to suburban ennui',⁴⁸ by the '70s the full implications of the damage of toxic emissions from cars, road freight and industrial plant on the environment were becoming apparent. Seminal books such as *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, and E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* which Burra is known to have read, attracted much attention. The views of a landscape seen from the network of arterial roads – the life blood of a modern society, are the impetus for this dissertation.

A giant postcard from post-war Britain in the early 1950s, as imagined by Rachel Cooke, would have shown bombed out cities, arable land scarred by airfields and military installations long after the cessation of WW II hostilities. Building new housing had been slow due to the shortage of building materials and the complexity of land purchase, but was well under way in the green belt around London. No great transformation of the land had taken place until the coming of the railways in the early nineteenth century but because of their nature were confined within certain limits, and automatically segregated from the path of the pedestrian.⁴⁹ The great American ecologist, G. P. Marsh wrote perceptively in his influential 1864 book, *Man and Nature*, 'Purely untutored humanity interferes comparatively little with the arrangements of Nature; the destructive agency of man becomes more and more energetic as he advances in civilization'.⁵⁰

The disruptive agency of man was to be most visible in the building of new high-speed roads. In 1956 work started on England's much needed first motorway, the M6 Preston Bypass, followed by the M1 between St. Albans and Warwickshire (Fig. 5). Designed to be as straight as possible with little reference to topography, these roads were constructed at an extraordinary rate of a mile in eight days by an army of Irish labourers as seen in a BBC documentary programme, *The Secret Life of Motorways*⁵¹. A significant area of peat bog, a valuable carbon storage resource, is shown in the film being drained and quickly back filled by yellow bulldozers, with scant regard to ecology, habitat or environmental impact that would be the subject of campaigners today. Burra had been interested in machines as symbols of modernity, as with the Dadaist practice of substituting body parts for machine parts.⁵² His painting of cartoon machines quarrelling like carnivorous dinosaurs masticating the landscape, (fig. 21) may seem strangely surreal until one sees newsreel of the construction of the motorways with armies

⁴⁸ Stephen Bayley, *The Age of Combustion*, (London: Circa Press, 2021) p.7.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey A. Jellicoe, *Motopia, a study in the Evolution of Urban Landscape* (Studio Books, London 1961) p.7.

⁵⁰ George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (London: S. Low, Son and Marston, 1864).

⁵¹ BBC 4 film, *The Secret life of Motorways* https://youtu.be/7y_wSOOLMb0 accessed 11.12. 2020.

⁵² Sotheby's Catalogue: *Works from the estate of Edward Burra and Lady Ritchie of Dundee*, (London: 3 July 2002) P.80.

of yellow earth moving machines scooping up ancient hedgerows in their path, all in the interest of control, speed and modernisation. The machines had seemingly taken over.

Burra lamented the constant expansion of the motorway cutting destructive geometric swathes through the countryside as seen on his tours around Britain, (Fig. 6) but at the same time relished the sight of deranged road building machinery in charge of their drivers. Roads featured in his later work, as a graphic stage for the cartoon-like yellow earth movers, their jaws' dripping with some noxious liquid, or as the long perspective slicing through the countryside like a surgeon's scalpel (fig.15).

For Burra the Motorway was a new experience, a sensation of movement through the wilder parts of the country and the potential for subversion on the way. The view through the windscreen was also to be Burra's new vanishing point, the long perspective that he used so effectively in his landscapes. The road journey through the British landscape has been the inspiration for many writers, musicians and artists and will be discussed further in chapter IV as an alternative way of experiencing the emotions of speeding through the country.

Emotion has played a large part in the designed English landscape since the eighteenth century, inspired by those returning from the Grand Tour of Italy, a rite of passage undertaken by wealthy young men of taste to discover the culture, art and architecture of Classical Rome. The Vitruvian principles of firmness, commodity and delight informed the design of many of the great houses of England, and with them their landscapes. Andrew Causey in his *Complete Catalogue*⁵³ notes that Burra 'found many aspects of the eighteenth century congenial.' Art historian Andrew Stephenson writing in the catalogue to *Queer British Art, 1861-1967*,⁵⁴ suggests that 'Arcadianism' had been adopted as 'part of the homoerotic vocabulary in the early twentieth century, as a shorthand, a set of idealised codes and cultural interests' for those artists and intellectuals who shared same sex desires. The concept of providing a place for learned discourse where the naturalistic layout appealed to both heart and mind was introduced by William Kent.⁵⁵ Kent built on the idea of the 'genius of the place' – to enhance the irregular and imperfect and to introduce memory of former glories by including theatrical elements of the past as punctuation to the naturalistic layout. This idea of a collaboration between enlightened and creative minds to combine art and nature, beauty and emotion had come to define, through landscape, the soul of the nation. The rejection of capitalism and ideas of an earlier pastoral idyll were perhaps

⁵³ Causey, *Complete Catalogue*, P.18.

⁵⁴ Clare Barlow, Ed. *Queer British Art 1861 – 1967* (London, Tate Publishing, 2017)

⁵⁵Horace Walpole, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, published 1771.

what Burra was responding to. While a great deal of thought had gone into planning post-war development, lyrical, poetic meaning and heightened emotional mood was missing; delight was lost to commodity.

The newly built roads gave much needed access for transport links to new industrial sites and large-scale industrial developments that grew up around major junctions. The concern for the landscape around public utilities such as power stations had been raised by Thomas Sharp (1901-1978) the somewhat uncompromising president of the Institute of Landscape Architects (ILA) and town planner, who spoke of the problem in his address to the British Institute stating that 'strangely shaped cooling towers, cloud piercing chimneys, vast turbine houses, retorts and gas holders overtop everything with irredeemable brutality...they outrage the spirit of man in the place of his own creation.'⁵⁶ But they were in fact redeemable through art – by the landscape architects who considered them, and the photographers and artists who saw them as themes of overlooked beauty and the relationship between form and function.

Burra's painting, *Motorway*, 1972 (Cat.384) (fig. 4) shows such sculptural clusters of cooling towers and faceless blocks of pit offices forming the centre of the road junction, the black scar of the coal stock ground behind, while derricks suggest rampant gallows on a towering embankment of camouflage-like planting. The lone lorry, dwarfed and intimidated by strangely engorged embankments, cluttered by signage and lamp posts, takes the sinister road to hell, a comment on man's environmental impact on the landscape. This painting was made after a journey to Yorkshire and is likely to have been the Ratcliffe Cooling towers in Nottinghamshire, just off the M1. Ratcliffe power station, opened in 1968, and designed by the architectural practice, Building Design Partnership (BDP).

At its peak, Ratcliffe, burned 5.5 million tons of coal, then gradually reduced its toxic emissions over the years, but many others have since been demolished, their construction unsuitable for regeneration or re purposing. Given their sculptural contribution to the landscape it is to be regretted that none has been officially listed. One, the cooling towers at Willington Power Station, has a Certificate of Immunity until 2025.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ SHARP, THOMAS. "PLANNING RESPONSIBILITY OF THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT IN BRITAIN: PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE BRITISH INSTITUTE IN LONDON." *Landscape Architecture*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1950, pp. 67–72. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44660009. Accessed 17 May 2021.

⁵⁷ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1420581>

Burra's curiously gendered road sign in *Motorway, 1972* (Fig.4) directs one to junction 101 – a possible reference to Room 101 in George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-four*, where The Ministry would confine the prisoner to address their worst fears and phobias, with the object of breaking down their resistance to a totalitarian regime. It examines the role of truth and facts within politics, and the ways in which they are manipulated. As Andrew Lambirth wrote 'The thrust of Burra's late landscapes echoes ...cynicism at man's greedy exploitation, helpless fatalism, and anger at the laziness and ineptitude of the governing minority which takes no steps to remedy the situation'.⁵⁸

The disruptive oil crisis in 1973-4, national coal strikes resulting in the three - day week, electricity and proposed petrol rationing and the ongoing protests against further road building, led other authors such as J. G. Ballard and Peter Nichols to write new dystopian, surrealist works involving disturbing nightmare scenarios on motorways and flyovers which were, to quote the novelist, Zadie Smith 'a sweet spot where dystopia and utopia converge.' Ballard's book and subsequent film, *Crash*, introduces a new post-modern dystopia into the landscape, 'a brutal, erotic and over-lit future that beckons us ever more powerfully from the margins of the technological landscape'.⁵⁹

In his book on motorways, Peter Merriman analyses the making of a mobile landscape, and cites Burra's painting *English Country Scene No. 1* (cat.359) (Fig. 6) as depicting 'the increasingly typical view of the English countryside, with a long line of lorries – replete with angry animalistic faces' in his chapter on Motorways and the environment.⁶⁰

One can add Ballard's violent sexualisation of motor vehicles, into this transgressive scenario, and one which Burra might have relished, had he read Ballard's book, published in 1973.

⁵⁸ Andrew Lambirth, *Burra: The Landscape option* in Simon Martin *Edward Burra*, (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2011) p.155.

⁵⁹ <https://www.bl.uk/works/crash#> accessed 13.7.21

⁶⁰ Peter Merriman, *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 Motorway* (Oxford: Blackwell's, 2007) P.206.



Fig 4. *Motorway* 1972 (Cat. 384) Cooling towers, Sculpturally beautiful but with toxic implications for the environment. The lorry appears threatened by the camouflaged and swollen verge, the opposite of a hard shoulder. © Bridgeman images.

The construction of these motorways was a considerable feat of engineering on a heroic scale, and the general public took to them with great euphoria for the freedom to drive fast and without traffic congestion. Service stations proved to be destinations in their own right, with amusements and even fine dining restaurants (Fig.3). The first service station was at Watford Gap in Northamptonshire, built on historic ground between two hills where the old road ran beside the canal and the railway. The name comes from a low dip in the limestone ridge that crosses England diagonally from the Cotswolds to Lincoln Edge. The ancient route, paved by the Romans (a prototype for the motorway), named Watling Street, crossed the gap and is numbered as one of the major highways of mediaeval England.⁶¹

⁶¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watford_Gap_services accessed 7.12. 20

In 1938, Clough Williams-Ellis had combined with other influential figures, including John Maynard Keynes, G. M. Trevelyan and E. M. Forster, to reiterate the message that 'the British people are heirs to a unique landscape in which beautiful towns and villages have grown in harmonious relation to the landscape.' Their book – *Britain and the Beast* – was said to be profoundly influential on wartime discussions and post-war planning.⁶² Government was though driven by the need to re-build a modern, technological United Kingdom rather than compound the myth of an agrarian Merry England. As Margaret Garlake writes, "to locate the essence of Englishness within the rural was clearly anachronistic in an economy geared to industrial revival."⁶³ Landscape painting needed to change to reflect the new modernity, and Burra took this challenge by reflecting on the wilder places, while depicting the brutal impact on the land by voracious machinery driven by faceless men.

A lasting legacy of well thought out design remains in the distinctive standardised motorway signage designed as a coherent and easily legible system, the font now known as New Motorway, by Jock Kinneir (1917–94) and Margaret Calvert (1936 –).

Sir Hugh Casson (1910 –1999) architect, and the landscape architects Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin rather surprisingly supported the traditionalists objecting to 'the worrying squiggles of lower-case lettering,' and criticized the colour and size of the signage as 'having been designed for lunatic drivers'.⁶⁴ Burra depicted those 'lunatic drivers' oblivious of their surroundings, hell bent on speeding up the Motorway as 'an all- powerful force drawing victims involuntarily into some hell mouth' in his painting *English Country Scene, No. II 1970*. (Fig.7)⁶⁵ For Burra these new roads were now an integral part of the landscape, giving what Andrew Causey describes as 'their raking depth to the horizon...their roller coaster perspective'. Being Burra, the paintings are both disapproving and humorous and an opportunity for vehicles to have strange, snarling animistic encounters.

Lawrence Halprin, the American landscape architect, wrote more lyrically than the British critics in his 1966 book *Freeways*⁶⁶ describing the American rural freeways as having 'movement and kinaesthetic qualities', and an 'exercise in choreography in the landscape ...Great ribbons of concrete, swirling the

⁶² *Britain and the Beast* referenced in Roger Scruton, Article, *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 December 2014.

⁶³ Margaret Garlake, *New Art New World*, (New Haven and London, The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1998) p, 151.

⁶⁴ TNA MT 121/72, *Minutes of The Advisory Committee on Traffic Signs for Motorways*, Minutes of the 13th meeting, 25th May 1959. "Editorial Notes: Clough Williams-Ellis." *The Town Planning Review*, vol. 54, no. 4, 1983, pp. 380–382. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40038793. Accessed 5 Jan. 2021.

⁶⁵ Causey, *Edward Burra* p.78.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Halprin, *Freeways*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Inc., 1966)

land, give us the excitement of an environmental dance, where man can be in motion in his landscape theatre.'

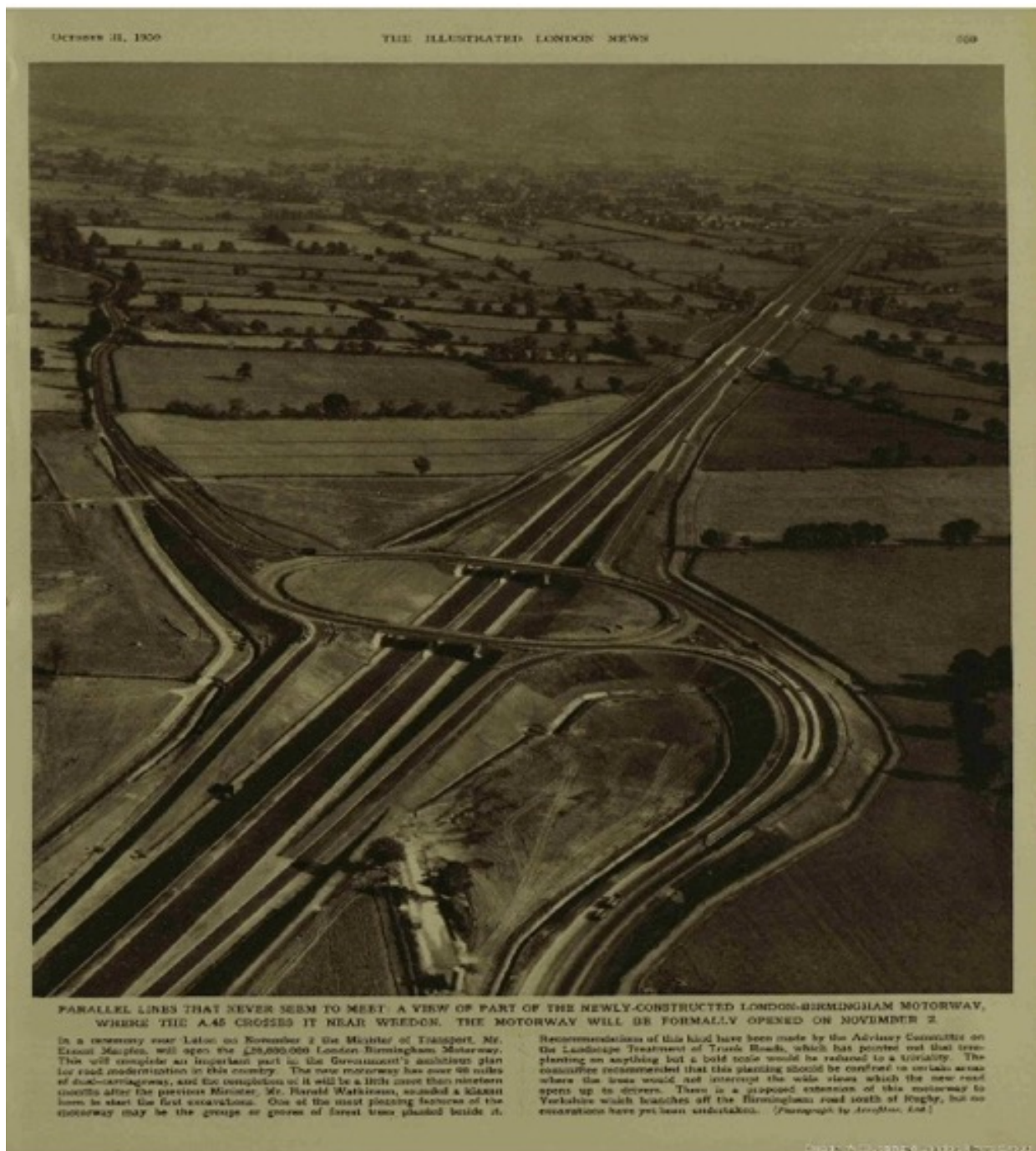


Fig. 5 *The Illustrated London News*, October 31st 1959 an almost Sublime aerial view of construction of the London to Birmingham Motorway where it crosses the A 45 near Weedon. © Illustrated London News Group.

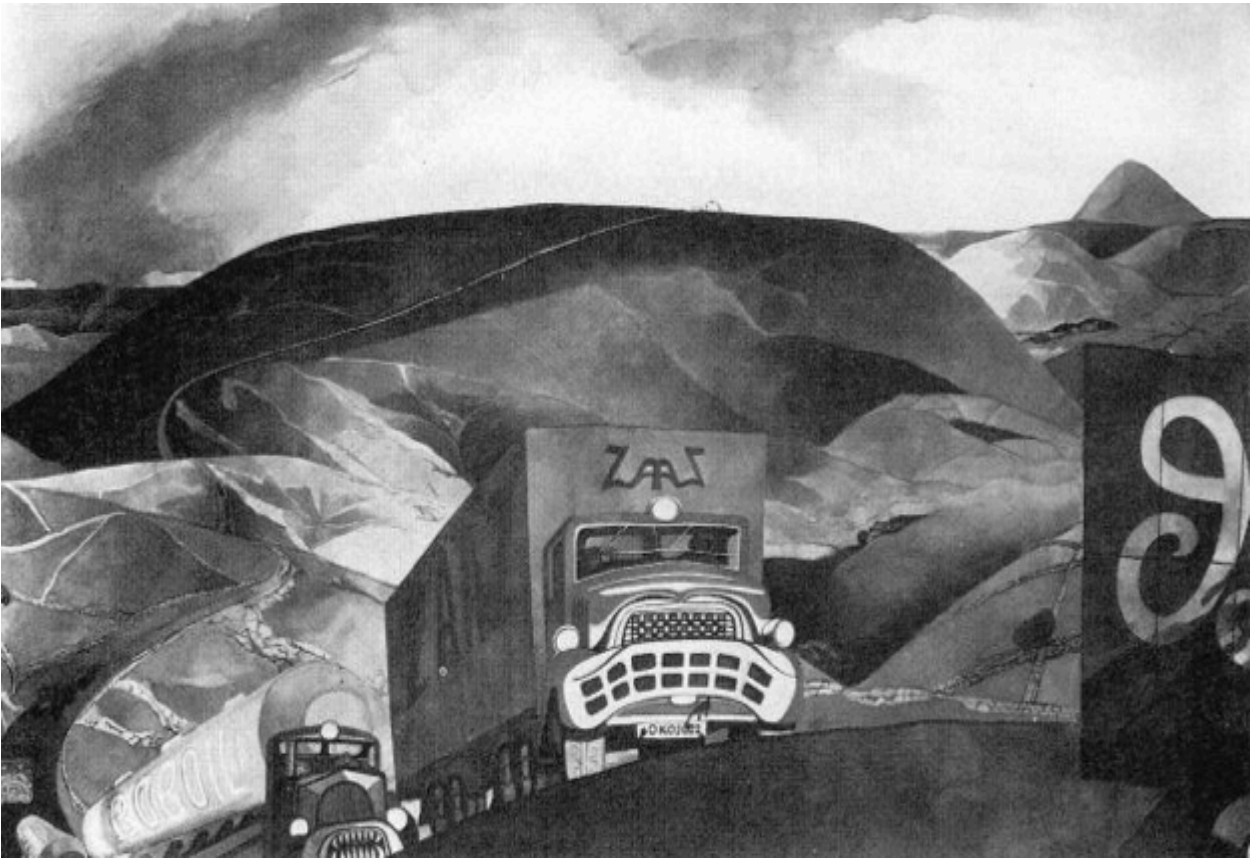


Fig. 6. Edward Burra, English Country Scene I, 1970

A typical view of queues of lorries snaking nose to tail into the distance near Buxton.



Fig. 7 Edward Burra: *An English Country Scene No. II*, 1970 (Cat. 360)

Queues of lorries despoil the hillsides near Buxton, and the speeding motorcyclist with his fragile passenger seem vulnerable between the American style Juggernauts carrying some noxious liquid or liquor, balefully observed by a burial mound— baleful eye sockets being a recurring theme in Burra's work.

Landscape in Distress

'And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.' Philip Larkin, *Going, Going*.⁶⁷

In 1965 a study by Lionel Brett, 4th Viscount Esher (1913 – 2004), architect, town planner and environmentalist, set out to evaluate the results of 20 years of expansion in a typical sample of land in the south-east of England between Oxford and Reading.⁶⁸ A Government paper, *South East Study 1964*⁶⁹ had recommended that a predicted growth of three million people could be accommodated in the twelve counties that make up the South East without the 'requirement of deliberate growth centres...the ordinary planning machinery can function satisfactorily'. Brett states that the study affects land stretching from the Vale of the White Horse to the Cliffs of Dover and from Constable country to the New Forest, not only areas of great beauty and historical importance, but of sentimental value too.

Taking a sample area of 250 square miles of Southern Oxfordshire bordered by the Thames from Oxford, through Reading and Henley with the Chiltern Hills forming the eastern edge, Brett examines the unromantic reality of the Government's proposition of unrestricted development on the area's 'rural' reserves. This area included the Wittenham Clumps, (fig. 8) a landmark of two dome-like hills topped with ancient Beech trees on the site of a hill fort with earthworks dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages. For Burra's friend Paul Nash (1895 – 1946), these mounds held a special spiritual meaning, a sense of place to which he returned again and again to paint until just before his death⁷⁰. In his powerful polemic, *Landscape in Distress*, Brett pioneered the expansion of architectural thinking to encompass the broader environmental spectrum.

⁶⁷ Archie Burnett, Ed. *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

⁶⁸ Lionel Brett, *Landscape in distress*, (London: The Architectural Press, 1965).

⁶⁹ Hansard, *HoC Debate* 04 May 1964 vol 694 cc 919-1050.

⁷⁰ Paul Nash, *Outline, an autobiography*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2016) p.100.



Fig. 8 Paul Nash, *The Wittenham Clumps*, 1912

On a clear day Nash might have seen Harwell Atomic Research Establishment from the Wittenham Clumps. (Fig. 10) This was built on the surrounding Downs in 1946 (the year Nash died) by the Ministry of Supply, which overrode all local environmental objection as well as that of other ministries. The urgent need to house workers on site resulted in prefabs being erected at speed on Downs originally scheduled as 'not for building'. Sir John Betjeman (with John Piper) wrote that the 'result is a sudden muddle, worse than the Slough Trading Estate...enclosed in a high wire fence,' and compares the 'moonlight on thatch and tile, stone and brick, elms and barns of the old village, with the blue electric glare and sinister workshops' of the Atomic Research Establishment.⁷¹ It is this 'muddle' of hastily thrown up buildings, signage, wire fencing and abandoned airfields that had little to do with the vernacular identity of rural England, left long after their war-time usage, that so outraged artists and writers of the 1960s.

Following the building of the subterranean Rutherford High Energy Laboratories on the Harwell site in 1957, landscape architect, Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900 – 1996) was commissioned to design landscaping to conceal this potentially destructive atomic tool. Jellicoe recounts sitting next to Henry Moore at a meeting of the Royal Fine Art Commission who encouraged him to 'model the land as sculpture on a

⁷¹ John Betjeman, John Piper, Ed. *Murray's Berkshire Architectural Guide* (London: John Murray, 1949) p.128.

gigantic scale' with the huge waste heap of excavated chalk at the foot of the Berkshire Downs.⁷² Jellicoe, much given to classical allegories, named the project *Nimrod*, the mighty hunter of mythology and scourge of mankind, produced drawings for three hills echoing the ancient Barrows of the surrounding Downland. These hills to protect the underground 'monster' were named *Zeus*, *Themis* and *Klotho* whose combined presence would ensure the safe future of mankind. A phone call from the client shortly before the work commenced, stated that *Klotho* would impede certain rays, and must be removed. As Jellicoe wrote, 'the fate of mankind still hangs in the balance'.

The Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) was to become the leading commissioner of landscape architecture in the 1960s providing an opportunity to remedy, re purpose and compose ways of integrating new construction with both hard and soft landscape. Their foresight in such unprecedented and widespread infrastructural projects on both rural and urban landscapes was comparable to the impact of the industrial revolution in the UK. The pylons used to carry electricity across the country became a major element in landscape, and Burra used the geometry of the pylons as personages in his paintings, striding over the landscape as if they were gendered robotic invaders.

Brenda Colvin (1897-1981) and her colleague Sylvia Crowe (1901-1997) both pioneering landscape architects, were instrumental in shaping the CEGB's approach and attitude to landscaping the new power stations and cooling towers, which were usually sited by rivers and adjoining coal fields. Colvin recognised the unsuitability of trying to screen the massive towers with conventional planting, instead relating them to the wider landscape to accentuate the elemental quality of the towers, creating ground modelling mounds using ash spoil from the coal fields, and creating lakes as boundaries. Sylvia Crowe turned her attention to the pressing problem of the need to landscape roads and motorways to integrate them into the landscape. She mentions the formation of the '*Roads Beautifying Association*' in 1928 and who contributed to the cost of roadside planting. This horticultural and frankly cosmetic solution rather obscured the need for a more radical strategy.⁷³ Crowe took a holistic and analytical view of what was needed, citing the need for the cooperation between a diverse group of local authorities, landowners, conservancies, Commissions, and Ministries of Agriculture, Air and Transport, at the initial planning stage, not as an afterthought as so often happens. As with other writers at the time, she also criticised the confusion of advertising signage, assorted structures, telephone wires and *ad hoc* planting that distracted from the beauty of a well-considered, well-

⁷² Michael Spens, *The Complete Landscape Designs and Gardens of Geoffrey Jellicoe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994) P.86.

⁷³ Sylvia Crowe, *The Landscape of Roads*, (London: The Architectural Press, 1960) P.20.

engineered road.⁷⁴ Crowe took more positive approach than others in seeing an opportunity for creating new landscapes in scale with the new developments, that could be read at speed.

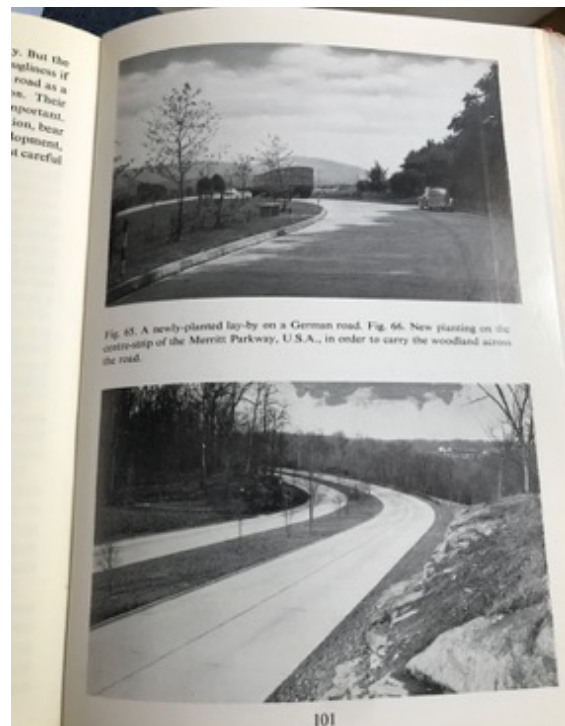


Fig. 9 Sylvia Crowe, writing in 1960 said of the design of roads, 'if they are not handled with infinite care and sensibility, they will certainly ruin much of what remains of our landscape.'

Her illustrations came from Germany and the U.S.A as there were no good examples in Britain.
Photograph taken from *The Landscape of Roads*.

⁷⁴ Crowe, *The Landscape of Roads*, (London: The Architectural Press, 1950).



Fig. 10. Didcot Power Station towers, Berkshire (now demolished) viewed from The Wittenham Clumps, a place that held immense emotional significance for Paul Nash who referred to them as his *genius loci*. © Motmit, CC BY-SA 3.0

The journalist, Ian Naim, writing in his 1955 manifesto, *Outrage*,⁷⁵ highlights the number of disused airfields (eight) with numerous abandoned huts, barbed wire and defensive signage in the area of Berkshire recorded by Brett, suggesting 'it is no use being prepared for attack if in doing so you destroy what you are supposed to be defending'.⁷⁶

Ian Naim, like Burra, was happiest when sitting in the corner of a bar, quietly ruminating on the self-made mess that was spreading across the country. He railed against the unthinking erasure of town and country by road building, bureaucratic procedure and patronising planning, and his manifesto has remained relevant and thought provoking today. What troubled Naim was mediocrity – the mass application of misunderstood principles, not the need to build or modernise. The accretion of ad hoc

⁷⁵ Ian Naim, *Outrage*, (London: Architectural Press, 1955, p.378.

⁷⁶ Naim, *Outrage*, p.378.

advertising signage, concrete bollards, lamp posts and telephone wires which appeared, sanctioned by the planning system, but without any aesthetic consideration across the country, rendered one town the same as another.

To demonstrate this creeping malaise of urban blight, Nairn documented a journey by road from the outskirts of Southampton as J. B. Priestley had done earlier, to the outskirts of Carlisle and finds the same 'creeping mildew' of provincial torpor, wherever he went regardless of local geology or regional identity. Electricity wires, TV aerials and pylons muddled views on his journey, reducing 'all urban scenes to the same common denominator – the lowest: subtopia.'

Pylons

Burra also commented dryly on the bijou, the cosy and the bungalow that was to be found in the South East, and pylons, march humming and growling over the countryside in many of his landscapes e.g. *The Pylon*, 1965 (Cat.319) as divisive harbingers of a new post-pastoral sensibility. The word pylon comes from πύλων, the Greek term for a gateway and also the name of a group of 1930s left wing poets, The Pylon Poets, including Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNiece and Cecil Day-Lewis, who were known for their use of industrial imagery in their poetry.⁷⁷ Pylons could either be interpreted as a 'heroic ideals, political networks of power,' or as 'the permanent disfigurement of a familiar feature of the English landscape.'⁷⁸ With Burra it could be both. Mediocracy and lazy thinking by local planners was indeed the greatest concern for those who valued the special character of places. The local identity formed by vernacular materials, geological conditions and trading history gave a modulation to a journey through the counties. The loss of these local signifiers was to be the greatest loss to the landscape, not the addition of pylons and wiring, however one regarded them.

*But far above and far as sight endures
Like whips of anger
With lightning's danger
There runs the quick perspective of the future.*

Stephen Spender, *The Pylons*⁷⁹

⁷⁷ <https://www.pylonofthemoth.org/2009/05/pylon-poetry-from-stephen-spender.html> accessed 19.4.21.

⁷⁸ James Purdon Research Fellow in English at Jesus College, Cambridge, writing in <http://amodem.net/article/electric-cinema-pylon-poetry/> accessed 19.4.21.

⁷⁹ Stephen Spender, "The Pylons," in *Poems* (London: Faber, 1933).

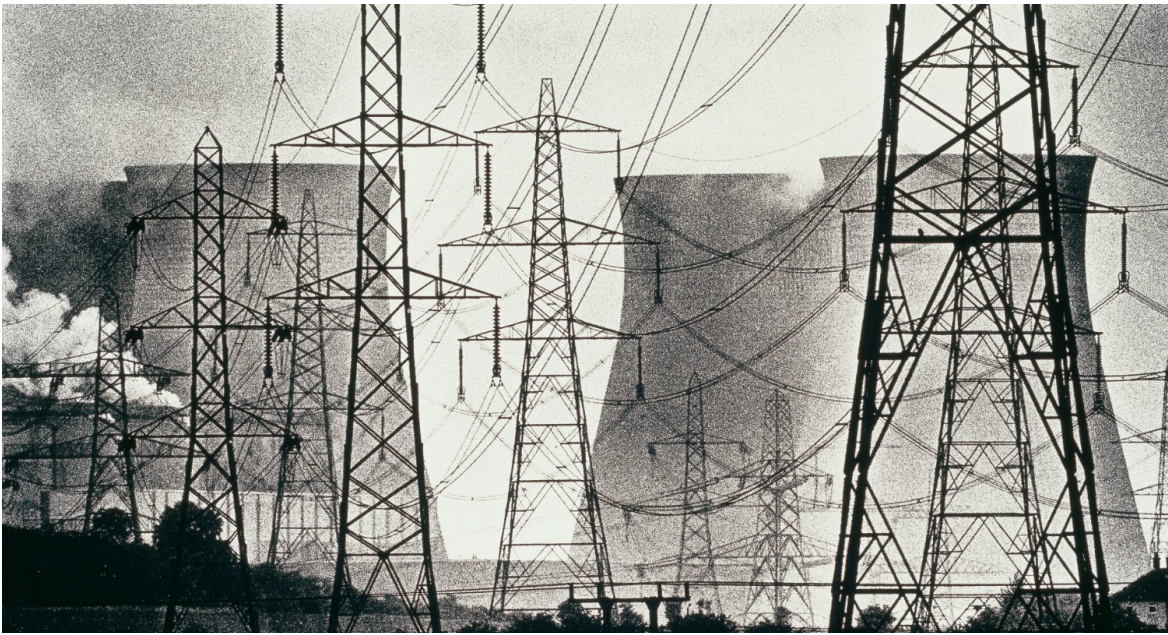


Fig 11 © Drax.com Beautiful, graphic and sinister but essential. The design of the Pylon has never been improved despite a competition to do so in 2011. Won by a Danish engineering firm, Bystrop, it is yet to be implemented. There is also a rather British society, *The Pylon Appreciation Society*.

In 1929 a flurry of letters to the Editor of *The Times*, had protested at the proposed introduction of the pylons to the Sussex Downs, including one from Rudyard Kipling and Maynard Keynes. Burra's relative, Sir Reginald Blomfield, a staunch anti-modernist and Sussex resident, had been asked by the CEBG to advise on the final design of the new pylons submitted by the American firm, Milliken Brothers, that would criss-cross the country.

Blomfield was able to justify the design by looking at the Greek origin of the word, then to ancient Egyptian gateways in a land still dominated by British imperial interests, and therefore had suitably classical antecedents.⁸⁰ In a letter to the *Times*, 1st November 1929,⁸¹ Blomfield sets out an untypical defence of his support for these 'steel masts' striding across the country, as having 'an element of romance' and adding interest to the landscape and 'make their own appeal to the imagination'. The pylon has, it could be argued, had a bad press. To many they are beautiful, fulfilling the Vitruvian principles of design perfectly, providing designed, engineered steel elements to acres of flat arable farmland.

⁸⁰ James Purdon: <http://amodem.net/article/electric-cinema-pylon-poetry/> accessed 19.4.21.

⁸¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/archive/frame/article/1929-11-01/12/5.html>.



Fig. 12 David Evans, *Driving past the Electricity Pylons*.
© Liss Llewellyn Gallery

The artist David Evans (1929-1988) was a great admirer of Burra and also painted very large water colours. He too was an ardent environmentalist and campaigner on the effects of pollution in the form of landfill, industrial plants and roads, as shown in his work. The painting (Fig 12) shows childlike toy cars dwarfed by the robotic pylon dominating the landscape, He played with perspective and painted colourful landscapes of his native Suffolk, as well as being drawn to metropolitan life, running a well - known classical record shop in London. He died in a road accident in 1988.



Fig. 13 Edward Burra, *English Countryside*, 1965-7 (detail) taken from *Edward Burra* by Simon Martin, ©The Donlea Collection

Robot-like Pylons transgress boundaries across Sussex, the composition and balance of this painting, *English Countryside* (Fig.13) dissected by a curiously blue road/landing strip shows Burra's strong graphic design ability. The colours and geometric composition in this painting are similar to Paul Nash's 1923 painting *The Shore*.

Chapter III Post War Art and Identity

This chapter will set out the mood of the country recovering from the war, and how Burra and his contemporaries interpreted the emotional impact of the prospect of nuclear warfare with the additional tension of the ongoing Cold War, through their work

As Catherine Jolivette noted in *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain*,⁸² it was the 'tension between two visions, of a Britain grounded in the past and a country facing the realities of the post-war industrial and atomic world' that the 1951 Festival of Britain, a 'tonic for the Nation' attempted to address. A statement of confidence, it was intended to reassure the British public that the country could move forward technologically while respecting the past. It was to be 'a celebration of national identity forged by landscape and an attempt to promote recovery and design in the re-building programme across the country's towns and villages.' Burra was commissioned by The Arts Council to produce a large painting of his own choice for one of the exhibitions at the festival, *Sixty paintings for '51*. His submission was described by his biographer, Jane Stevenson, as 'an extremely strange Caravaggesque *Judith and Holofernes*' (Cat. 201).⁸³ This was a typically perverse choice for a celebratory festival, being an intensely religious painting referencing the art of the sixteenth century, rather than a tonic for a nation looking forward to a brighter future. The snide grin on the severed head of Holofernes may suggest a true testament to Burra's visceral nature, one of darkness mixed with comedy,⁸⁴ or that the rhetoric of the Festival was already outdated.

One year later, the British Pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale showed a very different version of contemporary art, devoid of nostalgia or romanticism, that led Herbert Read (who both commissioned the exhibition and sat on the selection committee)⁸⁵ to dub this new movement 'The Geometry of Fear' in his essay for the exhibition catalogue. He used the term to evoke the angular and spindly sculptural forms that he equated to the fears in society during the Cold War. This was in the context of the recent end of the Second World War, the discovery of the Nazi death camps, and the growing fear of nuclear war between the USA and the Soviet Union.⁸⁶

⁸² Catherine Jolivette, *Landscape Art and Identity in 1950s Britain*, (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing, 2009).

⁸³ Jane Stevens, *Edward Burra*, p.311.

⁸⁴ <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/modern-post-war-british-art-115143/lot.7.html> accessed 15.4.21.

⁸⁵ Sophie Bowness, Clive Philpot, Ed, *Britain at the Venice Biennale 1895-1995*, (London: The British Council, 1995).

⁸⁶ Michael. Paraskos, "Geometry of Fear." *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Modernism*. : Taylor and Francis, 2016. Date Accessed 9 May. 2021.

The symbol of The Festival of Britain, *Skylon*, designed by the architectural practice, Powell and Moya, became the spindly representation of a new future, of technology, space exploration and of art taking on a more three-dimensional expression. Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of the incoming Tory government dismissed the whole event as Socialist propaganda and *Skylon* was dismantled and sold to the 600 Group, a scrap metal dealership, the symbol of the future was literally on the scrap heap.⁸⁷ It had however, symbolised a technological future that would include the exploration of space.

The work of Graham Sutherland (1903–1980) whose painting, *The Origins of the Land*, (Fig. 15) had featured prominently in the Festival of Britain, was one of the more established (and Establishment) artists shown along with Henry Moore at the 1952 Venice Biennale. Sutherland had been an official War Artist recording the devastating bomb damage to England and Wales. His subsequent work focussed on taking details from nature and expanding them into strange and mutated animalistic or vegetal forms, mutant chimeras of fear. Howling anguished orifices, isolated in an apocalyptic landscape of alienation can be seen in the pencil and water colour painting, *Twisted Tree Form*, 1944 (Fig. 14). This animistic approach can also be seen in Burra's landscapes where vehicles or hillocks have sentience, and the sentient seem transparent, vaporious.



Fig. 14 Graham Sutherland, *Twisted Tree Form*, 1944. © Laing Art Gallery.

⁸⁷ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/last-remnant-of-skylon-found-c8jwgi8qgbw> accessed 15.8.21.

Like Burra, Sutherland would paint skulls and the skeletal remains as a metaphor for human damage in the landscape, a distorted Surreal landscape which 'no longer addresses solely the depiction of topography, but encompasses issues of social, environmental and political concern'.⁸⁸ It was clear by 1951 that Britain's place in world power was declining, and that 'the world was dominated by fear and threatened by catastrophe.'⁸⁹

Art of the post-war landscape no longer addressed solely the depiction of topography, but encompassed issues of social, environmental and political concern, very much in line with Burra's disillusioned vision of the era. The collective memory of the horror of concentration camps and atom bombs had made a deep emotional impact on those artists whose careers had been established before the second war such as Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland and Barbara Hepworth.

In September of '51, prior to the Biennale the debate on the future of landscape in art came to a head in a broadcast on BBC's *Third Programme* with Reg Butler (1913-1981) sculptor and blacksmith, and Barbara Hepworth (in a series called *Artists on Art*, which addressed the new direction of contemporary art in Britain. For Hepworth it was the endurance of the British landscape and the connection with the natural world that gave a sense of permanence in a restless and frightening new world. Butler vehemently disagreed, rejecting Hepworth's clinging to the landscape for stability, saying "The environment in which we live – is not one of security – it is one of doubt, one of suspicion, one of absolute tension – we're not a pastoral society anymore."⁹⁰ This dialogue illustrates the chasm between artists who felt deep affinity with the landscape and whose work involved land-based forms, and those who felt the pressure of man-made anxiety and of the fragility of existence in a nuclear age for whom the landscape held little comfort.

Burra combined both viewpoints. From the late '60s awe inspiring landscapes bereft of people provided the large visual canvas that he chose to watch, like a peregrine falcon hovering over his unsuspecting prey. He used the scar-like quality of new arterial roads to create a long perspective or to introduce transgressive lorries crawling like dung beetles across the painting taking their toxic load to some unknown destination. Faced with a poetic moorland, Burra would conjure up somewhat camp and vaporous spirits, will-o'-the-wisps rising from the peat bog or emerging from behind a cloud, as in *Snowdonia II* (Fig. 16.) As the art critic, Giles Auty, writing in the *Spectator* in 1985 said it 'cries out for

⁸⁸ <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/collection/artists/sutherland-graham-1903>.

⁸⁹ Jolivette, *Landscape, Art and Identity*, The Archbishop of Canterbury, sermon, 17.7. 950. P.18.

⁹⁰ Catherine Jolivette, *Landscape Art and Identity*, p.149.

a speech balloon reading 'Hullo sailor'. The sublimity of the rock with its modulated colours is in contrast with the wraith-like figures which emanate from the summit. Are they the imprisoned spirits of place, guardians of a sacred mountain reproaching tourists from invading their sacred territory or are they the undead rising up to taunt the viewer.⁹¹ With Burra one suspects the latter.

⁹¹ Andrew Lambirth, contributor in Simon Martin, *Edward Burra*, (Farnham, Lund Humphries, 2011) p.156.



Fig. 15 Study No. 3, The Origins of the Landscape, Graham Sutherland, 1950
© The Artist's Estate



Fig. 16 Edward Burra, *Snowdonia No. 2*. (Cat. No.380) © Bridgeman images.

A painting that evokes the sense of both foreboding, desolation and haunting beauty is *Near Whitby, Yorkshire*, (fig. 17) painted in January 1972, (Cat. No, 385). Burra painted two versions of this, one of which forms part of the Ingram Collection.⁹² A catalogue from the Lefevre Gallery of 1982⁹³ shows the smaller painting to have been executed in 1976 shortly before his death. Whichever way one interprets the scene, it is far from cosy. The viewpoint is from on high as though from the cab of a lorry, although the grey tarmac road, which plunges off into the unknown is manifestly unfit for heavy vehicles. The purple heather has turned a burnt umber and the wayside guide stones resemble abandoned gravestones. Burra has given an acrid, penumbral cloud prominence as it emanates from a heath fire or perhaps something more sinister, nuclear. The desolation is haunting, and as with many of Burra's landscapes, one would not wish to be there on a dark night.

⁹² <http://ingramcollection.com/works/near-whitby-yorkshire-1972/> accessed 4.4.21.

⁹³ The Lefevre Gallery, exhibition catalogue, *Edward Burra 1975-1976*. 1st April – 1st May 1982.

'Landscape has a secret and silent memory, a narrative of presence where nothing is ever lost or forgotten.'
(John O'Donohue, Anam Cara 1997).



Fig. 17 Edward Burra, *Near Whitby, Yorkshire*, viewed at *The Light Box Gallery*, Woking. A pattern of small fields can be seen centre left in the acrid yellow cloud, pungent and toxic. Photo by author.

These North Yorkshire moors above Whitby are rich in historic landscape features such as ancient crosses, guide stones, (as in this painting) and shale tips left abandoned from earlier jet mining, a product of fossilised Jurassic marine sediment particular to the Whitby area, and popularised by Queen Victoria who wore Jet during her long period of mourning. The oily shale was burnt to a rich red colour by spontaneous combustion as shown in this painting.

There is a sense of mourning in this sombre landscape, for those who worked the land and lost their lives in war, or died in the mines, taken by the very land they were mining. These are the subliminal ghosts that haunt so many of Burra's late landscapes which with their melancholy colouring create a

sense of psychic unease and pathos. Grey Gowrie, (Grey Ruthven, 2nd Earl of Gowrie)⁹⁴ then Chairman of Sotheby's wrote of him that 'his meditative landscapes (are) fraught with the menace of agribusiness and general industrial exploitation' an elegant observation and generally pertinent to Burra's late paintings though it could be argued that Burra was seeing something less pragmatic, more nuanced and infinite, a 'terrain open to reconsideration'.⁹⁵

The strange numinous beauty of the moors has inspired writers and poets, especially Yorkshire born W. H. Auden (1907 – 1973) who so loved Alston Moor, mined for its zinc, barytes and fluorspar, that he kept a map of the North Pennines on the wall of his studio in Fire Island, New York. His landscape was an industrialized world shaped and re-shaped by the works of man: the 'tramlines and slagheaps' his preferred scenery.⁹⁶

Auden's poem *In Praise of Limestone*, 1948, showed the interconnectedness of people and landscape and the uncertainty of human life. Where Auden wrote about desolation, isolation, discovery, and love, Burra painted it. Understanding Auden's poetry and Burra's landscapes requires one to accept the ambiguity and emblematic symbolism in their work and find the mysticism that haunts the English landscape. Comparisons between the two men are obvious, although Burra's biographer states that Burra was not attracted to Auden's work, they were contemporaries in a time of anxiety. Both travelled extensively and understood the problems faced by mankind on the verge of war, particularly the Spanish Civil War, and both used the imagery of psychoanalysis in their work. Both felt passionately about the beauty of the English landscape and man's role in it, and both were gay.

*'When the green field comes off like a lid
Revealing what was much better hid:
Unpleasant.
And look, behind you the woods have come up and are standing round
In deadly crescent.'*

W. H. Auden, *The Witnesses*, 1932

⁹⁴ Grey Gowrie (2nd Earl of Gowrie) introduction to Sotheby's Catalogue, *Works from the Estate of Edward Burra, Lady Ritchie of Dundee and Associated Owners*, (London: Sotheby's, 2002).

⁹⁵ Ian Jeffrey, Ed. *Unseen Landscapes: Artists and Wilderness*. Catalogue to accompany an exhibition of the same name, (The Lowry Press: Salford, 2001).

⁹⁶ W. H. Auden, *Letter to Lord Byron*.



fig.18 *Landscape, Dartmoor*, 1974 (detail) (Cat. No. 395) © Christies. Burra had the landscapist's ability to show nature as overwhelming and awe inspiring – Sublime.

Landscape, Dartmoor (fig.18) resulted from Burra's visit to Tavistock and Dartmoor in September 1973, a few months after his successful retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery in May. It could be interpreted as Burra seeing this as a 'vale of soul-making' as in John Keats' letters where he sought to discover the essential meaning of life and the purpose of it all through landscapes.⁹⁷ Distorted finger-shaped rain clouds also threaten and seem to wipe the colour from the hilltops. Some fields appear

⁹⁷ John Keats, *Letter to George Keats*, April 1819, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm>.

chemically verdant below, but the foreground is sombre as with the previous painting, a subconscious sense of waiting and watching for something ominous to happen given that army camouflage is hinted at in the colours chosen. A contemporaneous painting, *Dartmoor 1974*, (Cat. 394) shows the same foreground populated with rounded stones resembling skulls, the eye sockets of ancient souls reproaching mankind for its failure to defend their land. There is no sign of life except for the suggestion of the hand of man in the old field patterns and dry stone walls that stretch like patchwork into the distance, a narrow road through the valley uncluttered by vehicles. Burra, who loved birds, as stated by his sister in the 1973 Arts Council film, may be commenting on the over use of pesticides, which killed so many native birds as documented in Rachel Carson's influential book, *Silent Spring*, as no bird life is evident in this painting.⁹⁸

There is however, an *hommage* to Burra's friend and mentor, the Surrealist painter Paul Nash, in the carefully painted clump of trees centre left, that strongly recalls *Wood on the Downs, 1930* (Fig 21) suggesting a reference to Nash's work as a war artist, and a deliberate evocation of a person he felt strongly about.⁹⁹ The engorged hills, sliced through by scar-like roads also feature in many of Burra's landscape paintings.

Nash died relatively young in 1946, and Burra would have been aware of his own mortality when finally working on the Devon landscape in 1974. As Burra said, 'I never tell anybody anything', the interpretation is for the viewer to decide, but there is a Freudian sense of the effeminate in his landscapes— of contoured thighs and buttocks, limbs awry and passive, arteries and thread veins exposed. This suggestion of Freudian symbolism is particularly evident in *Valley and River, 1972* (Cat. 387, Cover illustration). As Andrew Causey wrote in *Complete Catalogue*, 'Burra's eroticism is generally covert'. Causey was writing of the earlier works, of the bars and dance halls of pre-war Europe, but this view can also be extrapolated to the later works executed in the mid 1950s. With Burra there is always an undertow.

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms¹⁰⁰

T.S. Eliot

⁹⁸ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

⁹⁹ Jane Stevenson, Christies' sale catalogue, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5502352>.

¹⁰⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, part IV, 1925.

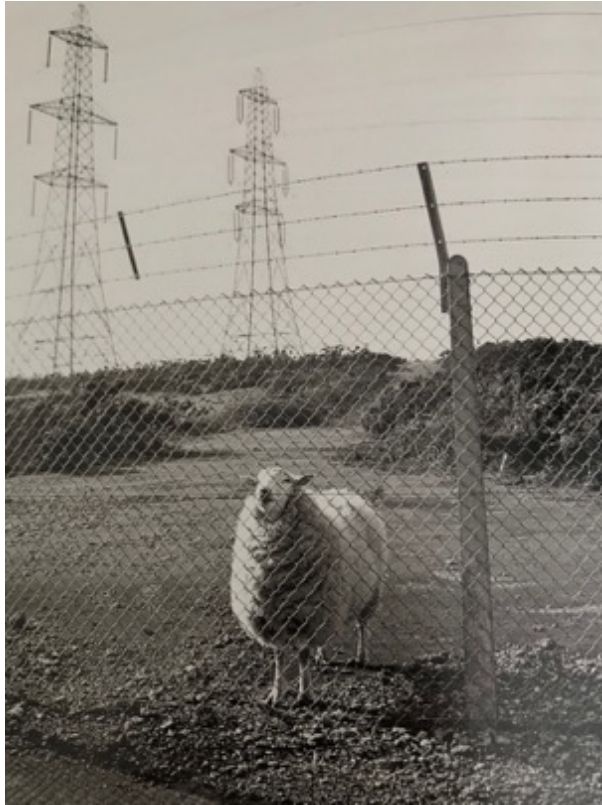


Fig. 19 © Fay Godwin 1990. A footpath closed by the Military at Lydd.

As Britain became more populated, wild open places were harder to find. The author, Robert Macfarlane, wrote in his book, *The Wild Places*, 'openness is rare, but its importance is proportionately great.'¹⁰¹ In seeking out these wild open places, Burra was confronting a changing landscape he found to be no longer bucolic or romantic, but anti-scenic, plundered by man, vulnerable.¹⁰² Few places though are truly wild. All our landscapes are a palimpsest written over by man by centuries of cultivation – 'all evolved as a varied and harmonious whole by a long living together of man and nature in a gentle climate'.¹⁰³ Nan Fairbrother in her 1970 book, *New Lives, New Landscape*, assessed the practical problems of the countryside threatened by the economic pressures of a society wanting to enjoy both the amenities of the unspoiled landscape and all that goes with an industrial democracy in the 20th century. She made a strong case for the new landscape to be well designed – new landscapes for new post war lives in well planned roads and cities - a holistic approach rather than blundering around piecemeal, in line with Sylvia Crowe's mantra, but an approach often overlooked in the race to complete projects on time and on budget. Fairbrother was also an early advocate of motorway verges and reservations being managed as nature reserves, literal corridors for ecological diversity through the

¹⁰¹ Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2008) p.76.

¹⁰² Robert Macfarlane, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-36-spring-2016/walking-unquiet-landscapes>. Accessed 6.4.21.

¹⁰³ Nan Fairbrother, *New Lives, New Landscape*. (London: The Architectural Press, 1970).

country, a linear landscape.¹⁰⁴ Fairbrother's wish for the naturalisation of roadside verges has, fifty years on, been taken up by councils leaving natural plants to flourish uncut to provide seeds and nectar. Wildlife corridors, often using redundant railway lines or 'Bee Lines'¹⁰⁵ to increase the diversity of bees and pollinators to inhabit is actively underway in London, following the success of the High Line in New York.¹⁰⁶ Even Kings College, Cambridge (Fig. 20) has let its immaculately mown sward become 'an ecosystem of wild diversity'- a wildlife meadow.¹⁰⁷



Fig. 20 Scientific research at Kings College Cambridge. ©Geoff Robinson

¹⁰⁴ Fairbrother, *New Lives, New Landscape* P.278

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.gigl.org.uk/making-a-b-line/>

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.thehighline.org/gardens/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/digitalweek/wildflower-meadow-tour>



Fig. 21 Paul Nash, *Wood on the Downs*, 1930 ©Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums. A similar clump of trees appear in Burra's *Dartmoor* '74 and road patterns over the distended tennis ball-like Downs appear in Fig. 17. Burra's *Near Whitby, Yorkshire*.



Fig. 22 Edward Burra, *Picking a Quarrel*, 1968-69 (CAT. 348) © Sotheby's. 'Hybridised animal-machines behaving like prehistoric reptiles'¹⁰⁸

Burra lamented the constant expansion of the motorways while at the same time relishing the sinister prospect of machine rule. In *Picking a Quarrel* (Fig. 22) dark humanoid figures are present but are faceless onlookers at the rape of the landscape by out-of-control machines – it is the machines that have contorted faces. That the earth moving trucks look American could be a reference to the Americanisation of the country, of roadside motels and petrol stations, advertising hoardings and the popularity of American movies. A wayside Madonna, more commonly seen in Latin countries looks down on the carnage, her blood-red cape spilling down the ravaged hillside, combining many of Burra's earlier interests. Surrealism, American cartoons, merged with his experience of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, are all present in this peculiar landscape which incorporates the painting of the fleshy protuberant buttocks of Second World War soldiers, in Burra's *Soldiers' Backs*, 1942 (Cat. 161).

¹⁰⁸ M. Wharton and m. ffolkes, *A Land fit for Traffic to live in*, article (Daily Telegraph, 31 July 1958)

Landscape as victim

As the landscape inevitably changed, so too did the work of artists during a period of geopolitical tension. Britain, due to its geographical location and alliance with the United States, was at the frontline of the struggle for political supremacy – the Cold War, a power play between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the US during the second half of the 20th century. Nuclear Weapons were held on former RAF sites by the US Air Force, notably at Greenham Common, an area of lowland heathland, ancient woodland, rivers and streams, again in rural Berkshire, a site mentioned in the Domesday book, became the scene of one of the longest mass protests in recent history.

Unsettling in a very different way was the work of neo-romantic painter, Alan Sorrell (1904 – 1974). Sorrell was one of the distinguished group of artists, dubbed by Paul Nash as 'an outbreak of talent' who attended the Royal College of Art in the mid 1920s including Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious, John Piper, Burra and Henry Moore, all of whom are strongly associated with the English landscape. A man of great principle and an active environmentalist, Sorrell campaigned to protect woodlands and hedgerows from urban development in Essex. In the biography of his life and works, the art dealer Paul Liss wrote of his paintings in general, 'The narrative both engages and unsettled the viewer – the composition suggests that more of the story is unfolding beyond the confines of the space into which the viewer peers but cannot see beyond.'¹⁰⁹ Like Burra, he saw machines as superhuman agents of destruction, operated by faceless operatives hell-bent on ripping out the visibly flinching and traumatised trees. (Fig. 23)

¹⁰⁹ Paul Liss, contributor to *Alan Sorrell, the Life and Works of an English Neo-Romantic Artist* edited (Bristol: Sansom Media, 2013) P. 11.



Fig. 23 Alan Sorrell, *The Assault*, 1974. Courtesy of Julia Sorrell.

*A small grove massacred to the last ash,
An oak with heart-rot, give away the show:
This great society is going smash;
They cannot fool us with how fast they go,
How much they cost each other and the gods!
A culture is no better than its woods.
W.H Auden, *Bucolic**

In the process of seeking permission to use the previous image in this dissertation, Sorrell's daughter, Julia replied: 'As to *The Assault*, it happens to be one of the paintings I have here, ... It was unfinished at my father's death standing on the easel waiting to be completed. It was inspired by the building of a new supermarket near to us. He went up there and did lots of drawings of diggers at work. My father was always very involved with paintings of the destruction of our green and pleasant land as well as the pending collapse of our civilisation.'

Sorrell's painting, *The Spoilers*, (Fig. 24) is also a protest against the development of urban sprawl showing a site of contest. Trees felled to make way for 'Executive homes' with manicured lawns where native trees had no place. He perceived a decline in standards in post-war Britain and even compared this to the decline of the Roman Empire 'when ordered life was gradually destroyed by the advances of the barbarians.'



Fig. 24 Alan Sorrell, *The Spoilers*, 1958 (detail) © The Artist's Estate. The development of rows of identical houses requires the use of the bulldozer to clear (or brutalise) trees in the name of modernisation

The photographer Fay Godwin (1931-2005) also evoked bleak landscapes and urban dereliction through her poetic monotone photographs, in a body of work that reflects a deep sense of place and the poetry of place.¹¹⁰ Margaret Drabble writing in 2011 on an exhibition of Godwin's work wrote 'There is a deep loneliness in some of her images, a sense of desolation,' found too in Burra's work. Her book *Our Forbidden Land*.¹¹¹ was a polemic against military and commercial exploitation of the land, (Fig. 17) and the blocking of historic rights of access to the land – the right to roam. Large parts of Dartmoor are still used for military manoeuvres, including the firing of live ammunition, and severely limiting public access. The resultant clutter of Ministry of Defence signage and wire fences, all added to the sense of unease, and that the menace of invasion is ever present. (Fig. 19). The Ministry of Defence

¹¹⁰ Margaret Drabble, article on Godwin's exhibition at The National Media Museum in *The Guardian*, 08/01/21.

¹¹¹ Fay Godwin, *Our Forbidden Land*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990).

(MOD) is still one of the largest landowners in the country, with an estate approximately equal to 1.8% of the UK land mass.¹¹²

The landscape under threat of a different kind was the subject of Godwin's book. Her deep-rooted commitment was to protect the right to roam from landowners who blocked ancient footpaths, putting up ugly wire fences and threatening signage. (Fig. 19) Her passionate and unsentimental documentation of deserted Ministry of Defence sites, long since in disuse, of moorland privately owned for game shooting and of pollution caused by nuclear power stations, led to her becoming President of the Ramblers' Association from 1987-90.

In an essay by Philip Stokes, (*St. James Modern Masterpieces*, 1998), he wrote of her work as being 'an elegy for the passing of that which can never be regained; the connection between Godwin's vision and that of William Blake and his friends is made clear. They and we have the same battle to fight.' Her subjects were the ancient terrain: stony, windswept and generally worn down by the elements, drawing attention to the harm being done to the environment in a very graphic way, through monochrome photography. She used the camera to change the way we look at our land, and like Burra, made her home in Rye. Her orthogonal photographs place the dignity of nature at the centre of the composition, the man-made detritus such as the seemingly superfluous road markings (Fig. 25) add to the message of impotent anger at the actions of man and the need to respect the land.

112

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886546/UK_Land_Holdings_Report_2020.pdf Accessed 14.6.21.



Fig.25 Fay Godwin, *Meall Mor*, Glencoe, © The Estate of the Artist. Godwin uses the perspective of the superfluous road markings and the wire fencing to emphasize the power and dignity of the hill.

Chapter V English Road Journeys

The tradition of documenting the road journey through England is a long one, but for the purposes of this dissertation, J. B. Priestley's *English Journey*, written in the second half of the 1930s, is pertinent. He portrayed 'three Englands – old Englishness, dominant industrialism, and an emergent suburban consumer culture, and expressed frustration at the state of society and a lack of a common purpose.'¹¹³ His journey from Southampton to the Black Country, captures and describes the English landscape its people, and the nature of Englishness. He writes of the nineteenth century legacy of northern industrialisation leaving 'blackened fields, poisoned rivers, ravaged earth...filth and ugliness'. Moving onto the third England, the post war scene as he reaches the suburbs of London, he finds the Americanisation of the landscape with 'arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations...bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths'.¹¹⁴ It is a narrative that still resonates today, and is certainly evident in Burra's paintings, a mixture of affection, melancholy and anger. He responded to the mood of the time amongst writers and artists.

Also entitled *An English Journey* (2004)¹¹⁵ is a film by the artist, Andrew Cross, (born 1961), a three-hour contemporary version of Priestley's journey, starting with a glossy Scania truck being loaded with pallets by silent robotic machines at Southampton docks and bound for an industrial estate in Manchester. The camera is mounted high up in the passenger seat of the truck on a journey which records many of the elements of the landscape discussed in this dissertation. The truck pulls away from the docks past Blomfield's pylons, skeletal gantries, chain-link wire fencing and past an oblique view of concrete flyovers, then on to the open road punctuated by the slightly menacing mechanical *tic toc* of the indicator as the truck takes exits at roundabouts. Calvert and Kinnear's road signs flash past as the truck starts its 'quietly chilling' motorway journey.¹¹⁶ Described eloquently by art critic Martin Herbert as 'Coming across like a frictionless computer simulation of the driving experience, what [Cross's] work achieves is a state of suspension, a productive boredom wherein it is possible to stop and consider how social changes (such as globalisation) manifest themselves on the landscape; how the tended earth itself has been, since the advent of agriculture, constantly in a state of Heraclitean flux.'¹¹⁷ This is the landscape of boredom that most people experience through the windscreen on their daily commute through Nairn's *Subtopia*, a landscape and social commentary. This every day familiarity is also

¹¹³ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, (Ilkley, Great Northern Books,2009).

¹¹⁴ Priestley, *English Journey* p.333.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Cross, *An English Journey 2004* <https://andrewcross.co.uk/video/>

¹¹⁶ Owen Hatherley, *New Statesman* 11 May 2009.

¹¹⁷ Martin Herbert – *Tate etc. Issue 4*, Summer 2005. <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-4-summer-2005>

celebrated in Martin Parr's *Boring Postcards*¹¹⁸ (Fig.26) This nothing is nevertheless something meaningful.¹¹⁹ Parr captures the innately British feeling of embarrassment mixed with humour at the banality of the subject, an intimate, satirical and anthropological look at aspects of modern life which as Sontag states, with the passage of time, becomes fantastic. Parr's obsessive collection of postcards is a chronicle of everyday life at a certain period in time akin to one's own family album.



Fig. 26. A boring postcard with *Burraesque* perspectives and dislocated geography, from a collection by Martin Parr.

Derek Jarman, (1942-1994) film director, painter, spokesman against what he saw as anti-gay politics who, knowing his illness was terminal, chose to make his final home and famous garden on the bleak shingle of Dungeness, Kent in sight of a nuclear power station. Jarman also took a road journey in 1971, *Journey to Avebury*. Using Super-8 film, what feels at first like an amateur home movie, records a summer walk through the chalky landscape, a walk which builds up to an unsettling crescendo on reaching the 'alarmingly animate' standing stones of Avebury. The author, Robert McFarlane, describes this strangeness succinctly in his essay on *Walking in Unquiet Landscapes* for The Tate Gallery website: 'It is unsettlingly anti-scenic. Bucolic dreams of cultivation and consolation are disrupted. In place of the rural, the ruderal; in place of the serene, the eerie.'¹²⁰

Oliver Wainwright writing in *The Guardian*¹²¹ recounted that when creating his somewhat unconventional garden, Jarman sensed that local fishermen feared something occult was afoot. "People

¹¹⁸ Martin Parr, Ed. *Boring Postcards*, (London: Phaidon Press. 2004).

¹¹⁹ Quoted from Bernadette Buckley, Andrew Cross: *An English Journey*, Film and Video Umbrella/John Hansard Gallery 2004.

¹²⁰ Robert McFarlane, *Walking in Unquiet Landscapes*, Tate Gallery <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-36-spring-2016/walking-unquiet-landscapes> accessed 10.7. 2021.

¹²¹ Oliver Wainwright, article in *The Guardian*, 21. 7.21

thought I was building a garden for magical purposes', 'a white witch out to get the nuclear power station.' Something of the occult was often afoot in Burra's camp creations too. There were other similarities, both men were English eccentrics, mavericks, both had incurable illnesses and loved beautiful young men. Jarman and Burra each designed theatre sets and felt a strong bond with the English landscape, and with the uneasy strangeness which exists in British art.

In 1972 Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) somewhat surprisingly commissioned a poem from Philip Larkin as a preface to a report on the human habitat called *'How Do You Want To Live?'* Predictably HMSO redacted parts. The extract below, sums up so much that Burra painted and is written in this dissertation.

Things are tougher than we are, just
As earth will always respond
However, we mess it about;
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:
The tides will be clean beyond.
—But what do I feel now? Doubt?

Or age, simply? The crowd
Is young in the M1 cafe;
Their kids are screaming for more—
More houses, more parking allowed,
More caravan sites, more pay.
On the Business Page, a score

Of spectacled grins approve
Some takeover bid that entails
Five per cent profit (and ten
Per cent more in the estuaries): move
Your works to the unspoilt dales
(Grey area grants)!

Philip Larkin. 1972

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation has been to present a summary of Edward Burra's work, and place it within the context of British post-war recovery, involving immense changes to the landscape but with scant regard for the consequent destruction of aspects we now understand to be inherently worth preserving. I have shown how Burra's work both sat within the context of other artists and writers of his time, and contributed to the vanguard of protest against the thoughtless destruction of the British landscape. I have linked part of this to Burra's uneasy societal position of one who was both on the inside — a privileged, affluent white man — and on the outside as a (non-practising) homosexual invalid who felt empathy with those on the perimeters of society. This dichotomy of both inside and outside can be seen in his admiration and simultaneous criticism of the demonic machines used to destroy the historic landscape he related to.

It is perhaps the quote from the novelist, Zadie Smith, that best describes the strange landscapes, completed in the last few years of his life as 'a sweet spot where dystopia and utopia converge.' For a country recovering from the trauma of war, the prospect of reconstruction, building a new technological future was to be welcomed but not at the expense of the pastoral heritage. Paul Nash had identified a problem for art during the heyday of Modernism in the 1930s, as to whether it was possible to 'go modern' and still 'be British'. For the British, having fought a long war to preserve their country and identity, this dilemma continued to be the subject of much debate. The post-war work of Burra's mentor Nash, the artist who had painted the devastation caused by war, was always to be haunted by death. The nature of war and its aftermath could be said to be the ultimate experience of the Sublime as defined by Edmund Burke:¹²² 'whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the Sublime'

Burra took the high theatre of the Sublime and made it his own, infusing it with meaning. His perception of a pure awe-inspiring landscape was tempered by his own experience of pain, and a pain that man had also inflicted on the land over the centuries by his actions, never more so than by war and subsequent programme of road building. Whilst Burra never discussed his work it could be said that he was hoping to galvanise the viewer to feel the distress and act with the energy he did not possess, to respect the sense of place that we are heirs to.

¹²² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful with Several Other Additions*. The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, 12 volumes, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm>.

Burra was arguably one of the most inventive and beautiful exploiters of watercolour as a landscape medium since John Sell Cotman. The scale and the opacity of the works is extraordinary, even more strange when one discovers the secret of his velvety textures to be copious amounts of spit. His health was undoubtedly a constant and cruel burden, depriving him of the physical energy to even explore his sexuality, yet enabled him to avoid the strictures of an Eton education to become an artist, and to escape conscription in World War II. One suspects that either experience would have ended in disaster.

His early paintings of the bars and dance halls of Latin ports, of barmaids and matelots were colourful, closely observed, and erotically charged. That he should turn to landscapes entirely devoid of the colourful and culturally diverse is also paradoxical, but his health again determined a new pioneering direction. His ability to observe and keep the memory of what he saw to paint later, enabled an imaginative interpretation more nuanced than had he painted at the scene. His love of the American cinema spilled out on the roads of North Yorkshire, where Spanish Madonnas found themselves shedding tears on Motorway hard shoulders. Buttocks appeared at random in an otherwise pastoral landscape and baleful eyes watched the whole carry on from ancient barrows. Like Sutherland he viewed the landscape as a site for anxiety, which might at any minute turn against man in acts of malevolence.¹²³ In Burra's paintings, the eyes of the hills and barrows are watching and waiting.

English Heritage produced a report entitled, appropriately, *A Look in the Rear -View Mirror*,¹²⁴ which looked back at the damage done to approximately 1,000 archaeological sites by the extensive road building programme, showing that 930 KM square of motorways were opened between 1970 and 1974, and by 2011 an area of 3,065 square km was covered by roads, 2.3% of Britain's whole land area. It could be argued that Burra's ethereal spirits were those whose resting places were disturbed by the Caterpillar tractors and earth movers that devoured the country, as in his strangest paintings.

But England is not gone: The British identity is still deeply engrained in the landscape, that now any development that disturbs a natural element, be it Natterjack toads, Pipistrelle bats, wild orchids or Desmoulin's whorl snail,¹²⁵ is met with organised and impassioned group protest. Archaeologists are now given access to development sites prior to major construction works, and programmes of

¹²³ Catherine Jolivet, *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain*. P.34

¹²⁴ Magnus Alexander: *A Look in the Rear -View Mirror: Twentieth Century road Building and the Development of Professional Archaeology*. English Heritage Report 93-2011

¹²⁵ <https://www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/news/article/snail-and-bypass>.

educational talks and tours are implemented, even at the cost and inconvenience of developers.

Burra brought his interpretation of a living but mute landscape under threat of Tarmac, concrete and the casual day tripper, in line with others who were dismayed at the mediocrity of suburban spread. He railed against aesthetic myopia and the sameness that was spreading across the country, through the unusual medium of watercolour, as passionately as Ian Nairn expressed outrage with his words.

Paul Nash's statement for Unit One suggested 'We must find new symbols to express our reaction to the environment. In some cases, this will take the form of an abstract art, in others we may look for some different nature of imaginative research.' This dissertation places Edward Burra's reaction to the environmental problems firmly into the field of imaginative research. Alan Powers quotes C. J. Jung's theory of archetypes, that 'ideas and images that are latent in the shared consciousness of man' and that it is 'the artist's special duty to bring out into the open, through his sensitivity to the subconscious'.¹²⁶ Burra's paintings are evocations of 'an inhabited landscape, though not populated in quite the ordinary way.'¹²⁷

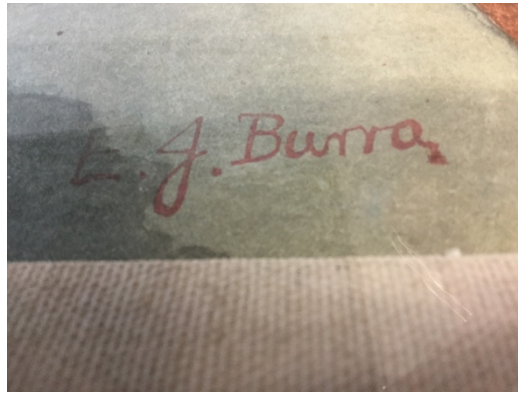
His late, disquieting works, both rich and strange, can be seen as a register of dissent and unease at the loss of aestheticism and the spread of placelessness by the hand of man. This dissertation shows how his work fits into a particular moment of concern and anxiety for the landscape in the 20th century, alongside the writing of Priestley and Nairn, the poems of Auden, Betjeman and Larkin. The late landscapes were Burra's coded elegy for an arcadia that once lost could never be regained.

'Everything is in flux and nothing abides everything flows and nothing stays fixed everything is constantly changing and nothing stays the same'

On Nature, Heraclitus

¹²⁶ Alan Powers, Chapter 3, *Landscape in Britain*, in Treib Ed, *The Architecture of Landscape, 1940 – 1960* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. P. 70.

¹²⁷ Simon Martin, *Edward Burra*, P.156.



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