

There's an old couple sitting together quietly. They've been together a long time, these two: they needn't say anything. But they like remembering. She says, 'Did you do Marion Richardson?' He thinks back, then nods: 'We did Marion Richardson.' She nods back: 'So did I, in my school.' They move a little closer together.

It's the 1920s. I'm the middle of three sisters. At night I tell them stories, weaving my imagination in and out of the darkness until we all fall asleep.

It's not stories, though, that take me away to College. It's Art. Birmingham Art College!

But it's so harsh! We must draw and paint *exactly*. Apples in a bowl, a crab's claw – render it *exactly*. No chance of weaving it in and out of my imagination. In my lonely Birmingham bed, I grieve for my sisters, my friends.

Now qualified to render everything *exactly*, I take up a post in Dudley. The Black Country: the factories make everything black. I teach Art to Girls at the High School. Strict syllabus. I show them lantern slides, they copy the image.

One day the lantern loses its light. No picture.

I know this picture well: *A Countryside Scene on a Spring Evening*. So I describe it. 'Close your eyes, girls. Listen. Wait till you can see the picture in your imagination. Then open your eyes, draw it, paint it.'

The classroom falls quiet as my voice paints the picture, weaving it in and out of the darkness of their closed eyes.

The result? Every one of these paintings is different from the others, and is 'good'. I knew, and can now prove, that in Art, there is no such thing as One Good-ness, One Truth. There are many goodnesses, many truths.

I arrange an exhibition. News gets round. A man called Roger Fry comes. He is from 'The Bloomsbury Group'. He likes my method. So do the Bloomsberries. I go to London. Paint. Exhibit. Lecture. I travel, far away from the English Midlands, my friends, and my special friend, in Dudley. To Canada, America, Sweden, Finland, Russia! So many different kinds of Art.

I have always loved handwriting. I know from the classroom that children often hate being forced to write, then to have their work condemned as 'untidy'. So I devise a method they can enjoy. It has a structure, but it flows. The Marion Richardson handwriting method. Did you do it? (*She nods.*)

I take my art teaching everywhere. Into prisons. Winson Green. Holloway. (*She shivers.*) The prisoners dare to close their eyes, and open up their imagination. Their work, too, is good.

Then - war. I am taken out of Art, and handwriting, and sent to organise refugee camps. Even there I use paper, pens, brushes, to help the displaced people find the place of their imagination.

Then comes illness. I return to Dudley, and to my friend. She becomes my nurse, and my last moments are in her arms. She and I wove ourselves in and out of each other. We are different, but good, together.

Marion Richardson

Alison Leonard

