

A peaceful place

Andrew Gallon meets an artist for whom sketching represented an escape from psychological abuse



Rock climbing brought artist and writer Ray Green to Lakeland forty-four years ago. He discovered climbing – “one of those lucky accidents” – while studying architecture at the University of Bristol. As a result, Southampton-born Ray was keen to live near mountains and, after graduation, relocated to Kendal to take up a post as an architect with South Lakeland District Council. It was the start of an enduring love affair with the “energy and wild beauty” of Cumbria’s dramatic landscape.

Ray got involved with the 4th Kendal Venture Scouts, becoming an instructor then a fully qualified mountain leader,

and for a decade was a member of the Kendal Mountain Rescue team. At the age of fifty-four he accepted an offer of voluntary redundancy from his job as a Lancashire County Council architect; he took up canoeing and also painting, an interest that had lain dormant since passing A-Level art as a teenager.

He retrained as a counsellor and a psychotherapist at the University of Cumbria, and used painting and drawing to

Ray Green in his Kendal home studio with an acrylic painting of Loch Shiel, a wild place in the Scottish Highlands

assist inarticulate clients. “The idea of helping them access previously unexpressed or uncontacted feelings was the same as contacting the feelings a wild place evokes in me,” he says. “The work also felt like journeying into wild places, walking people’s narrow edges with them.” Only in the last two years, after retiring as a supervisor of counsellors, has Ray been able to devote time and energy exclusively to painting.

“ Writing allows me to reflect on what is happening as I’m sitting in front of a landscape

“I’ve had two very fulfilling careers,” he says, “and I’m very pleased I’ve developed my painting and writing alongside those careers. Now I’m retired, this is my third career. A good friend has an expression ‘don’t retire, rewire’, and that’s what I feel I’m doing with my art and painting.”

On September 29–30 Ray, a member of artists’ collective Green Door, will take part in the annual Green Door Art Trail. He will have about twenty-five paintings displayed at his Kendal home (22 Briarigg, LA9 6FA). Ray also launches his first book, *A Walk in the Wild*, featuring thirty paintings and accompanying poetry or prose. He will share his home exhibition space during the Art Trail with photographer, fellow Green Door member and friend Eric Pye who, like Ray, is a

walker and a devotee of wild places.

Though Ray returned to painting relatively late in life, he has sketched and written since boyhood. Drawers in his home studio bulge with sketchbooks, and on a shelf are stacked journals started thirty-five years go. “It’s lovely going back,” he says, “just reading sections.” Essentially, the sketchbooks and journals contain Ray’s on-the-spot responses to the landscapes – the wild places – he subsequently paints, notably in Cumbria, Scotland, France and South East Asia.

Growing up in Southampton, Ray was abused psychologically by his parents. “When I was ten,” he recalls, “I went out to sketch by the banks of the River Itchen. I think, because of the stressful family situation I was in, sketching felt I had part-crossed into a peaceful place. It was weird, experiencing something happening. I still can’t explain what it is. I’ve always had a habit of sketching. That’s how my love of painting in the wild places started.

“Writing came about at school. I felt the need to write something. Initially, it was to keep a record of the big journeys I was making. At university, I had a friend with whom I caught a train and hitched round France. That was six weeks, and I needed to record it. It grew from there. Writing allows me to reflect on what is happening as I’m sitting in front of a landscape. It is what it is stimulating in me. I try to get a sense of the core of what it is I’m trying to paint; what is there that really attracts me in the landscape. I try to capture that in the sketch. Sometimes, I’ll write words down about what really resonates, about what’s going on.”



Ray no longer climbs but manages scrambling, along with “wilderness” canoeing and “serious” fell walking. Back in his home studio, after a trip to wild places, he is a whirl of activity (“there’s a lot to paint”). Ray uses acrylic paint, which he builds up in layers and often scores or scratches. “I can work very quickly with acrylic, and paint over the things I’d like to,” he explains. “I like to work spontaneously, not thinking too much, whereas with oil I would have to leave the painting to dry for two or three days. I try to make sure the painting captures the spirit of the sketch. The colours I use tend to be a little bit more extreme than normal. I use the colours to create an emotional impact, to provoke a reaction.”

Ray visits many of his favourite wild places alone, others in the company of friends. In June, he and wife Jan spent a fortnight canoeing the Loire in France. His sketchbook, stowed in the bottom of the canoe, protected by a dry bag, was an essential item of equipment.

“Longsleddale and Kentmere are imprinted on me, not just because I did a lot of work with Venture Scouts there, but because I have some great – and some sad – memories of the mountain rescue team there,” he says. “I like Thirlmere, because straightaway you get into the east-to-north-facing slopes of the mountains. It’s a savage and, with the drowned village, a slightly eerie place. It’s remote; there’s nobody there. You never see a soul on the water. One of the classic canoe journeys I’ve done, loads of times, is from the Middle Derwent at Grange in Borrowdale. I paddle down the lake, wild camp

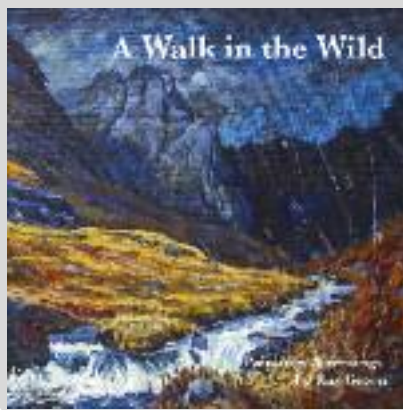
on St Herbert’s Island then go down the next Derwent, to Bassenthwaite.

“Autumn and winter are my favourite seasons in Cumbria because I love the rawness of the colours: the greys and the yellows, compared to the lush greens of the summer. The Lake District can look a bit twee in the summer.”

Creatures Calling Our Names

Two of us walk along the outfall river from the tarn in Dovedale. There, a solitary white swan swims alone in the big world of Brothers Water and dwarfing ancient mountains. It senses us walking by, disturbing the peace of the other world, rippling its calm surface. So it arches its wings, halo-like above its back in the beautiful heart shape of a creature in love with its destiny. Then, invisibly powered, moves in awesome majesty away over the water. Does it know it is alone with no mate, and so reaches out to us? A white visitation, calling, calling.

*Extracted from A Walk in the Wild,
by Ray Green*





The idea of presenting his painting and writing alongside each other in a book is relatively recent. The seed was sown when Ray was invited to a Stealing Thunder Storynights' storytelling evening at Brigsteer Village Hall. He has since given illustrated talks to community groups. "Some of the pieces of writing are almost meditations, soliloquies. Some of them are real life adventure experiences. Originally, I thought they were just for me: memories of places. But then I realised people find them very interesting and want to hear them. Only in the last year or so have I started, in my talks, to share my writings against a backcloth of my paintings. The two together work very well. It increases the impact of each.

*Winter road through the Lake District;
previous page, Lake District Waterfall*

"My talks evoke a powerful reaction, anything from laughter to tears. People tell me they are moved. They love the combination of the paintings and the writing. Reading my own poems and writings is much more powerful than someone else reading them because I put my soul into it. I'm confident, now, about how the book is going to work." ■

Visit the websites raygreen-artist.co.uk and greendoor.org.uk for more. Ray's paintings can be viewed at G1Art Gallery, Windermere