

Dear Alan,
 For years - how many it be, I work-
 -ed and struggled in rooms where, to quote
 one obstacle there were people who did not
 want to learn to draw. They were late and
 shuffled out early, talked, laughed. I found
 it hell to concentrate. However I worked
 on. There were years the skin, on face and
 my body broke. Doctors said it was nerve
 strain. I worked on - and I worked while
 water dripped from my skin eruptions.
 Ultimately I broke my heart even. However
 I got some drawings. Drawings that could
 have gone to represent drawing in the world
 anywhere. I chose the best. I sent them
 to Perth Art Gallery. Now they have been
~~misplaced~~
 stolen? (or am I a fool to keep hoping)

and dear Alan McCulloch says 'Bequeath
 the paintings to the Gallery.'

What again!

And have that stolen by some sharp fellow
 I would sooner cut it to pieces

Please show Ellen this letter.

2/2/57.

Love G. Murray.

In Memoriam Godfrey Miller

Alan McCulloch

One day, early in 1958, I met Godfrey Miller in a Melbourne teashop; he had arrived from Sydney about an hour previously and wanted to talk about some drawings – his own drawings naturally. He ordered tea and plain cake and when it came reduced the cake to crumbs with a fork, raked them into a neat mound in the middle of the plate and ate them with a teaspoon.

I am not presenting this incident to demonstrate Godfrey's well-known eccentricity; he talked throughout with an absent-minded air and I am sure was completely unaware of any strangeness in the way he ate the cake.

The incident impressed me because it seemed symbolic of Godfrey's whole outlook, his entire attitude towards art and life; everything needed first to be reduced to separate units before a new synthesis could be effected; analysis of matter had to be carefully detailed.

'Miller?' The *Sydney Morning Herald* critic, Paul Haefliger, had once said in answer to a question: 'Yes, Miller's one of the few real painters. But Lord! What a tortuous technique . . .' Haefliger's assessments had a notable reputation for accuracy. But was 'tortuous' really the word to describe that wonderful complexity of minute squares and rectangles, that taut, mysterious labyrinth of precise linear structure?

The word 'technique' never came into Miller's calculations; whenever he transferred those tiny filaments of black from the dark areas of the compositions into the light to infect the pale viridians, oranges and ultramarines with that characteristic, jewel-like sparkle, was he not transferring, in his heart, the under-privileged from the darkness of some Indian village to the more hygienic light of the West in honour of a Utopian,



universal integration such as he often dreamed about? I believe so. As he said in a letter:

India is the great source of Wisdom (tho' she could never put it out) and is to be elevated . . .

Anyway he was certainly not thinking of technique.

Hal Missingham introduced me to Miller in 1952; he lived then in what I took to be the former premises of a ship's chandler near Circular Quay. He was dressed in white duck trousers and



GODFREY MILLER UNITY IN BLUE
Oil on canvas 26in x 33in
Collection Art Gallery of NSW

sandshoes and he intoned about the paintings which he had shown us after much persuasion, in soft, almost whispered accents so that we had the impression of listening not so much to an artist talking about his work as to a penitent making his confessional . . .

From the moment of that first meeting he became my most regular and relentless correspondent. In the course of our growing acquaintance I invited him to come and stay with us 'if ever he was down south in Melbourne and felt like it', and one day to my surprise he arrived.

He had his pyjamas on underneath his clothes and carried a heavy suitcase which, it transpired, contained a small painting

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of a madonna; the madonna was placed on the living-room mantelpiece and every night, sitting before the fire, we would talk about it.

After two days my wife and small daughter had both fallen in love with Godfrey; my wife wanted badly to buy the madonna, but we did not have the money to offer and in any case he, himself, was so enraptured by the picture that we did not feel it would have been right to ask him to part with it.

It was rather like having Fra Angelico in the house.

He had brought the madonna partly because he wanted to look at it and partly as a safety measure, two or three similar madonnas having been stolen from him, as he told us, along with

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several pieces of copper guttering which he had personally installed on the roof of his newly acquired house at Paddington. I did not know then that he had the habit of painting one picture on top of another, or rather continuing with a second version, then a third, on the same piece of canvas on which the first version of the subject had already been completed.

He loved walking among the pines which cover the few acres of land surrounding our house
*secretive fellows and don't reveal the influence spring has on them, and getting into the long, green grasses for a few strokes with a sharp scythe
 that bent and crooked instrument whose cut can be gauged from the sound . . .*

In 1957 he planned a trip abroad.

I have an idea of making a break and going over to Paris - getting a run in while I can . . . I am having a flutter. I will fly, leaving Sept. 19th.

Nearly six letterless weeks passed before I heard of the disaster which had caused this silence. The letter was written on November 11th, from the American hospital at Neuilly, Paris.

Where are your scouts? I came to Paris, end Sept. On about 1st Oct. I was knocked down by some motor vehicle. Unconscious and they put me in a public casualty ward [a letter from the French critic, Waldemar George, eventually enabled the police to trace his connections and identify him]. Somehow, after four days when nothing was done, my friends got me out. I went to the above. Fever had come and I had a dreadful struggle for my life . . . six long weeks unable to move from my back. I have great admiration for the devotion of doctors . . .

Then later:

So you like the French? Did you ever put your head in a public hospital casualty ward? Did you ever listen to Paris television? Did you ever see 'Cach'? . . . I am sorry for them over their social services. So often they have tried to clean them up. Committees start with someone giving a long speech, long speech, long speech. And it ends with things understuffed by kind, well-meaning persons; no money, no organization. 'Cach' is a form of boxing-wrestling where you can kick your opponent, kick him anywhere. I was shocked to see on television wonderful childrens' drawings excluded and prize (given to drawing) of elephant like you see in India on a cigarette case. All the same there is a wealth of things here if only you are young.

Godfrey saw the Paris of 1957 from a hospital bed, but it was astonishing how much he saw; again he was gathering the scattered units - casualty ward, charity workers, hospital staff, television snippets - and the synthesis of impressions appeared

in his letters. Back in Sydney in 1958 he took up the threads of a project which he had already mentioned in the fascinating context of that tireless correspondence.

Speaking hypothetically, speaking in the world of suggestion, for the moment only - what would you say if I launched a plan to come to Melbourne with seven paintings; four being large, three small, putting say four up for sale? . . .

I gave careful thought to this idea, then approached the director of the National Gallery of Victoria. Why should not one of the finest painters in Australia, having never previously received any official recognition, why should he not be given the honour of a full-scale, retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery? The director put the suggestion to the trustees who, surprisingly enough since this had not happened to a living artist since Rupert Bunney, accepted the recommendation; Leonard French, not long appointed exhibitions officer at the gallery, was enthusiastic. Godfrey's response mixed caution with justifiable pride - it was good, but it was his due.

A lot of goodwill, faith and firm belief went into the implementation of the exhibition, but as time proved there were organizational hazards that nobody could have anticipated.

When finally it was mounted the exhibition more than justified expectations, a splendid testimony to an artist's dedicated work and beliefs.

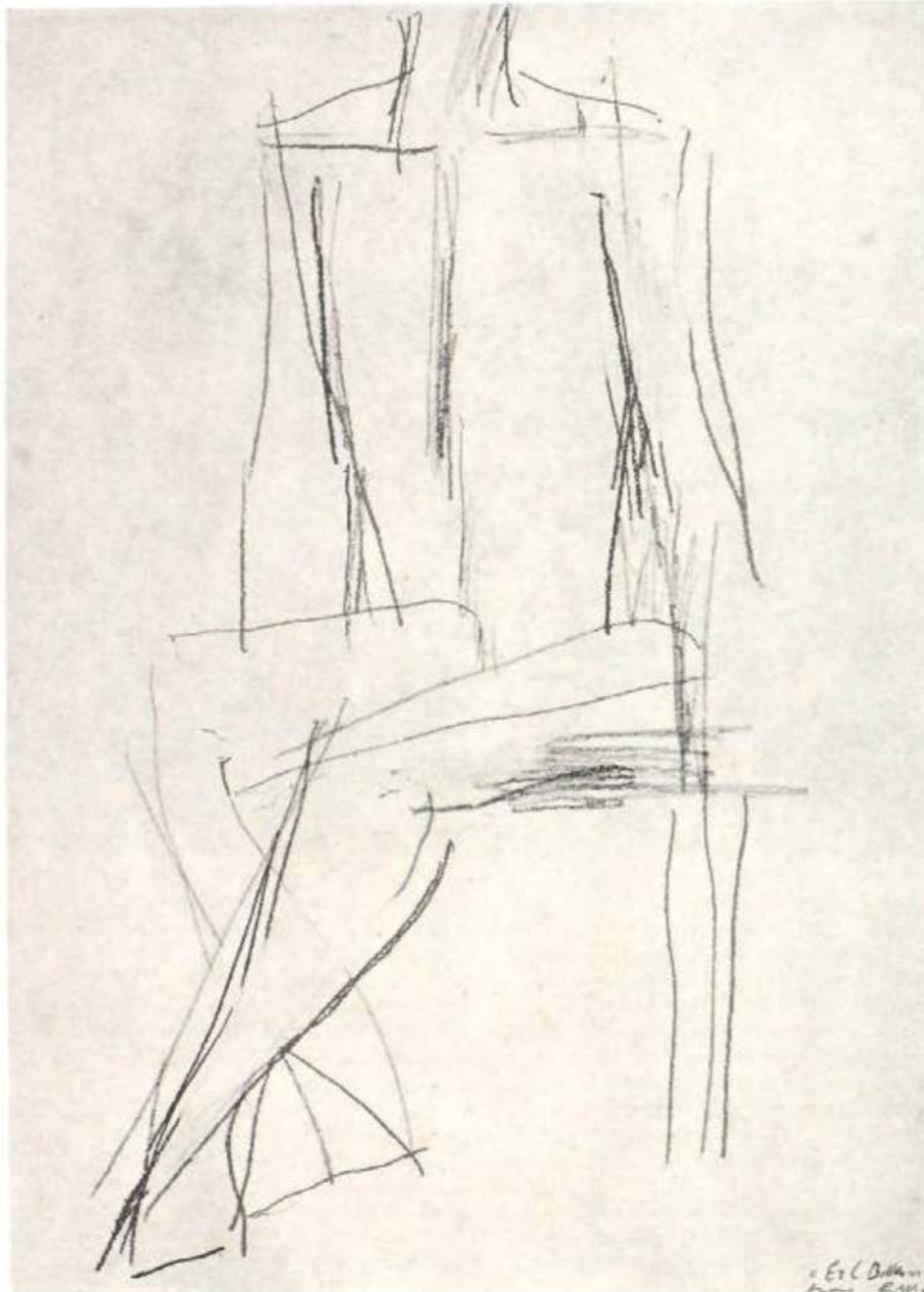
Godfrey however did not see it in this light, the organization had not satisfied his expectations and his letters contained some sharp rebukes.

The letters continued however, after a brief lapse, with undiminished energy . . .

In the course of our ten years or more of correspondence Godfrey, who was born in Wellington, New Zealand, gave as his birth date three different times: 1891, '93 and '95. His letters stated what he thought of biography:

The word . . . biography isn't much of a one is it? I suppose the great item in anything of a man's make-up, is why does he accept certain things, statements, analogies, why accept them not now but then, or accept them now under certain circumstances, but not then a few minutes later - or why accept them at all? So - thus we step through the world of creative men. Sometimes taking, as I say, an analogy, sometimes refusing it. To get at this strange thing in a man we go in for a lot of things and we call it a biography: we ask how old, how racial he is . . .

Without consulting the New Zealand archives I would say that Godfrey was born probably in 1891, which would make him



E. C. Becken
1964

GODFREY MILLER NUDE
Drawing 10in x 7in
Collection Earle Becken

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seventy-two or seventy-three when he died at Paddington (10th May 1964).

He was wounded at Gallipoli during World War I, studied at the Slade under Tonks and travelled in the Mediterranean countries and the Far East before settling in Australia; War-randyte, Victoria, was his home before he moved to Sydney.

I have never met a man whose work was so completely integrated with his personality; for that reason it would be quite useless for another painter to imitate his painting, as several have tried to do. They might produce a replica which was even an improvement, technically speaking, of the original, but without the motive power – the philosophy – the work would be meaningless.

One of the strangest pieces of recognition Godfrey received was the book of forty drawings published by Edwards and Shaw (Sydney, 1962) with an understanding foreword by John Henshaw.

The drawings were so slight in some cases as to barely do more than caress the paper; one felt that a breath of air might well blow them from the pages. Yet suddenly, here and there, a climax occurred, so that a particular, fugitive sketch would have the quality of a tense exclamation; even without knowledge of the artist it was possible to sense the reservoir of untapped power of which they were so briefly expressive a part . . .

What of the paintings? How did Godfrey arrive at the conclusions which prompted his extremely complex style or manner? This passage from one of the letters explains the more simple aspects:

I am launching this little plan of approach. Period (1) The working in monochrome. Period (2) The coming of colour. (3) The accent on drawing or, as Professor Tonks would call it, the science of drawing, plus the entrance into modelling and matters of the third dimension as plain third dimension. These three features seem to me the most important in what I have done. The endeavour – rather pitifully determined – to build and create in sepia certainly gave the germ or setting for later imports . . .

The elementary features of that way of working could produce Claude Lorraine and Turner's early work – simplicity, dignity, power and light. The second period – the coming of colour – could be called the awful one. For a time it destroyed, by ruffling the expressions in the rhythms, the creative work of the sepia. But it brought a new power. But is it, I still ask, allied to and incorporated in tone? Or is it set against and antagonistic to tone? The third, the science of drawing, grew out of the need which, as I suggest, appeared to have something more tangible and crucial in the mixture of tone colour existence . . .

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But the crux of the matter is that, having equipped himself with a vocabulary in this manner, Godfrey expressed in his paintings everything he observed and thought and reasoned about the visible world, whether the vehicle for such expression was a nude, still-life, or a triptych of trees from the Australian bush for which he had an overwhelming passion.

Public recognition of Godfrey's painting extended over a maximum period of about twelve years; little is known of his twenty years or more of solitude. He never forgot a remark made to him by Leonard French soon after they met; it recalled I believe those twenty years and he quoted it twice in letters to me:

If you're a painter you have to accept the fact that you're also a prisoner.

Godfrey's life's work comprised perhaps fifty or sixty paintings besides numerous drawings. Once he attained recognition the paintings were eagerly sought; Godfrey who had worked on most of them for several years loved the idea of getting high prices but hated to relinquish possession of objects that represented his heart's blood.

Nevertheless some did find their way into State galleries, a few into private hands, and one was acquired for the Tate Gallery, London, at the time of the Whitechapel show of Australian painting, 1961. From the moment of that fame-making purchase, Godfrey scanned the papers and other sources for news about the Tate. Pleased at first his attitude underwent a gradual metamorphosis.

The last letter he ever wrote to me (30th March 1964) concluded with this passage:

The Tate has gone Beate! no artist would try to get into it. Above and beyond this – on another plane altogether – I would put my remark: the last decade, the period we have lived, is the greatest – and I would solemnly say it were it my last breath, my last blood therein to write it – the greatest decade of all history. I don't just mean history of us but history of all the world. And we wouldn't see . . .

And the future of Australian painting?

The fashions of painting were anathema to him; he was full of apprehension about their effects on the young.

A footnote added to one of his letters concerning a change in his signature (the downstroke of the letter 'y' in Godfrey) might well be quoted as a note of advice to young painters:

My new signing . . . the downstroke of the 'y'. The firmness thereof means: come on you fellows, none of your unknown movements. Be firm. Come out into the open and let me know scientifically where you will be.