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JAMES DIXON - PRIMITIVE PAINTER OF TORY ISLAND

by

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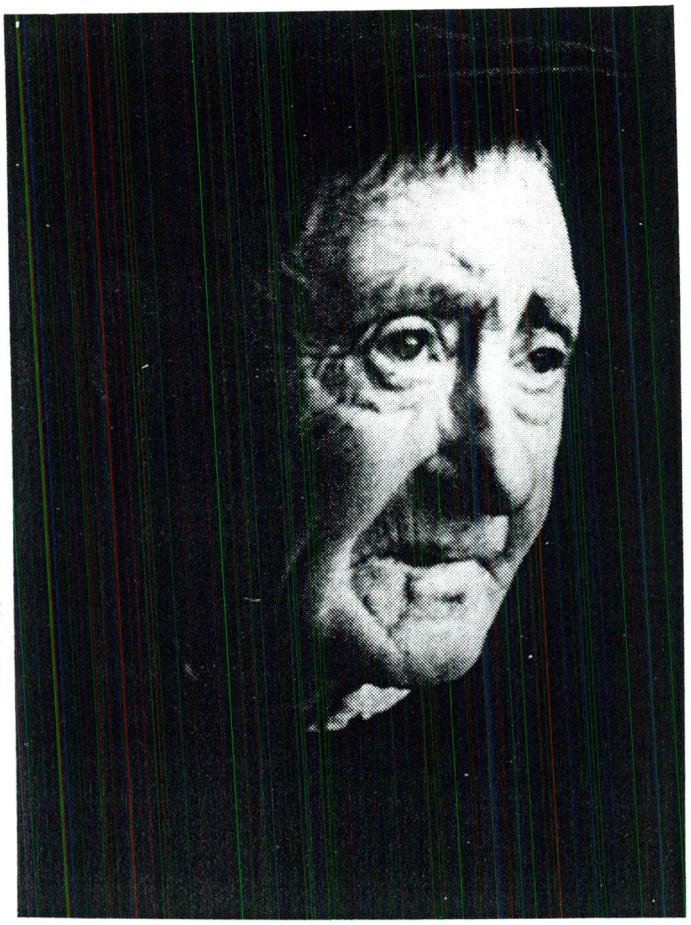


Dixon, James

(Figure 1 - James Dixon)

"Dixon on Tory"

"Incorrigible these beginnings,
The first flagstaff that was erected
on Ardlarin Point by Lloyds
For signalling to ships and the first
Tractor that ever came to Tory.

These representative lives
steered between the rocks of sea and land
And these other uncluttered journeys
The Wild Goose leaving after
A good dance on Tory Island hall

The Queen on her Royal Yacht Britannia
Miss Rodgers driving the cattle home.
The easy telling of these endings
The Wasp wrecked on back of the lighthouse
The Rothy Boy of Greenock

On the rocks near the east end,
The Farholm on the rocks beside Alarin
Ninety people have been drowned
Under this weight of oil and canvas
Though one survived by clinging to the brush."

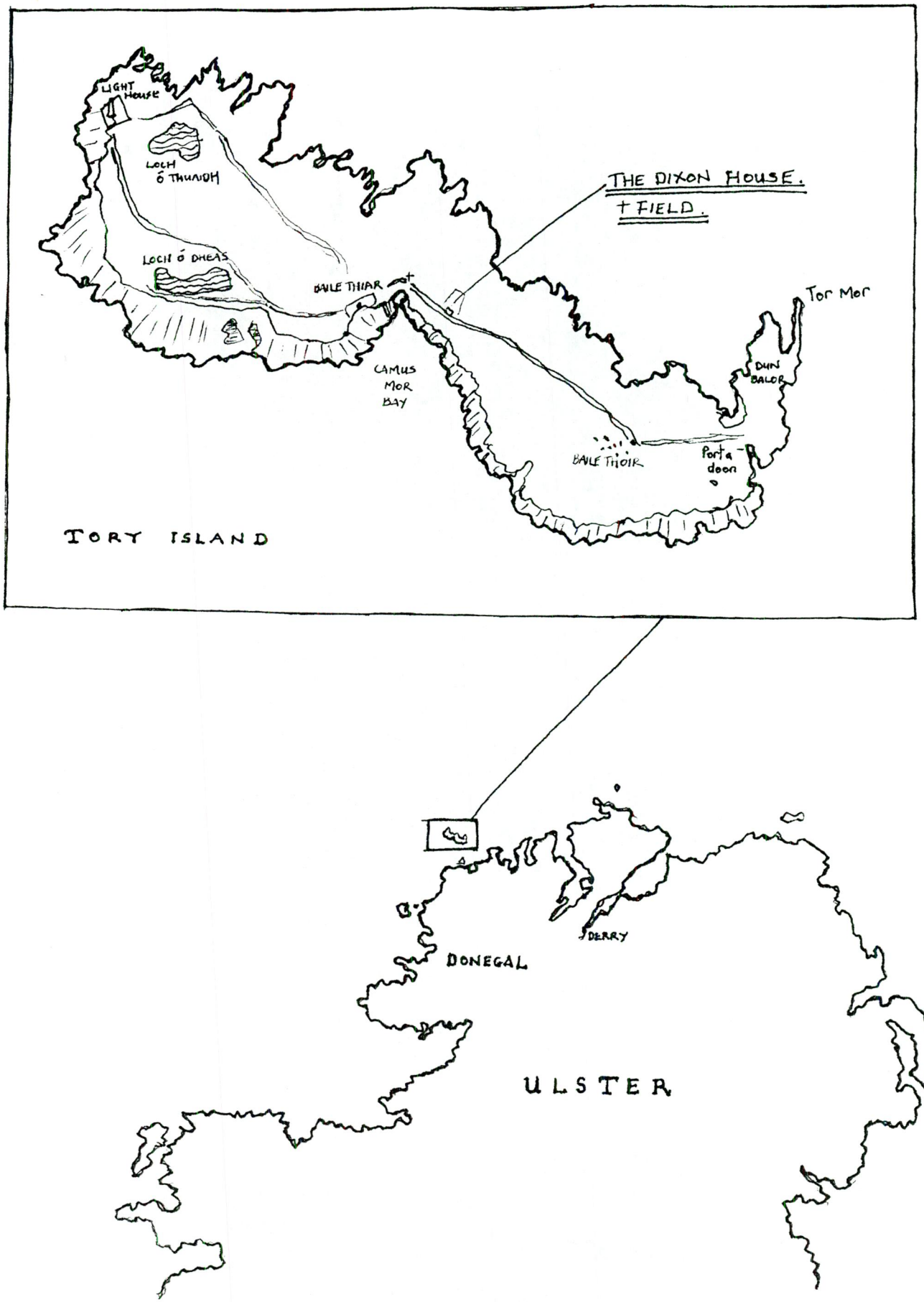
Paul Muldoon

(Reprinted from "Knowing My Place", (Ulsterman Publications, 1971)

INTRODUCTION

The paintings of James Dixon, the primitive painter of Tory Island have fascinated people by their naive style and sombre colours reflecting the turbulence of the weather on Tory Island. This Island, Gaelic speaking and cut off during the winter, has now given birth to a school of primitive painting which James Dixon began. This thesis will try and discover the many facets which made James Dixon such the unique painter that he was, and how his paintings influenced his fellow islanders to also take up painting after Dixon had died. The investigation will look at the influences of Tory on James Dixon, his social and cultural background and the role of folklore in his paintings. It will also look at his place within Irish art, and primitive art and finally look at the implications of James Dixon's painting on the survival of Tory Island.

As is the case of lesser known Irish artists, there has been very little written about James Dixon, enhanced by the isolation of Tory Island to mainland Ireland. What has been written has been on various minor exhibition catalogues and newspaper articles, which although short, were quite informative and accurate. In order to gain more access to James Dixon and his world, the author travelled out to Tory Island for five days in January 1994 and interviewed three of the Tory Island painters living on the Island, Patsy Dan MacRuairi, Anton Meenan and Ruairi L. MacRuairi. These men carry on James Dixon's work and continue to build up the Tory Island School of Primitive Art.



(Figure 1a - Map of Tory Island)

CHAPTER 1

TORY ISLAND

Derek Hill, James Dixon and the Tory Island Primitive School of Painting

Derek Hill, the well known landscape and portrait artist had travelled all over the world before he finally visited Tory Island in 1956. On Tory Island, Derek Hill found a retreat which he compares with Mount Athos. He has said that Tory is at the edge of the old world, an important outpost of civilization. While painting on Tory, Derek Hill met an islander, James Dixon and this resulted in the beginning of a School of Primitive Painting.

James Dixon was an old man of seventy years when he saw Derek Hill painting at the harbour in the summer of 1957. Apparently the islanders had never seen a grown man or woman paint before, it was something reserved for the children at school. At this time, the Tory Islanders had no electricity or television to link them to an outside world.

After studying Derek Hill, James Dixon challenged him that he could do a better job of painting himself. Derek Hill asked him to and he provided him with materials to do so. James Dixon's career as a painter had begun and he painted many paintings before his death in 1971 aged 84 years.

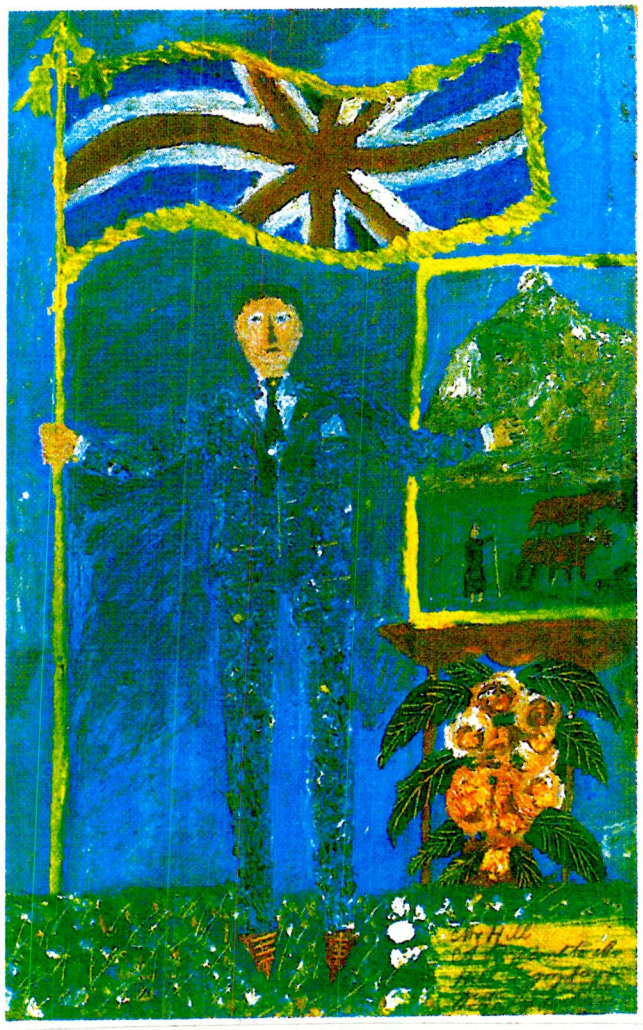
James Dixon saw others also begin painting after he had started. Johnny Dixon, his brother, began painting and a neighbour Jimmy 'The Yank' Rodgers made up with James Dixon, what we now call the first generation of Tory

Primitive Painters. Another local man Ruairi Sarah Rodgers also painted five or six brilliant pictures. Tragically he disappeared one Sunday morning after mass. He probably lost his footing and was drowned in the sea beneath the high cliffs on the north side of the Island.

The second generation of Tory painters are well and living and painting now on the Island: Patsy Dan Rodgers, Ruairi L. Rodgers, Micheal Finbarr Rodgers and Anton Meenan.

Derek Hill feels that the older generation, especially James Dixon, were more impressionistic in their style than the second generation which have a more hard linear approach. It is the work of James Dixon which brought attention to the Island and encouraged the continuation of this creativity on an isolated Island for those whose only previous outlets were fishing and farming.

James Dixon's gratitude to Derek Hill was a painting of him (figure 2), a Union Jack in hand, wearing a suit and a tie, and beside him a landscape and flower to demonstrate the things that Hill likes best to paint. As was typical of James Dixon, this painting reveals how he just painted his own feelings towards a subject, mostly from the memory, not bothering about any true likeness to the subject. Yet he still managed to create a piece of art which people find distinctively unique and powerful.



(Figure 2 - "Mr Hill a Present to Mr Hill by James Dixon Wishing him Luck 12.3.65")

In his painting of Hill, we find Dixon takes the most important aspects of Hill, the Union Jack, a suit and a landscape painting, in the same way a child picks out the most relevant features about someone. Dixon was not childlike in his technique, but he had an innocence that comes from someone who has not been introduced to formal art, such as he.

James Dixon and Tory Island

James Dixon was born on the 2nd June, 1887 on Tory Island. Tory Island is one of the many islands off the coast of Ireland. It is situated nine miles off the coast of Donegal on the North West of Ireland.

In order to understand the impact of Tory Island on James Dixon and the subsequent school of Tory Island painters, one needs to look at the Island itself, geographically along with its cultural, social and economic entities in order to understand where James Dixon derives his obsession with his sense of place.

Tory Island - A sense of Place, its People and Culture

Tory Island is a narrow shoulder of granite, three miles long and half a mile wide, whose massive cliffs on the windward side have made it the terror of sailors for hundreds of years. One of the Tory painters, Anton Meenan, has discussed how the Island is strewn with the wrecks of ships from time immemorial, which makes one quite fearful and wary when standing on the cliffs looking into the deep sea, imagining those fateful wrecks and their passenger's watery graves (author's diary on Tory visit).

(Figure 3 - A view of Tory Island from East End Dun Balor, showing East Town on the left and West Village on the right)

Tory Island stands alone in the Atlantic sea, and is isolated every winter from the mainland. John Berger has referred to the Island as being like a boat adrift with wreck survivors with no hope of ever reaching the mainland (De Barra, 1972, p.1). Having experienced the ferry trip out to Tory Island myself on a blustery January from Bunbeg harbour in Donegal, with the waves rising up like great walls on each side, waiting to fall down and cover the ferry, it was remarkable how Tory suddenly appeared on the horizon like a welcome friend into which we hoped to escape from that treacherous sea. Even when the ferry approached the harbour there was also the danger of it being dashed against the harbour wall by the high sea.

Tory Island is a wedge of land in the Atlantic with the harbour at the lower end, and the cliffs at the other side. If it were flat, the inhabitants probably would have a lesser change of surviving on this Island which is treeless. First impressions of the Island were how small everything was, and how the people had managed to exist on such a small piece of land, cut off from the mainland. The cliffs at the other side are less than a mile away from the harbour side; standing at these cliffs later on, it was possible to watch sea spray come up on the harbour side of the village and pass over the Island, over my head and back down the sheer cliffs into the deep sea below (figure 4). Being on the Island for a few nights and hearing the fog horn of the lighthouse gives the impression one is on a large ship out at sea, expecting it to arrive at port at any hour.

(Figure 4 - A photograph on the East Side, showing the steep cliffs and Tor Mor)

Some seventy-five families, about one hundred and thirty people in all, live on Tory, divided between two small hamlets, about a mile apart called "Baile Thiar" in Irish or West Town and "Baile Thoir" (East Town). The main hamlet, West Town, has a post office, a Catholic church and a school and are grouped around the harbour. A few dozen detached cottages are linked by a rough paved road crossed with open drains. A forest of electric wires radiates out from the remains of the great monastery, founded by St. Colmcille in the sixth century. A relic of a round tower stands grey and sombre against the white washed cottages.

The Islanders' main activities are fishing, farming which really means milking the odd cow, or conjuring a harvest from a few rough strips of arable ground. The barley crop which they grow is probably reserved for the making of poitin during the winter months. The Islanders are also subsidized by the unemployment benefits - (dole), and money from Udaras na Ghaeltachta, because it is a Gaelic speaking area. Together these benefits only help them to survive, what with travel expenses to the mainland towns and then the trouble with having things delivered to the Island such as washing machines and other essentials which we on the mainland take for granted.

They have often been storm bound for weeks by gales and are completely dependent for supplies on the weather. This has led to an indolent and stoic fatalism and apathy towards self-improvement.

In contrast with islands further down the western coastline, many of which are completely deserted, Tory has kept its population at a fairly constant level; its very isolation contributing to a communal spirit which seems to prevent many emigrants from settling permanently abroad. Those emigrants who have worked for a spell in Britain or America, return, eventually, realizing that the sense of belonging on Tory and its tranquillity are worth the lack of home comforts and though things are now improving, there can be few less comfortable places to live in Europe. One "returned" islander who had been successful in America said he had returned to Tory because he was sick of looking at his watch all the time.

The general absence of or even hostility towards initiative makes the achievement of James Dixon's emergence as a painter all the more striking. James Dixon and those who took up the palette after him worked on their own in what was essentially a private activity which aroused no interest among the other islanders until it was thought they might be making money. Painting it seems provided a much needed outlet for energies which the closeness of Island society could not accommodate in other ways.

Derek Hill has said (Irish Arts Review, 1993, p. 179) that when James Dixon commented on his painting that Dixon could do better, he did not mean to criticise his technical ability at representational detail, it was just that the studied restrained pictorialism employed by Hill to represent the Island bore little relation to Dixon's own experience of the place on which he had spent almost

his entire life. The Island that Hill was painting was like a foreign place to James Dixon; to him his Island was full of stories, connected with his family for generations, a place he experience not just on a summers day, but during the cruel winter storms which bombarded on every side. This contrast can be seen when we compare James Dixon's painting with that of Derek Hill's.

Tory Island's Social Background

The idea of family is very important to the people of Tory, it is their very existence and is linked to the land, religion and their labour. James Dixon was a native son of the Island, and the many facets which make up his existence as a painter must in part be found in his social and family background, which is typical of most of the Islanders.

A popular blessing on Tory is: "... le hanmanna na seacht sinsear d'fhag tu!..." Translated in English it says, "For the souls of the seven generations before you!". Robin Fox in his study of tory Island, has shown how the Tory Islanders are very conscious of who they are and how they are related to each other (Fox, 1978, p. 70). Obviously this has to do with a fear of too much intermarriage between near relations, working from a narrow gene pool. It also has to do with land inheritance, boat ownership and general responsibility of each other that this consciousness is kept alive.

The people of Tory have always made sure that land is divided equally among

each family, and that no one family ends up with more than any other. This may not always be the best if we think of it in terms of capital profits, but it has made sense to the Islanders, because this tradition of equal share has helped them to survive long before they had help from any government or those on the mainland. Fox sees it as a continuation of a Celtic communal tribal system which has managed to survive into the twentieth century. The Islanders own the land, but it is not owned in any real sense and they merely see themselves as custodians for later generations. They even have an appointed "Ri" - king who oversees these traditions. Fox found the same sense of wonderment at the unconscious feat of social engineering on Tory, as he found in the social structure of an American Indian tribe.

The reason for looking at this complex inter-relatedness is because this is fundamental to any understanding of the Islanders. How do they decide who is related to whom on an Island where everyone is related to everyone else? This problem is not peculiar to Tory, but pervades any small community that chooses to base some of its most important social transactions on the fact of relatedness or kinship.

All the genealogical knowledge on the island is the preserve of a few old men like James Dixon; the "seancaidhe" - story tellers, and they were all agreed that there were four key genealogies to which most of the others, if not all, could be related.

If one could imagine oneself and one's family living on an island with all one's grandparents, second and third cousins going back with a common genealogy for two hundred years, with all of these relations having intermarried from four main families, which on Tory Island are the Rodgers, the Duggans, Doohans and McClafferty's with a few more side names of Diver and Meenan, then one can imagine the inner social world, behind James Dixon's world.

In these genealogies and the stories surrounding them, we have a living example of well articulated bilateral descent groups, belonging to a people rich in their own histories and language, all happening on a small piece of land, cut off and surrounded by the Atlantic sea. The same stories and legends are interwoven all in their own Tory Gaelic, which is different in a unique way to Donegal and Munster Irish. These stories tell of Balor of the evil eye, of St. Colmcille, of Fairies and magic fishing boats, poitin and the famous Tory clay which wards off rats and prevents boats from sinking, all part of their rich folklore. They also have their own music and dances and beautiful Gaelic songs which have been written by the Tory Islanders about their own people and events, such as "Amhran na Scadan" (The Herring Song) or "Nil se na la" (It's not the day) a drinking song.

However, within this tight social set-up, because of the closeness, there are also disputes and jealousies which arise in a very close knit community. These disputes may go on for years, over land or words spoken and show the darker, but realistic version of what it is like to live on such an island.

To see James Dixon and the other Island painters as part of this, is not to see individuals, but members of a communal group with close kinship, a tribe and must, necessarily, be a big influence on how they paint and the reason for many details or certain styles, about the Island. When James Dixon painted his family's field, the Dixon-Diver field, he was painting a piece of land that has tribal and ethnic connotations and which connect him to his people who went before him and will continue after him. To him, Tory is the map on which his people, his family act out their very lives and aspirations and he wanted to paint this world. Unlike Derek Hill who painted Tory magnificently without the associated romance and stories, Dixon's Tory is steeped in everything he knows about the Island; maybe this is what gives his paintings their impressionistic naive style.

(Figure 5 - The Dixon Home, West Town)

(Figure 6 - James Dixon's Gallery which he built at the beginning of the 20th century, beside Dixon Home)

CHAPTER 2

JAMES DIXON

James Dixon - (1887-1971)

When James Dixon was born in 1887, in his family home (figure 5), he was born into a culture already defined, and a life lay ahead of him in which he was to follow in the footsteps of his forbearers, to be a farmer and fisherman, like one of his famous great-grandfathers Donnchadh O Duibhir (Denis Diver) a renowned fisherman, well known for his exploits and adventures on the sea. (O'Cathain, 1977, p. 247).

James Dixon's father, Denis Dixon had married into the Island, he was a native of Meenlaragh on the mainland coast of Donegal, facing in to Tory Island. James Dixon's mother was Madge Diver, a native of the Island and interrelated to the already mentioned families of Duggan, Rogers and Doohans. In the 1901 census for Tory Island (Appendix A), James Dixon is registered as fourteen years of age, and then twenty-four years old in the 1911 census (Appendix B) where his occupation is that of fisherman. He later on ended up living in the family home, unmarried with his three bachelor brothers and spinster sister Grace, who became the last Dixon on the Island.

Apart form an occasional visit to the "country" as the Islander's call the mainland, and one short period in the West of Ireland, as instructor on a fishing

course, James Dixon never left the Island. His life had been devoted to fishing and the usual cultivation of land and later on bringing the mail to and from the mainland on the Dixon's boat the "Ave Maria", which had been built by James's uncle Hugh Dixon in the 1920's when he worked on the Island for a while (figure 15). James or Jimmy Dixon as he was known on the Island, began his official career painting around 1956-57, when he was seventy years old. Derek Hill had arranged to send materials and brushes out to James Dixon and he was amazed when James Dixon said he did not need any brushes, as he had a fine donkey, whose tail he cut twice a year and the hairs would do fine for his brushes. (Therman, 1989 p. 160). Derek Hill says the point about the donkey tail brushes seemed important to Dixon in his work as it helped, he thinks, to give the painterly quality one finds in his work.

James Dixon and his Paintings

Most of James Dixon's pictures, apart from a few portraits, and some paintings of migrating birds, are related to the Island and what goes on during its daily routine, or events which may have happened during its history. Proportions, perspectives and topographical accuracy have no part in his work. Once to a local newspaper man Dixon said: ".... You don't get all that much colour here, except the blue and greys of the sky and the glistening of the sea ...." (Hill, 1967, Catalogue.)

Patsy Dan Rodgers and Anton Meenan have stated that (authors notes) James

Dixon was a very unique man, in the way he talked, the way he walked and in the way he painted. Apparently he did not want to show people his particular style of painting. He used to walk the Island's solitary track from east to West and then paint what he saw, be it the men working in the fields cutting corn, or the fishing boats and stormy seas which always seem to dominate Tory.

James Dixon worked in his gallery, next to his house (figure 6), and he would paint up to five paintings a night and leave the paintings lying around to dry among the other objects he has been collecting such as pieces of motor boat engines, and things which had been washed up on the sea.

James Dixon would use any materials he could find to paint, house paint, shoe polish and normally he would always add a bit of writing in beautiful copperplate script in English about the painting, which seems to add to the paintings' naive quality and pictorialism.

(Figure 7 - James Dixon, "Mr William Rogers Ploughing in Dixon's Farm 1967", oil on paper, 57.2 x 76 cm - Ulster Museum, Belfast)

An example of those written inscriptions can be seen at the bottom left hand corner of the painting "Mr William Rogers Ploughing in Dixon's Farm, 1967" (figure 7). The inscription reads: ".... Mr William Rogers ploughing in Dixon's Farm Tory Island. The first tractor that ever came to Tory Island ...." This painting also shows Dixon concentrating on a few fields of the Island, rather than the sea, because as well as fishing, the Islanders also cultivated their land for survival. Like most of Dixon's work, this is an aerial view of the Island, a bird's eye view. We see the fields below in large simple coloured shapes with delicate etching to delineate the newly furrowed field and the tractor, of significance, because it is the first tractor that every came to Tory. It was

unusual events like this that Dixon liked to paint, subjects that were talked about by the Islanders and would be remembered in years to come. He recorded other special occasions such as the catching of muldoons, the firing of rockets, the landing of helicopters, events which broke the monotony of island life for the people of this remote Island.

In looking at the "tractor" painting (figure 7), we see there is little sense of perspective, and also a few of his other paintings do not have any horizon line either. Dixon's paintings reflect the only world he knows, and because he was untrained, his paintings have a fullness that is unbroken almost like designs on tribal tapestries. The dark grey sea with flecks of white foam across the surface fills his canvasses or the paper on which he prefers to paint from top to bottom. Into his seas, which are always a dominant feature, he introduces the Island boats, fish and the events of the Island. Like every Islander he has a great sense of the moment.

It must also be remembered that James Dixon always painted from memory and from what he imagined things to be, even though he knew every detail of the Island, its cliffs, inlets, stones and hills such as figure 8.

**(Figure 8 - "Port a Doon" on East Side
(where a Fear si - fairy man, is believed to dwell)**

How good a painter was James Dixon? Derek Hill argues that (Irish Arts Review 1993, p. 179) Dixon's paintings are painter's pictures and not merely picture making and they are largely concerned with the texture of paint and the brushwork, as well as an unusual vision of the natural phenomenon around. His style has been referred to as an impressionistic style by Derek Hill. Dixon's brush strokes often overlap so that the sea, the land and even the boats make an inseparable unit and each element is in constant conflict with the other. This conflict is felt intensely by the Islanders, the sea to them is not merely a means of their livelihood by fishing, but also often a reason for their deaths by drowning.

(Figure 9 - One of James Dixon's paintings on paper - in the home of Anton Meenan, Baile Ur, West Town, Tory Island)

Dixon painted fast and intensely, up to five paintings a night which he left lying around to dry, or before they dried he would send them rolled up in a bundle to Derek Hill in Gartan, Donegal. Hill remembers these bundles arriving for him to sort through, they were still wet and stuck together and he could imagine that they had been thrown into the sea and washed ashore after a storm because of their sticky condition and subject matter, mostly seascapes. Dixon depicted the dramatic and restless natural elements and the reality of storm conditions in a way that is quite unique.

Unlike most untrained artists, Dixon did not go for static, embroidered patterns, nor was he obsessed with niggling details as primitive painters normally are.

He had an inborn sense of placing and balance and his compositions are dynamic and asymmetrical, often based on slashing diagonals.

We can see an example of how he refrains from niggling details in the painting "Mary Driving the Castle Home Across the Sands of Dee" (figure 10).

(Figure 10 - "Mary Driving the Cattle Home 1964" - James Dixon)

This painting once again is a bird's eye view, looking down on a woman and cattle. They are put into perspective within nature and part of it. There is no horizon line, and everything seems flat, but expressively so in a childlike way. The sea rolls in at the top, and in the bottom right hand corner, is one of Dixon's typical references to the picture which reads: ".... Mary driving the cattle home across the sands of Dee, the tide came in too soon, the poor girl got drowned ...." Obviously the picture relates to some story on the Island, about a girl being drowned driving her cattle home. It is this type of story that James Dixon loves to illustrate, putting pictures to his interior imagination and folklore.

James Dixon is one of those unschooled artists who can produce and express a magical sense of beauty in their paintings, which the Modernists, such as Picasso, tried to imitate, in a deliberate and conscious way. Picasso saw that tribal and primitive art was being expressed in a way without the learning of drawing in an academic way. James Dixon is one of these primitive painters, and he could paint the sea as though he were a part of it.

"West End Village" Painting

James Dixon's painting "An Baile Thiar, Toraigh" - West Town, Tory (figure 11), is a fine example of his impressionistic style of painting and shows the main subject of his work, the violence of the sea and the harsh realities of island life. It is a seabird's view of the village and harbour and was done entirely from memory, like all of his powerful and evocative scenes of Tory.

In looking closely at the painting, it comes across as being quite sophisticated in its apparent abstract style of having part of the Island turning down into the sea like a serpent's head. The rough painterly quality of the sky or sea in the background gives it dynamism and one senses the impact of the elements, the sea, wind and rain on this little hamlet, perched loosely on this piece of land, as if it could be washed away easily. The whites of the cottages, with the odd orange cottage in between, stands out against the overall blue-grey colour of the painting. St colmcille's bel tower stands immobile as it has done for centuries amidst the white cottages. One gets the sensation of a view on the earth's horizon from space, because of the curve of the land. Obviously Dixon was bringing into play his knowledge and experience as a sailor, and the way the earth's curvature does not allow us to see too far ahead.

The harbour in the middle juts out, leaving a calmer sea in between it and the west side of the Island. We can make out white seagulls and flakes of paint denote wave crests. On the beach we can see tiny specks of black which are humans and even a dog. People are put into their proper place within the immensity of nature, rather than dominating nature. As the people of Tory knew, the sea is a force which can take life easily. This painting makes one think of the Japanese Zen paintings, where the people are also tiny specks in comparison to nature. Dixon seems to be more oriental than occidental in his placement of the human figure; his figures know their place, they know they are only specks in comparison to the strength of the elements.

(Figure 11 - "An Baile Thiar, Toraigh" - West Town Tory by James Dixon - Glebe Gallery, Gratan, Donegal)

Derek Hill says this painting was Dixon's first attempt at painting after their meeting in 1956.

"H.M.S. Wasp Foundering on Tory" Painting

Shipwrecks were often chosen as subjects by James Dixon, such as the sinking of the Titanic. But on the Island, the most famous was the sinking of the H.M.S. Wasp in 1884 (figures 12 and 14). The boat had come from Sligo to

ach an tSolais

h Teach an tSolais Idir 1828 agus
ar chostas £16,563. George Halpin
igh é. Tá sé 30m ar airde agus tá a
allaí 2.3m ar dhoimhne ag a bhun
has a sholas don chéaduair ar 1
1832. Solas aonlionsach a bhí ar
ach athrafodh go solas déhonsach
Bhí foireann ag obair ann go dtí
tá sé neamhoiriúnach ó shin. Ag
in ngoil haois déag scríobh
Edwards, Eall den fhoireann,
rann, *The Mermaid of Inish-vigg*, a
ntais maith ann ar an tsaol a bhí
ar Theach an tSolais agus an
l a bhí acu le muintir Thorai. Tá
heach solais le feiceáil ó Thoraigh
Fánaid, Iois Trá Chall agus solas
in, ar ndóigh.

ned by George Halpin, Tory
thouse was built between 1828
at a cost of £16,563. It is 30m in
nd at its base the walls are 2.3m
e light which was first seen on 1
32 was originally catoptric but it
verted to dioptric in 1862. The
was manned until 1968 when
e automatic. R.W.K. Edwards, a
sekeeper who was stationed in
he late nineteenth century, wrote
vel, *The Mermaid of Inish-vigg*, in
re is a humorous account of the
y the lighthousekeepers and their
ship with the islanders. In
to the Tory Light, three other

collect Island rates long overdue and the inhabitants, especially the women, would go out on a special pilgrimage around the Island, with their red flannel shirts and their long hair streaming down their backs blowing in the wind. They would then turn the famous cursing stone. They did it on this particular night, and whatever happened, the lighthouse is alleged not to have been functioning that night and the loss of over eighty lives was the result. Six of the men were rescued, found stranded on the rocks, where they had been washed in by the waves. James Dixon has done at least two paintings of this incident.

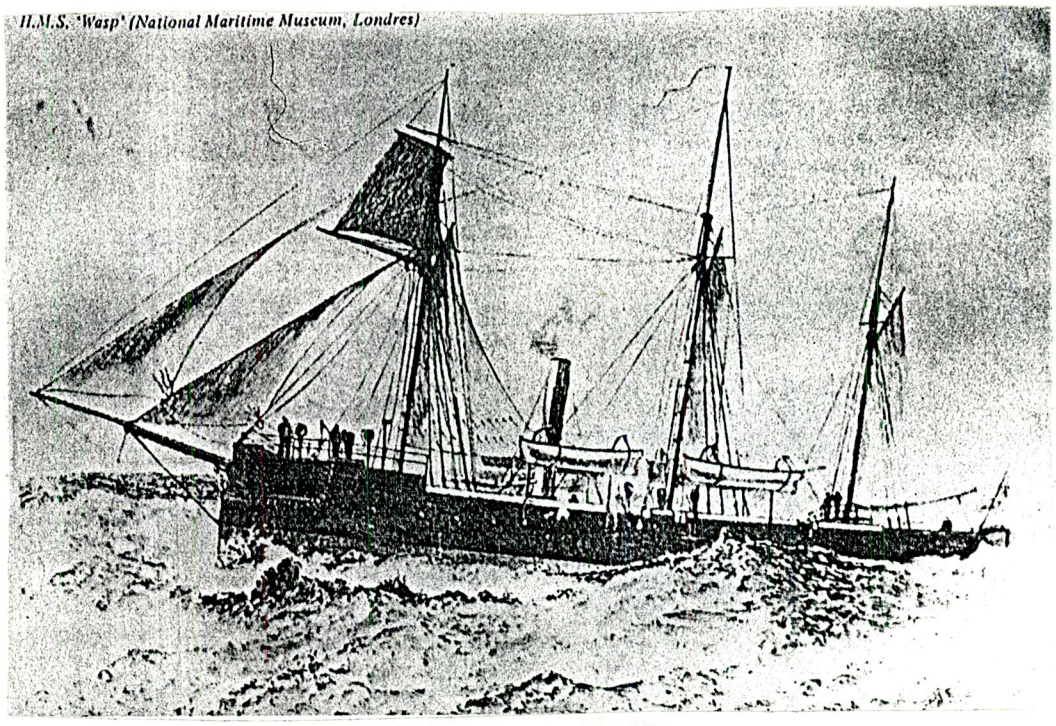
James Dixon, HMS Wasp Foundering on Tory, 1968.
Oil on paper, 57.2 x 76 cm. Private collection.

**(Figure 12 - "H.M.S. Wasp Foundering on Tory 1968"
oil on paper, 57.2 x 76 cms)**

The one done in 1968, the "H.M.S. Wasp Foundering on Tory, 1968" (figure 12), shows the doomed Wasp in difficulty on top of the waves. The vigorous brush strokes seem much more chaotic and expressive in comparison to his painting "West Town". Even the sky is dark and foreboding; the only two recognisable things are the Wasp itself and "protestant" graveyard, as it is known on Tory where some of the survivors of the Wasp were to be buried. James Dixon has included the graveyard as a foreboding to the future of the men on the Wasp. The inlet, or gully, on which the Wasp floundered, is still to this day known as "Feadan an Wasp" (The Wasp's Gully).

Overall the painting conjures up a scene of wild abandonment. Dixon has done this painting from memory, because this painting is part of the island's folklore, in comparison to the previous painting "West Town" which has more detail, Dixon has left out a lot of detail, and has tried to convey the scene with expressive and brush like strokes.

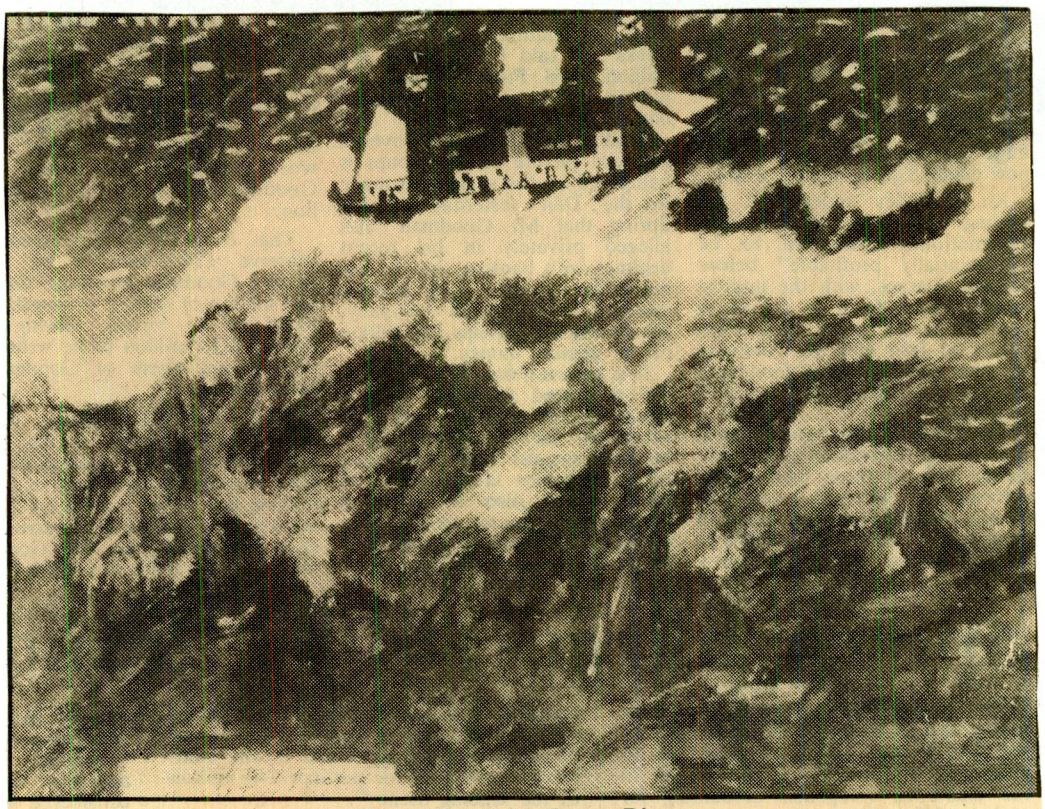
Brian Fallon (The Irish Times, 1990), suggests that James Dixon may have been remembering old prints and photographs or simply relying on his own imagination when putting ships in his paintings.



(Figure 13 - "H.M.S. Wasp" - A French Print of the Wasp)

How many sailing ships can he have seen if his memory stretched back to the years before the First World War? It is important to remember that James Dixon was born in 1887 and it is not too difficult to imagine that in reality he saw immigrant ships coming from Derry port en route to America anchoring near Tory to pick up passengers. Patsy Dan Rodgers has referred (author's interview) to the fact that Tory was the first land that great ships saw travelling from the U.S. to Derry or Southampton and often when ships were going to the U.S., Tory was the last sight of Ireland.

In the illustration of a French print of H.M.S. Wasp (figure 13) compared to James Dixon's painting we see the print in reverse. James Dixon may have seen this print or he was used to seeing such ships similar to the Wasp in his youth. This other painting of H.M.S. Wasp by Dixon (figure 14), shows a more controlled sea than the other painting (figure 12). The waves are painted in a tighter controlled style, but we still feel this little ship is going to sink as it is perches precariously on a high wave about to be dashed on the rocks.



"HMS Wasp" by James Dixon

(Figure 14 - "H.M.S. Wasp" by James Dixon)

From Folklore to permanent pictorial recording

In looking at how examples of the Island's history and folklore influenced James Dixon, one needs to see the importance of folklore in his life.

From the 1930's until the present day, the Irish Folklore Commission made it their priority to gather as much folklore, remaining in the Irish language from the people before it died with them. When the folklore (in Irish "Bealoideas", literally translated "Education by mouth") was collected on Tory, it was James Dixon and his brothers who were interviewed and James Dixon gave most of the stories in his native Gaelic tongue.

Peter de Barra (Hill Catalogue, 1972) claims that when James Dixon began to paint in 1956-57, a transition had begun, or had been happening, whereby the traditional method of folklore on Tory was beginning to decline, probably as a result of the onslaught of the introduction of radio and newspapers to the Island. Because of this decline of the traditional method of verbal, oral folklore communication, James Dixon took up Derek Hill's offer of a more permanent pictorial recording. Instead of telling stories of how H.M.S. Wasp was sunk, James Dixon began to do paintings of it sinking, which were more immediate and tangible.

As a rule, naive, primitive painting makes its appearance in other cultures at the very moment that folklore and folk art disappear (Jakovsky, p. 10). There is no

evidence of any previous folk art on Tory Island before James Dixon painted, apart from the images on the crosses belonging to the remains of the Columban Monastery.

From James Dixon's stories and folklore which were collected from him, we see that there was a creative imagination already present before he began painting.

Dixon's stories (O Cathain 1977, pp. 230-256) deal, as his paintings do, with the sea, priests being delayed on sick calls by singing leprechauns and fairy ships seen sailing across his family's field at the back of their cottage, as if they were floating in air. The time setting (O Cathain, 1977 p. 231) of his stories is interesting and consistent; almost all of the incident's happened long ago "fado o shin".

A grandfather or relative is always the actor or contemporary. The life portrayed is that of an older time before modern methods of transport and communication had been introduced and before hardship had been alleviated by pensions, insurances and dole. The impression given is of a homogenous community in which the only economic differences came from chance success or failure in the hard struggle to make a livelihood. The priest and the doctor are the only local dignitaries who figure in the stories. It might be thought that the conditions belong to the mid or late-nineteenth century because of some of the references. We may assume that the stories told by grandparents were told to them by their grandparents and so on back through the ages. At the

same time they kept the freshness of being associated with the near past, the day before yesterday. We see this tradition which Dixon recounted coming over into his paintings, for instance, the story of the H.M.S. Wasp, which Dixon has painted more than once. Other Island painters have also painted pictures of the Wasp sinking, and Derek Hill has painted a scene of the sea where the Wasp sunk. So James Dixon's vision was a vision that belonged to his people and which he inherited, a tradition which he was the first to paint out pictorially, which he had engaged in earlier through oral tradition. It is a Gaelic tradition passed on from his people, painted for the first time.

The Gaelic tradition was strongly grounded on Tory, and the society which preserved these stories was a simple one. The belief in supernatural entities such as singing mermaids and airborne fairies, is perhaps in popular tradition the most significant relic of the past and therefore also the strongest and most vital link between us an ancient days.

So in James Dixon we have an example of an "Aosdana" of the old Ireland who on Tory was noted for communication of local folklore in his native tongue. He was a link to that older, internal imagined work peopled by folk songs, fairies, magical boats, holy clay and magical animals. It is no wonder when the skill of painting was opened up to him by Derek Hill in the late 1950's that he should take it on so readily and continue on his storytelling in a pictorial painterly way.

(Figure 15 - "The Ave Maria" - The First Motor Boat on Tory referred to in page 13)

CHAPTER 3

JAMES DIXON IN RELATION TO OTHER ARTISTS

James Dixon, his place among the other primitive painters of Tory

As the residents of Tory Island lived in such close contact to each other, it was not surprising that many others would begin painting in emulation of James Dixon. Some would say this was because of the possibility of making money, which is essential on such a small Island starved of other resourceful outlets. Maybe it was seen as a useful creative outlet during the winter months when the Islanders could neither farm not go fishing.

(Figure 16 - A Portrait of Johnny Dixon by Derek Hill oil on canvas 26 x 26 ins. - David Clarke)

James Dixon's competition arose within his own family from his brother Johnny Dixon, who was at least nine years younger (figure 16). Johnny Dixon seems to have had more paint control than his older brother. His seas did not pour over the rocks or obliterate definition; his pencil-outlined buildings are staccato and hard-edge, no time for poetry, and one suspects that the gardens around his land would not grow flowers with any east. A thin Gothic world is revealed, even puritanical. Johnny Dixon however painted only a handful of paintings, six or seven paintings, in comparison to his brother's vast outlet.

The other competition from the first generation came from James Dixon's near neighbour across the road, in the form of Jimmy "The Yank" Rodgers. He was the oldest of all the painters and was known locally as "The Yank" because of the ten years he had spent in the U.S.A. before returning to Tory Island. He had the most outside worldly experience of the first generation of painters. His paintings show this by their being the most sophisticated of the group. Perhaps it may be the interest he claimed he saw in a German artist he knew in Philadelphia who had influenced him. Possibly it is too much to see an element of German expressionism in the heavy skies, livid clouds and oily seas and "marbled waves". In the painting which he did in the U.S., "The Mouth of the Susuehanna River" we see an involvement with another world, a world outside Tory Island and his immediate experiences as an Islander.

Anton Meenan (author's interview notes) has discussed how the Islanders are quite straight in dealing and talking with each other and have a healthy competitive streak on occasions with each other, especially among the painters. Even though James Dixon and Jimmy "The Yank" Rodgers were far out

cousins, through their Diver grandfathers, they used to compete with each other when visitors would come to talk to either one of them interested in their art, they would gesture across the road to each others house, saying don't bother visiting that man, sure he can't paint at all, I'm the better painter.

(Figure 17 - Photo of Patsy Dan Rodgers in his home "An Cregain" Tory Island, holding one of his paintings)

Patsy Dan Rodgers, who has recently been elected king of Tory "Ri-Thorai" is forty-nine years old (figure 17). He is seen as the link between the first "three" generation of painters and the younger second generation (figure 18). He exhibited with the older painters for the first time in Belfast in 1968. He says

Patsy Dan Rodgers

Figure
17

that James Dixon had a high influence on him, because of his determination and creativity.

**(Figure 18 - Second Generation of Tory Painters:
left to right: Anton Meenan, Patsy Dan Rodgers,
Michael Finbarr Rodgers, Ruairi L. Rodgers.
Royal College of Surgeons Exhibition, Dublin, October 1989)**

However, Patsy Dan sees himself as carrying on now in a different style, in his own way, which he still sees as primitive but different to James Dixon's style. The one common bond which James Dixon has with the other painters, is the emphasis on painting the island. All of them know every rock and stone and every facet of it both summer and winter, and that, on an Island such as Tory, one will see views that one would hardly see anywhere else in the world. Like

James Dixon, Patsy Dan Rodgers paints from his memory of the island, rather than painting from what he sees, he has also done some religious paintings as James Dixon did, and some paintings on the recent war in Kuwait. Patsy Dan has gone off on his own style and done some darker, sunset paintings showing that side of Tory which has not been painted before (figure 17).

The present Tory Island painters have been deeply inspired by James Dixon determination at painting, and all like to think of themselves being a part of that Primitive School which he set into motion, but they like to think that they have their own particular style within that primitive mode, or even going beyond it.

Ruairi L. Rodgers does very bright, accurate and detailed paintings of the Island in a more photographic idiom than Dixon's (figure 19) yet they still tie in with a naive style whereas Anton Meenan (figure 20), the youngest of the second group, who studied art in Letterkenny for a year, has developed a more academic style, akin to Derek Hill, though he still paints naive paintings illustrating the folklore of the Island in a way that could be seen as a continuation of Dixon's work. As a young boy Anton Meenan used to look in

at James Dixon painting in his studio, and was obviously encouraged by what he saw him doing.

(Figure 19 - Ruairi L. Rodgers in his home, Tory Island with a few of his paintings)

So James Dixon's fellow painters were inspired by him either through a competitive encouragement or as an exemplary figure. The fact that these men have still continued to paint though probably in different naive styles, says a lot for the openings that James Dixon achieved for them in a creative manner.

Susan L. Rodgers

(Figure 20 - Photo of Anton Meenan with some of his paintings at his home Baile Ur, West Town, Tory Island)

James Dixon's Place within Irish Art

One must question the place of James Dixon within Irish art. How does he relate to the overall tendencies of Irish landscape painting? Brian Fallon (The Irish Times, 1990) states that James Dixon has earned himself a special rocky niche in the hierarchy of Irish painting, because of that unique, primitive style

Anton Meanen

Gravel 20

of painting his island in the way that he does. Bruce Arnold (Arnold, 1969, p. 157) states that there are many Irish landscape painters who are to Ireland what Dixon is to Tory. In the way Dixon recorded the rich and varied nature of a world that he knew intimately, so other Irish artists have painted other places in Ireland. These artists have painted subjects which are varied and ever changing and the ways in which they tackle them in paint seem infinite. Many of them have been romantic in style, or fanciful and have been influenced by French painting or by English art and some, like Dixon, have gone beyond the simple range of landscape art into the telling of a story.

The one aspect that links Dixon with other Irish artists, is that they are deeply rooted in a landscape of place. Because of the many variations of landscape in Ireland, and close proximity to the sea, Irish landscape art has been very rich and varied.

Jack B. Yeats was rarely engaged in the painting of straight forward landscapes. He did paint them, but they were not his primary interest. Yeats wanted his pictures to tell a story, much in the same way we find James Dixon doing on Tory. Yeat's vision is so totally of the country in which he grew up and in which he spent all his mature working life, that his work is as completely Irish as the pure landscapes of his contemporaries.

We find Walter Osborne painting the urban poverty of Dublin in the 1890's or Sean Keating mixing the physical environment against a political background, and then we have James Dixon painting his island, his Ireland.

Declan McGonigle, Director of I.M.M.A. has talked about the culture of

"locality" in Irish art. Often this "locality" has been submerged to promote a "universal central culture" (McGonigle, 1990, Circa, No. 53, p. 26).

The art of post-modernism has been defined as a standing outside of cultures, of between cultures, a "non-culture". In Ireland during the forties and fifties, the notion of modernism was to reject a parochial enclosed culture and aim for international ideas. Nowadays with the media and the concept of the global village, people are constantly being bombarded with inter-nationalism which produces a common bond, a common language between us all. As a reaction a lot of contemporary artists are either taking up a post-modernist view of belonging to no culture, or looking back at their own culture, or localities as Declan McGonigle points out. In the North of Ireland, we find artists like Willie Doherty, John Kindness and Rita Duffy, looking at the problem of identity. rita Duffy explores the ideas of Irish Nationalism and Irish Unionism through paintings such as "Mother Ireland" and "Mother Ulster"; in these paintings she has gone deeper than national identity and looks at gender identity, and the role of women within these larger "isms". James Dixon and the Tory Island painters, are also a product of their locality. As Gaelic speaking islanders cut off from the mainland, they have painted what is next and dear to them, in a style that is unique to their island.

In looking at James Dixon and the other landscape painters of Ireland, we find that diversity and locality remains rich and varied. They have only the landscape of Ireland itself to draw them all together, and their own vision and technique to hold them apart. James Dixon's paintings are undoubtedly an intrinsic part of that variety.

James Dixon in relation to Naive Art

James Dixon was a true primitive painter, he was untutored and had invented his own expressive and stylistic alphabet entirely unaided. Every truly naive painter has a particular vision of the world which is unique, and therefore the style of painting is always unique, it cannot be taught and there can never be any distinct school of naive painting. Even within the Tory School of Primitive Painting each of the artists has a different style and technique.

The individual vision of every naive painter arises from a condition of the soul which is particularly unique and commanding and necessitates a need to express itself. One might say that naive painters have certain pictorial ideas circulating in their subconscious which quite spontaneously demand to be given release. Their pictures seem to begin like an old fairy tale ".... Once upon a time ...." These painters have a vision which can only be displayed by the way they would need to paint a certain landscape or portrait. When James Dixon saw Derek Hill's painting of Tory and claimed that he could do better, he most likely was referring to Hill's lack of emotion in painting what to Dixon was an Island full of events, stories, superstitions, folklore. What he saw in Hill's work was a cold rendering of the landscape which although beautiful and classical, was not the landscape that Dixon saw or would paint.

The effect of the climate and soil, the degree of familiarity which Dixon had with his island all combine to make possible Dixon's Tory paintings.

Like Dixon, most naive painters only painted towards the end of their lives when they had time. Their art was an outpouring in their leisure time of what

they had amassed in memory. The naive peasant artists have imaginations which are enriched by a store of memories and folklore relating to manners, customs and forms of village life. What they paint is a pictorial sequence of their labours and festivals. They have no knowledge of the aesthetic view that is associated with so called advanced civilization. Their true domain is the life around them in their villages. For this reason James Dixon reflects that life and allows us a view of Tory Island and its stories, and allows us to call him Ireland's greatest naive painter.

James Dixon and Alfred Wallis

James Dixon has often been sided with Alfred Wallis, the Cornish painter, and much discussion has gone on as to who is the "more gifted of the two". This is a point which could be debated endlessly, but undoubtedly, the two men had a lot in common. James Dixon, like Alfred Wallis, was a Celt, or descended from Celts. Cornwall is a part of England, an outcrop of the British mainland which has always been unique in its detachment and culture from Britain, much in the same way that Tory was. It is also renowned for its Celtic heritage. The Celts were a race of people renowned for their poetry and vision, whether it takes the form of verse, drama, music or painting. Both Dixon and Wallis were simple men, capable of making pictures of primitive power and both were absorbed by the sea in all its facets. Like Wallis, Dixon was out of touch with anything connected with the world of culture, and both used old bits of cardboard and paper on which they produced their art with limited materials, such as house paint and stubs of pencil.

Alfred Wallis was discovered in his cottage in old age by Ben Nicholson and

Christopher Wood of the St. Ives group. Wallis influenced these artists and others who gathered around them and became one of the starting points for modernism in Britain.

The love of the sea which both painters had is revealed in their art with a flair for depicting wind, waves and ships,. They both use aerial perspective, as though they were skimming overhead like sea birds. There is an inborn ability to paint and an ability to simplify the imagery which makes modern artists envious. Most other primitives are obsessed with rendering detail and with childlike patterns.

Both James Dixon and Alfred Wallis received little public acclaim during their lifetimes, in fact Wallis died in poverty in a workhouse and it is only now that Dixon's paintings are selling for up to £3,000, a figure he would probably be amazed at.

CONCLUSION

It is without a doubt that James Dixon's painting brought a lot of attention to Tory Island. They were in a unique, primitive style, dark and tenebrous, and to most of those who have come in contact with his paintings, the most outstanding feature is the way he is able to turn wind and weather into a pictorial turmoil, angry and fiercely expressive, not generally to be found in the work of the finest primitive artists.

The attention that Dixon brought to Tory made people aware of the plight of the Islanders. The Island was badly cut off from the mainland in 1974 for several weeks when supplies could not be delivered. After this, half of the islanders left for Falcarragh on the mainland. Some exhibitions were mounted and the second generation of painters realized they would have to convey their Island's plight in their paintings, in the same way James Dixon had told the Island's story. The painters realise that James Dixon brought attention to the Island, revealing its culture and creativity and they seem to be aware that their art does have importance for the Island's survival. Just as James Dixon was an ambassador for the Island by his art, they too must take up the mantle where he left off. The recent paintings show the turmoil of the Island, paintings of the Island cut off by storms and high seas which Dixon painted so convincingly. Now the Islander's have a daily ferry when the sea is not too rough. They have a helicopter bringing supplies twice a month, and word has just been announced that they are to have a new, safer harbour.

James Dixon's gallery, which was once his studio (figure 6) is now one of the important places for visitors to come and buy the paintings of the second

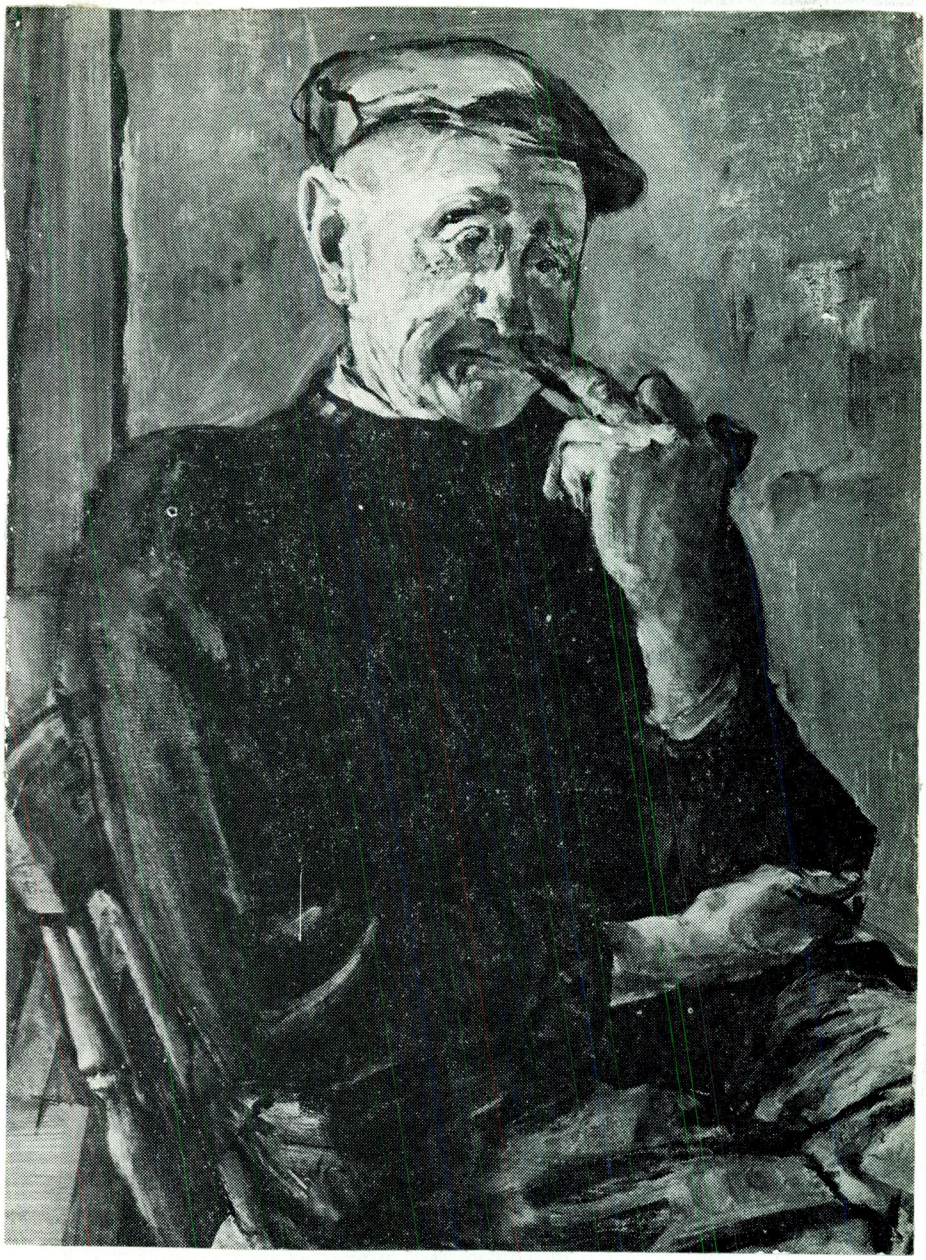
generation of painters who admire Dixon for bringing into existence an outlet for them which has meant the Island's survival.

In looking at James Dixon and his paintings one can ask what gave him the ability to paint such beautiful, impressionistic pictures of his Island which seem so sophisticated and deliberate in their primitive style. One could ask was it his environment alone which inspired him, Tory Island, surrounded by sea. Did the sea give him that certain impetus which made his paintings so unique? If one were to live on Tory Island also for seventy years, could one also paint like James Dixon? Perhaps it was the influence of his family, his culture, some sort of hidden magic that had been preserved in the Gaelic heritage which he inherited, and like his storytelling, had also emerged in painting, like Alfred Wallis. The famous Donegal writer Seosamh MacGrianna noted of his own writing: "Within me, a thousand years ago, a poet's soul was born ...."

It could also be said of James Dixon that his creativity was something which was being created by his people long before he was born, the idea of a gift passed on to Dixon by his Celtic Gaelic ancestors. Maybe it was just James Dixon's personal unique gift of art, which he could have done if he had been born and raised in Paris or New York.

One could say his gift was an attempt to escape the tight control and restraints of close families rules and customs that were found in such a close knit community of Tory, and painting gave him this release. It may have been sheer determination to conquer the sea and nature around Tory which seems to constantly hound the people and which in some way he wanted to tame and control in his paintings. His great outpouring of paintings may also have come

from the pure fact of wanting to prove simply to Derek Hill that yes, he could do better than he.



(Figure 21 - Portrait of James Dixon by Derek Hill - oil on canvas, 74 x 89 cms)

James Dixon's paintings do seem to be a pictorial continuation of the folklore and depict his native Tory in ways which are special, true, and not like anything one would see on pretty chocolate boxes or calenders. His paintings seem to reflect his inner world of colour, imagination and turmoil and allows him the honour of being among one of the many of Ireland's greatest self-taught painters.

APPENDIX 1

(A) **1901 Census of Ireland - Tory Island**

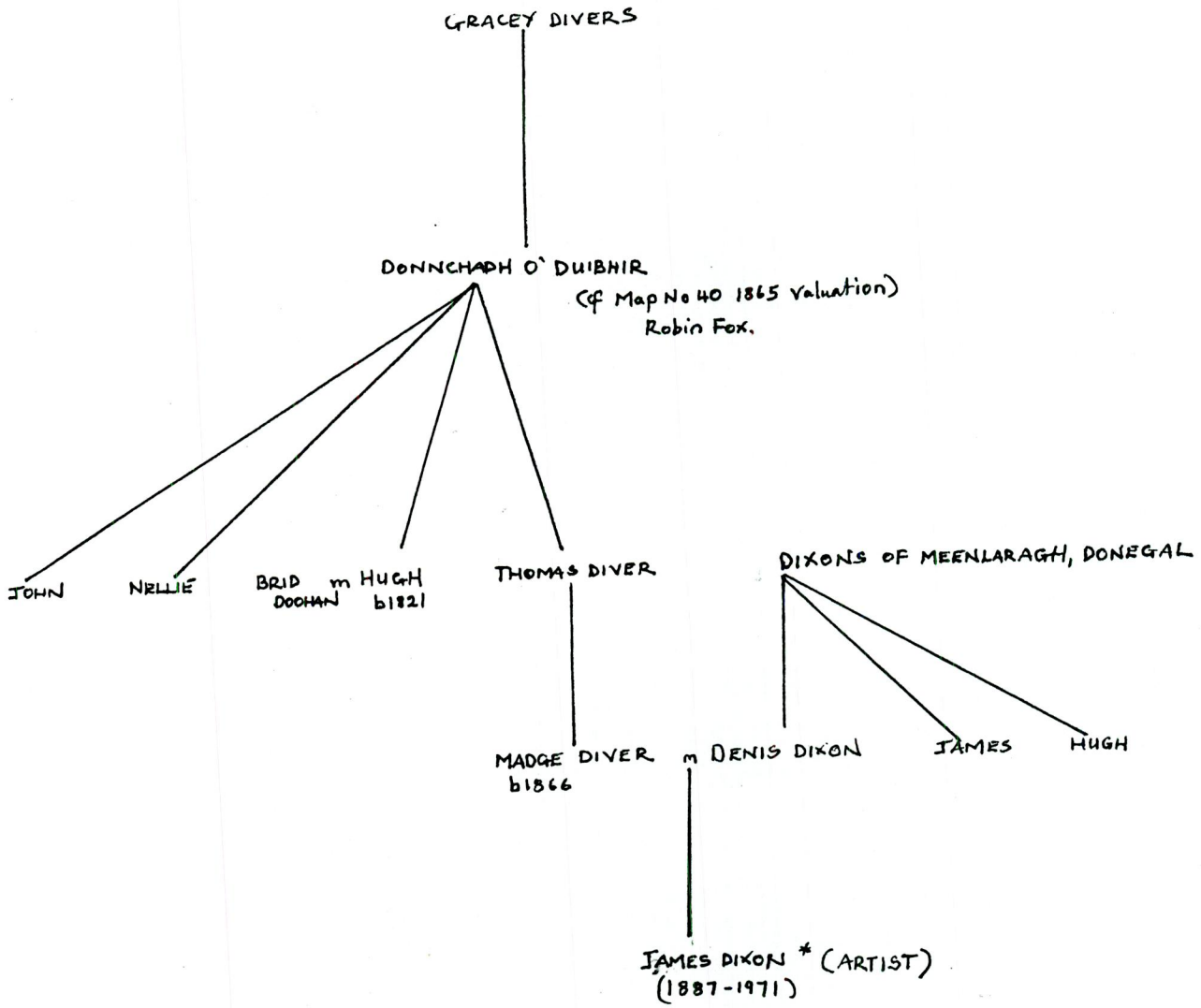
Denis Dixon	38	Roman Catholic	Fisherman	Born Co Donegal
Madge Dixon	35	Roman Catholic	Wife	Born Co Donegal
Hannah Dixon	18	Roman Catholic		Born Co Donegal
Patrick Dixon	16	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
James Dixon *	14	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
Denis Dixon	12	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
Hugh Dixon	10	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
Grace Dixon	4	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
John Dixon	5	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
Mary Dixon	1	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal

(B) **1911 Census of Ireland - Tory Island**

Denis Dixon	64	Roman Catholic	Fisherman	Born Co Donegal
Madge Dixon	62	Roman Catholic	Wife married 31 Years - 14 children born 7 still living	
James Dixon *	24	Roman Catholic	Fisherman	Born Co Donegal
Denis Dixon	22	Roman Catholic	Fisherman	Born Co Donegal
Hugh Dixon	21	Roman Catholic	Fisherman	Born Co Donegal
John Dixon	16	Roman Catholic	Postboy	Born Co Donegal
Grace Dixon	19	Roman Catholic		Born Co Donegal
Mary Dixon	11	Roman Catholic	Scholar	Born Co Donegal
Sarah Sweeney	26	Roman Catholic	National School Teacher	Born Co Donegal

Researched at National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin

WESTOWN DIVERS (GENEOLOGY 5). TORY ISLAND.
(cf Fox, 1978 p 52)



APPENDIX 3

KNOWN PAINTINGS OF JAMES DIXON - COMPILED BY AUTHOR

"Painter Wood Model of a Clipper Ship in Glass Case"

"Painting of a Bird"

"Crucifixion" (on a calendar)

"Baile Thiar - West Town"

"British Minesweepers at work between Tory Island and the Mainland"

"The Farnholm on the Rocks beside Alarin"

"Cutty Sark 1964" - oil on paper

"Mary Driving the Cattle Home across Sand of Dee 1964"

"A Present to Mr Hill 1965"

"Sinking of the Titanic 1966"

"Mr William Rodgers Ploughing in Dixon's Field 1967 (the first tractor on Tory)"

The "Ave Maria" - First motor boat on Tory 1968

"H.M.S. Wasp Foundering on Tory 1968"

"H.M.S. Wasp"

"Ellen Ward - (Islander) - a Portrait"

"To the Queen wishing you the Best of Luck"

"Winston Churchill"

"The Gypsy Moth rounding Cape Horn 1968"

"The Hindenburg Flying across the Sky"

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