

Lionel Percy Smythe RA (1838–1918) and Alice Gunyon (1847–1916)

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DON QUIXOTE OF HONVAULT

LIONEL PERCY SMYTHE was a respected artist of his day, a member of the Royal Academy and loosely associated with a small group of artists called the Idyllists which included J.W. North and Frederick Walker. He is now largely forgotten and his life overshadowed by his half-brother, the marine artist William Lionel Wyllie (1851–1931). In childhood years Lionel had some influence on William and despite an age difference they were good friends.

Stumbling accidentally across Lionel in the course of the research for the Barnsley Hidden Art project, Lionel Smythe almost certainly never visited Barnsley. His story and the connections to Barnsley through his wife Alice, however, gave him a place in the project.

In *W.L. Wyllie Marine Artist, 1851–1931*, Roger Quarm writes about Lionel: “Had he possessed the same fierce compulsion to paint that inspired W.L., he might have equalled him and even outstripped him in their pursuit of recognition as painters. Lionel’s work, unlike W.L.’s, was slowly executed and limited in quantity.”

There is one book written about Lionel, by a family friend, Rosa M. Whitlaw and William Lionel Wyllie: *Lionel P. Smythe RA: His life and Work*. In the opening pages of the book, published in 1923, Rosa Whitlaw describes Lionel: “So my first impression of Lionel Smythe at close quarters seemed to grow from a pair of white canvas shoes, neatly, nay, daintily, tied with pink string ... My eyes wandered shyly up a pair of very long legs clad in baggy grey trousers – climbed a loose tweed coat and so came to the man himself. He had a thin face with a moustache and small pointed beard, and a pair of kind but mischievous and amused grey-green eyes. Somehow the eyes taken in conjunction with the pink shoe laces, inspired confidence ... Women intuitively recognised in him the Don Quixote and champion of their sex.”

His physique and athleticism were both strong elements in his life. Physical fitness perhaps gave him a regime to help conquer periods of depression. How he and women looked mattered a great deal to Lionel.

As to his painting, Rosa says: “He was a poet who sang in light and colour ... He loved everything beautiful – the open sky and sea – the play of light on the harvest fields ... but more than all else, he loved the toilers of the soil and shore,

the women, with their ever present burden of little ones ... his women are often dreamy and lost in thought as they pause in their toil, but they are never sad.”

Rosa was trained at the Slade School of Art London, and an accomplished watercolourist. She was an admirer of Lionel and her book is written from a fan's point of view. It does not cover his birth and early years. Thoughts about these years, his mother, Catherine Benham, and who his father might have been are contained in the appendix.

Lionel was born on 4th September 1838 to Catherine Benham. Catherine was baptised at Christ Church, Spitalfields, London on 12th January 1813, the daughter of John Henry Benham of 12 Clements Inn Passage, Holborn, and Catharine Susanna Thacker. They had married in September 1816 in Southwark. John was a dealer in fancy trimmings including woven ribbons, braids, feathers and other ornamentation. There were six siblings. One sister, Emma, was the mother of Blanche Jenkins who exhibited at the Royal Academy on several occasions. Lionel was one of Catherine's three children born prior to her marriage to William Morison Wyllie in 1851. Lionel, his sister Kate Arabella Maria, born in January 1840 and his brother Philip Percy, born in May 1841 were all baptised at St Mary's Marylebone London on 12th January 1842. Lionel recorded in a variety of documents that he was born in London. There is no record of Catherine marrying prior to 1851 and Catherine gave the three children the Smythe surname, it is assumed, as an indicator of their father.

In the early 1840s Catherine went to live in France with the three children. It is possible that Lionel's siblings were born in France. Philip, the youngest, died of scarlet fever at 36 Gloucester Crescent, Regents Park, London in 1844. In about 1848 Catherine, Lionel and Kate settled in London. They may have thought it too dangerous to remain in France as revolution swept through Europe. A tutor was engaged for the children and in 1850 Catherine, calling herself Mrs Smythe



Gloucester Crescent, Regents Park,
London, 2013, number 36 extreme right

and giving as her address 48 Upper Albany Street, London, enrolled Lionel at King's College School, London where he commenced on 17th September. He was taught for a short time, by Miles E. Cotman (1810–1858) who was Master of Landscape Drawing at the school and the son of John Sell Cotman (1782–1842), marine and landscape artist who had also taught at the school.

On 28th January 1851 Catherine, spinster married William Morison Wyllie, gentleman, at St Pancras Church, London. They were living at 67 Albany Street. Both their fathers are described as gentlemen. Rosa Whitlaw says that they had met in France where William was studying art. The Wyllie family came from Scotland. William Morison's father, William Wyllie, married Martha Morison in London in 1818 and William Morison was born to them in 1820 in Aix-en-Provence. William Morison had a brief spell as a day boy at Harrow School in 1836. It is not known how he supported himself in the years before his marriage.

The Morison family owned estates in Tobago and under Martha's father's will of 1814 he left these estates between his four children. In Martha's case, the interest would cease on the bankruptcy of her husband William. William was declared bankrupt and in 1846 William Morison challenged the administration of the estate on behalf of his mother Martha. He was unsuccessful and lost again in the Court of Appeal in 1847. It would appear he was not a wealthy man on his marriage to Catherine. Catherine, however, owned the house at 36 Gloucester Crescent, built on land owned by Lord Southampton in the early 1840s.

William Morison was a strong presence in the family's life. He was a contributor to the Royal Academy between 1852 and 1887. He was the father of two artists – William Lionel (born 5th July 1851–1931) and Charles William Wyllie (1853–1923) and encouraged all three boys in art. He has work now held in the Southwark Art Collection and the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery. In his will he left all his artwork to the People's Palace, Mile End Road, London, with a request that it be hung together. The People's Palace, started in 1886, provided a cultural and educational centre for the community of London's east end. He died in 1895 at the home in Kent of his son William Lionel.

Lionel left King's College School in December 1853 and enrolled at Heatherley's School of Art. There were few art schools in the 1840s and Heatherley's had been set up in 1837 as a breakaway school from Somerset House which was focused on design for industry. Its pupils have included Henry Moore, Sir John Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Lionel's half-brothers also attended Heatherley's.

France never seemed far from the family's heart with regular summer holidays in and around Boulogne. The railway linked Paris to Boulogne in 1848 and it became a popular Parisian summer holiday resort. The 1851 French census records over 17,000 British residents in the area of Boulogne. It was a good deep port and there were regular packet boats from Dover, Folkestone and London. It attracted artists and in the 1840s Dante Gabriel Rossetti stayed with the Maenza family in Boulogne and spoke of its attractions. Rossetti was known to William Morison Wyllie and according to William Lionel made drawings in the sketch books of his father William Morison. Peppino Maenza, the only son of the family, was later to draw the Château d'Honvault which would become the Smythe family home.



Map of Boulogne and surrounding area

The Wyllie family rented houses on the coast near Wimereux. Rosa Whitlaw writes enthusiastically about Wyllie/Smythe family life. The musicality of Catherine who she says was adored by the children, the simple domestic life and, of course, the art. Money, however, seemed in short supply and Lionel had to write to his mother on several occasions for more money when he was in France and she in London.

All the family sang and according to Rosa they were joined by another, Alice Gunyon. Rosa says: “The exceptionally sweet and bird-like voice of little Alice Gunyon would join in ... Alice dropped into the family ways and was a great favourite. It was found she could climb a rope better than the two younger boys, and she learned to sketch very charmingly, though music was her great passion, and all her spare time was spent at the piano.”

Alice Gunyon was to become Lionel’s wife, but why was she with the family at the age of 12 and who was she?

Alice was the daughter of William Gunyon and Eliza Saville who married in Barnsley in December 1835. William was from Scotland and Eliza was born in Barnsley in 1816. The Saville family had been glass dealers on Cheapside,

Barnsley since at least 1816. In the 1841 census William Gunyon is listed as a grocer on Cheapside. A daughter Marion was born in 1836 and in 1837 baptised at the Salem Chapel Barnsley. By 1847 the family had moved to Wakefield where Alice was born on 2nd December 1847 at The Grove, Kirkgate. Her birth certificate says that William was a tea dealer. In February 1852 William died, aged 42 years, in Middlestown, Wakefield.

In 1855 Marion died at Portsea Place, Paddington, London aged 19. Eliza bought a burial plot for three from the address at Portsea Place so perhaps all three Gunyons were living there having moved from Wakefield. Marion is buried at All Souls' cemetery, Kensal Green. Rosa Whitlaw's book describes Alice's mother as being the superintendent of 36 Gloucester Crescent, the Smythe/Wyllie family home, but it is not clear from what date she took up that position and whether or not Eliza, Marion and Alice lived at number 36.

The French census of 1861 shows Alice aged 12 with the entire Wyllie/Smythe family – William, Catherine, Lionel, William Lionel and Charles. She seems to have become a favourite with the family and taken on holiday with them.

In August 1869 Alice and Lionel married. Both were living at 36 Gloucester Crescent. Lionel's father is named as Percy Smythe in the marriage certificate. Their honeymoon was spent in Guines, France and Lionel commenced work on 'Field of the Cloth of Gold', a place near Guines where Henry VIII and Francis I of France met. He did not finish the work until 1884, when it was shown at the Royal Academy. Shortly after his marriage Lionel, together with William and Charles, carried out a sea rescue (not for the first time) when a schooner ran aground in a gale off the French coast. To the cheering of the crowds on the beach, they rescued the crew. Watching was Prince Jerome Napoleon, a nephew of Bonaparte who later invited them on to his yacht. Lionel exhibited a work called 'A Hero of our Time' at the Royal Academy in 1873. This work is said to be an account of a local prominent resident of Boulogne pinning medals onto the chests of the brothers in recognition of the rescue. Central to the work is a delicate, pretty woman – this is Alice.

Lionel was becoming an established artist. His work appeared in the *Illustrated London News* and he had exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1863. He exhibited at the British Institution in 1865 a work called 'The Arabian Nights', a small oil of a woman reading a book to a child. It is possible that the woman is Catherine and the child either William or Charles Wyllie. In 1868 his work 'Fancy Free' was shown at the Royal Academy and at the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts. This group of schoolgirls are walking in Caen wood near Hampstead. The oil of this work is now held by Glasgow Museums but called 'Children coming home from school'. In 1869 he exhibited at the Royal Academy. The work was called 'Bon Voyage', a picture of a fisher girl. The National Maritime Museum holds a watercolour work by Lionel called 'A Thick Night off the Goodwins' which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1869 and shows men with a chart below deck in a storm. William Lionel writes that Lionel recreated the cabin in the back parlour at Gloucester Crescent.



'A Hero of our Time'
by Lionel Percy Smythe

The Wyllies and Lionel held strong views about art and in the 1870s, Lionel, William and William Morison hoped that they could do something about the attitude of the Royal Academy to 'outsiders', i.e. non-members. The trio issued a pamphlet which was sent to all Royal Academy exhibitors. The issue progressed and they won the support of Sir Charles Dilke, Member of Parliament for Chelsea for some reforms to be made to the Royal Academy. The trio attended a debate on the issue at the House of Commons. All criticism of the Royal Academy was rejected by the Prime Minister, Gladstone, who suggested that the Royal Academy should be left alone and it was. There is an oil in the Parliamentary Art Collection by William Morison Wyllie which depicts the debate and central characters, dated 1878.

A daughter, Nora Katherine, was born to Lionel and Alice and baptised in London in July 1870. In 1871 the family were all living at Gloucester Crescent.

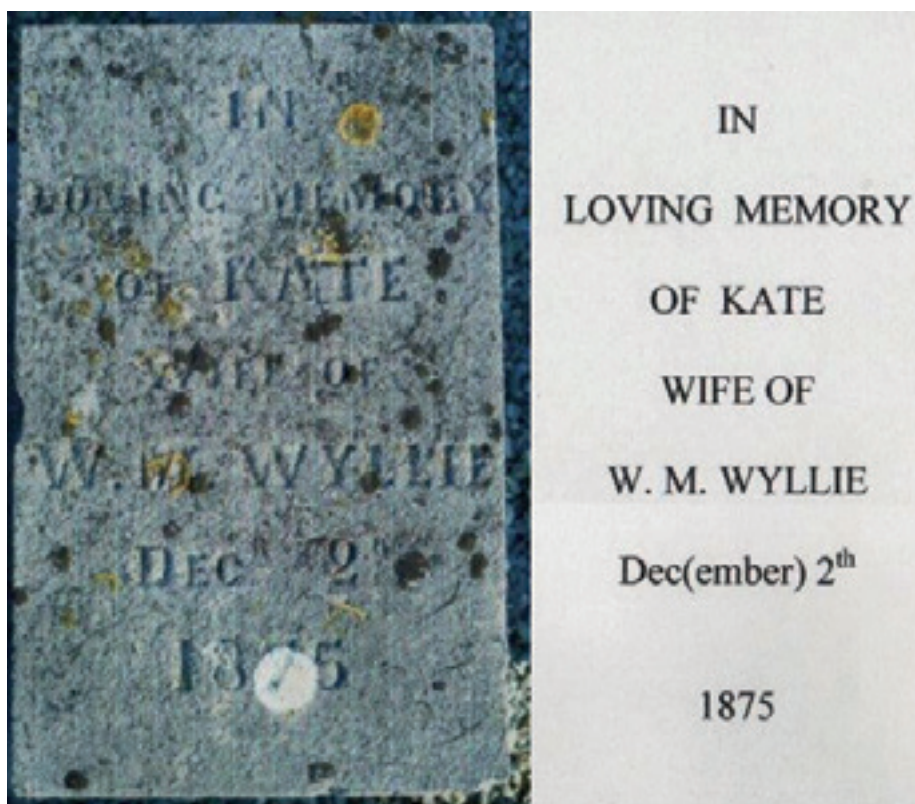
Summers were still spent in France and in 1872 Catherine and Charles were in France when another storm hit. This time the house was washed away and Catherine had to be rescued. Catherine, already in poor health died in 1875. She had nurtured her children and kept a happy household.

One sadness had occurred in the family when in 1873 Catherine's daughter Kate, Lionel's sister, died. Kate, according to Rosa Whitlaw, never fitted into the happy lifestyle of the family she so vividly comments on, describing her as having a "bitter" tongue. She had seemed unsettled, spending a lot of time under the chaperonage of Eliza Gunyon at 36 Gloucester Crescent.

In 1873 a daughter, Minnie, was born in London and 1874 Lionel painted a work called 'Shorthanded' which was exhibited at the Royal Academy and which is now in the collection of the National Maritime Museum. The work initially was in the collection of The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney but was sold by them in 1959. He exhibited in Glasgow throughout the 1870s.

The year 1876 finds some of the family in France. Charles, Alice, Norah and Minnie are joined by a Jeanne Aitchison, a 28 year-old Scot said to be a "domestique". This is possibly the Jane Aitchison who William Morison Wyllie married in 1884. They went to live at Marine Cottage, Guernsey. Jane died aged 38 in 1886 in Guernsey.

In 1878 a third child, Philip, was born in London. In 1879 Lionel exhibited at the Royal Academy a work called 'Kindred Spirits'. This shows a child on a swing with two cats and is thought to be Lionel's daughter Nora in the garden of 36 Gloucester Crescent. The work is now held at National Museums, Liverpool.



Gravestone of Catherine Wyllie



'Château d'Honvault'
by Lionel Percy Smythe



By 1881 the Smythes had settled permanently in France. They chose to live at the Château d'Honvault near Wimereux. The family including William Morison had invested in property in the Rue des Anglais Wimereux in 1875 and it may be that rent from this property assisted Lionel's finances. The property was sold by Alice and Lionel in the same year as William Morison's death in 1895.

The English 1881 census shows Lionel at 36 Gloucester Crescent as a lodger. It seems the house had been let and Lionel kept a room for his use. The 1882 French census shows the five Smythes together and it is likely that they were living at the Château d'Honvault near Wimereux. This was to remain the family home until the deaths of Alice and Lionel.

The château was built between the 13th and 16th centuries. It provided Lionel with sea and pastoral views, and the simple life he loved. A description of the Smythe family is contained in a work by Charles Gogin 'Things are waking up at Mudham'. Gogin (1844–1931) was an artist who regularly accompanied his friend, the author and critic Samuel Butler (1835–1902) on numerous trips

to Boulogne. They visited the Smythes and Gogin described the visit: "On Boxing Day we called on an English artist friend who lives a few miles from Boulogne in a most delightful spot: an old French château in an antique garden with woods (or rather a small wood) on a hill side from which one can see the sea and the lovely surrounding country. He has three children now grown up, and I remember them as a flight of wild sea-gulls ... no words of mine could convey to you an idea of the quaintness and picturesqueness of this family, their home and their pursuits ... Our friend has a rather Spanish look, tall, thin, with an air of Don Quixote."

The move to France may have suited family life but cannot have made much commercial sense for Lionel. Money again seemed in short supply. Frequent trips to England were necessary and a variety of work was undertaken by Lionel, not always to his taste.

In 1883 Lionel, William Morison and Charles Wyllie exhibited at the London International Fisheries Exhibition. This exhibition took place between May and October and was located in area occupied now by the Science Museum and the campus of Imperial College. Lionel continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy and in Glasgow. 'Reflections at the Spring', held by the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum was painted this year and is likely to feature either Nora or Minnie. By 1886 the Smythe family were all at Château d'Honvault.

In 1886 Lionel moved between Wimereux and London and he painted a portrait of a rugby match with W.H. Overend. This was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle Internationale at Paris and at the Fine Art Society. The match was between Scotland and England at Raeburn Place on 13th March 1886. It seems likely the two men were chosen for their combined skills. A reproduction hangs at Murrayfield. The picture seems to have created great interest for the French and may have stimulated an interest in the game in France. This commission was important to Lionel as he was coming close to bankruptcy and the fee saved him from that fate.

Lionel also worked with Charles James Lewis (1830–1892) on a work showing girls mending nets. He was greatly influenced by Lewis both in terms of colour and subject and Lewis remained a friend. In the same year he painted 'The Dawn of Spring' which now hangs in the William Morris Gallery as a gift from Sir Frank Brangwyn in 1948 and a watercolour called 'Springtime' which forms part of the Whitworth collection in Manchester.

Lionel was on friendly terms with James A. McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and there is correspondence dated 1887 from Whistler to Lionel on the occasion of Whistler being deselected as President of the Royal Society of British Artists. Lionel was also present in 1889 at a dinner at the Criterion London to honour Whistler being made an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Munich.

In 1889 Lionel was awarded an Honourable Mention at the Paris Universelle Exhibition, in the fine art watercolour section.

Money was still a worry. The Smythes' salvation did not come from the Smythe or Wyllie family but from Alice. Rosa Whitlaw says that Alice received a legacy of £400 and properties in Lincolnshire and Scotland from her uncle. There was a court case in 1890 where solicitors were seeking fees for a case

involving Alice's lunatic relative. In the course of that case it was disclosed that Alice had an interest in a property on May Day Green, Barnsley which had been sold in 1871. It is likely that Alice's money had kept the family afloat.

Temporarily free of money worries, Lionel exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1890 a work called 'Germinal' which is now in the collection of the Tate Gallery, London. This depicts the meadow behind the château and has many Smythe ingredients: small child with mother, flowers, and a family pet puppy.

Lionel was a medal winner in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair and he continued to paint and exhibit. In 1897 he was visited at Honvault by the architect, designer and admirer Sydney Vacher and his children. Vacher sought lessons from Lionel but actually became his daughter Minnie's first pupil. Lionel carried out another sea rescue of Vacher's son Cecil when he and his father got into difficulty in the sea. Cecil was later honoured for his gallantry as a Royal Naval Officer in the Battle of Jutland. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, have a work by Lionel painted in 1902 called 'Under the Greenwood Tree' and this was donated by a member of the Walpole Society in memory of the Battle of Jutland.

In 1898 Lionel was made an Associate of the Royal Academy but in the same year that accolade was greatly diminished by the death of his daughter Nora from consumption. In the same year a plaster, then later bronze bust was commissioned of Lionel by Alfred Gilbert (1854–1934), sculptor and goldsmith. The bust is now at the Royal Academy, London.

Towards the end of the century clouds were growing over the Smythes. Hints of Alice's ill health are made by Rosa Whitlaw. She seems to have had a spinal problem which eventually led to paralysis.

Despite her illness, family life continued and Lionel continued to paint and exhibit. He won a Gold Medal at the Paris Exhibition for his work 'The Gleaners'. In 1902 visitors at Honvault included the novelist Samuel Butler and Henry Festing Jones. Butler (1835–1902), best known for his works 'Erewhon' and 'The Way of All Flesh' was a student at Heatherley's with Lionel. Festing Jones was Butler's assistant and travelling companion. In 1908 Lionel exhibited for the last time in Glasgow a work entitled 'Summer'.

In May 1910 the magazine *The International Studio* had an article by A.L. Baldry, artist and writer, about Lionel and his work. Baldry praises Lionel for his 'absolute truth ... exquisite accomplishment ... and delicate handling.'

The Royal Academy holds a work by Lionel, 'Fruit d'amour' which was his diploma work. In May 1911 Lionel was made a Royal Academician.

Minnie, whilst looking after her parents, was beginning to paint in her own right. She received commissions for child portraits including the Wood family of Berkshire, whilst staying with the Whitlaws. The Royal Watercolour Society have a work of Minnie's called 'Gorse' as well as two works by Lionel: 'La Tricoteuse' and 'Child in a Red Dress'.

Lionel's frequent trips to England will have alerted him to the forthcoming war as well as local Wimereux rumblings. Knowledge of the exact troop position was scarce and the situation was not helped by the rather chaotic postal service. Rosa Whitlaw talks of the fact that summer holiday visitors to Wimereux

had melted away. Soldiers took their place. Soldiers were working the farm at Honvault as the workmen had been called away on military service. Food was scarce and the Smythes, always short of money, were pleased to have their vegetable garden and wood to rely on. The only source of water was from their stream.

Sir John French, Commander of the British Expeditionary Force, landed in Boulogne in August 1914 and from that date to the end of the war the area around Boulogne was transformed. The Smythe family idyll was over. They did not return to England as many did from their locality. Thousands of soldiers passed through Boulogne, and Boulogne and Wimereux became centres for large base hospitals away from the front line. The good railway and port links made them good centres for evacuation. There were at least 10 such hospitals in Wimereux alone, mostly set up in the holiday hotels.

In 1915 Lionel sent his last picture to the Royal Academy – ‘A Fisher Girl’. Lionel also contributed to the Artists War Fund exhibitions organised by the Royal Academy in January and February 1915, the proceeds being donated to the Red Cross. Alice’s health was deteriorating. Minnie was pushed to her limits. Philip was a private with the Labour Corps and Lionel continued to travel to London. War raged around them but they stayed put. Alice’s health continued to decline and she died in August 1916. Her death, the war and the increasing air raids depressed Lionel’s spirit.

He continued to paint but his health was failing. Dr James A. Philip, longtime doctor in Boulogne was summoned. Lionel was transferred to a military hospital where he died on 10th July 1918 and was buried with Alice in Wimille cemetery. He left the sum of £637 15s 11d gross. His will had been made in London in 1905 and his estate passed to his children. On 14th November 1917 he added a



Grave of Lionel and Alice at Wimille



Graveyard in Wimille

codicil in Boulogne. In the event of his children predeceasing him his estate was to be shared between his half-brothers William and Charles Wyllie.

After his death Minnie and Philip moved to 36 Gloucester Crescent where both of them lived until their deaths in 1955 and 1958 respectively. Both are described as artists in their death certificates. Neither married. Under his will, Philip left 36 Gloucester Crescent to a F.M. Ashton and certain of his watches and pictures to his friend, Edward Philip, thought to be the son of Dr Philip of Boulogne. In 1958 Edward Philip donated to the Royal Academy a work by Lionel, 'Portrait of an unknown man'. It is possible that this is a portrait of Dr Philip, his father.

The Times of 16th July 1918 has a brief obituary of Lionel. It comments: "...Mr Smythe deserves to be better known than he is ... he was a skilful, conscientious, and honest painter ... he has acquired a secure reputation which will probably increase with time." Sadly that has not happened.

In March 1918 Lionel had been visited by William Lionel's son, Lieutenant Colonel H. Wyllie, and Rosa records his words which are a very fitting personal tribute to a most interesting, kind, loving and talented man: "...I made my way up the steep road leading over the cliffs to Honvault ... the whole face of the country was covered with temporary buildings and huts. Great hospitals were everywhere. Honvault alone seemed unchanged ... we went to the little studio in the wood, the workshop of the gallant Don Quixote, the wizard of the woods, the hills, the sea, of glorious sunshine, of comely wenches and adorable children. How he understood and loved them all! And wove that love with pencil and point and brush..."

APPENDIX

What If?

Rosa Whitlaw and W.L. Wyllie start their account of Lionel as a schoolboy in France. Nothing is recorded about his father, birth and early years and very little about Catherine prior to her marriage to William Morison Wyllie.

The absence of any marriage to Mr Smythe and the description of Catherine as a spinster at her marriage in 1851 raised intriguing questions as to who Percy Smythe, Lionel's father, could have been. The obvious candidate on an internet search was Percy Clinton Sidney Smythe, sixth Viscount Strangford, diplomat and man of letters born in 1780. Given the difference in social status between Catherine and the Viscount he was a very unlikely candidate. Also, the Viscount's wife Ellen (Eleanor) Browne who he had married in 1817 died in 1826, whilst the Viscount was Ambassador to St Petersburg, leaving the Viscount free to marry. This had not happened.

Further research showed that *The Post Office Directory* for 1846 has the occupier of 36 Gloucester Crescent as Percy Smidt; Catherine owned 36 Gloucester Crescent and as her father was bankrupt there was no evidence of how she acquired a significant property in Regent's Park; the Viscount lived at 68 Harley Street, not far from 36 Gloucester Crescent and Albany Street; Catherine's three children prior to her marriage had Smythe family names: Lionel was the name of the fifth Viscount, Percy's father and also the name of Percy's second son who died young in 1834. Lionel was repeated in the name of William Lionel Wyllie; Percy the name of the sixth Viscount; Maria the name of American wife of the fifth Viscount and Philip was the name of the second and fourth Viscounts.

The evidence was circumstantial until reading a work by the Canadian scholar Mary S. Millar. In her brilliant work of scholarship *Disraeli's Disciple: The Scandalous Life of George Smythe* (the sixth Viscount's eldest son), Mary Millar states that on the death of Percy in 1855, George had a huge shock about his father's affairs:

"...on the whole there was alarmingly little money. What also came to light was that Strangford had all along been supporting a common-law wife and a brood of illegitimate children to whom, despairing of GSS's financial irresponsibility, he had sequestered everything he could, 'considerable savings', Disraeli told Lady Londonderry."

This revelation made Percy a very much more likely candidate. That the Smythes also had a home in France for many generations which may have been a bolthole for Catherine and the children was significant. The next thought was whether chronology would support Percy. By 1828, Percy's diplomatic career was over. His life was spent as a Tory Peer and in pursuit of greatness for his son George. His homes were Harley Street, held on a lease, and the Smythe ancestral home, Westenhanger near Hythe, Kent which Percy bought in the 1830s. In 1838 his mother died in Bristol; in December 1840 he was likely to be present at his daughter's wedding and in 1841 George was elected MP for Canterbury. These important family events would seem to indicate his presence in England at times relevant to Catherine's three children.

The fact that Lionel's father was a Percy Smythe was not a secret. Lionel cites the name on his marriage certificate to Alice. If the Percy was the Viscount did Lionel and the rest of the family know that he was the sixth Viscount, if indeed he was? It would seem that W.L. Wyllie, if he knew Lionel's father, chose not to tell in the book he co-wrote with Rosa. Lionel seems to have said nothing. What Lionel's children knew is contained in a letter written by Lionel's daughter Minnie in 1944, which also informs as to how Catherine and Percy may have met.

The letter, very kindly loaned by the National Maritime Museum recounts: "...the third daughter Catherine married Percy Sidney Smythe and second William Lionel Wyllie..."

For the first time Sidney is added to Percy's name. She continues talking of her grandfather John Henry Benham: "...he was very fond of music and had all his daughters well taught in singing ... he was an obstinate old man and failed to modernise ... and fell into great poverty ... then his three eldest daughters came to the rescue and went on the stage ... they sang in light opera, *The Beggar's Opera* and *Midas*."

The Smythe/Wyllie family were very proud of Catherine's musicality and the sixth Viscount wrote ballads with musical contributions from Charlotte Sneyd and Charles Hempel and this interest may have facilitated their paths crossing.

The reasons why Percy did not marry Catherine may be accounted for in his personality traits vividly described by Mary Millar. She says that his interest in his family's history verged on the obsessive. He was determined to buy back Westenhangar for the family despite the tightness of funds. She says he was authoritarian, controlling, prickly, paranoid and impatient of authority. Importantly she says that he was attracted by intellect even more than beauty and would never have married mere meekness. He equated ability with breeding, Mary Millar says. Catherine would not have measured highly on breeding and perhaps intellect and it seems Percy could not accept that in a wife. Although seemingly having little time for his children by his wife Ellen in their youth, he seemed devastated by her death and the death of his son Lionel in 1834, and could be an emotional man. If he was Catherine's lover, then he gave what he could to her and the children, leaving his own son, who was a great disappointment to him by Mary Millar's account, a titled pauper.

Was there a physical resemblance between Lionel and the Viscount? Apart from the pictures and paintings we have several physical descriptions of the two men.

Rosa describes Lionel as in the opening paragraphs of this work. William Lionel describes Lionel as "a thin youth, very long in the legs." There is the description of him by Charles Gogin, having the air of Don Quixote. Jessie Bayes in 1970 described her artistic family home in Fellows Road London and the visitors, one of whom was Lionel who she describes thus: "It was an open house – fellow artists and their families in and out all the time. They were an interesting group; Lionel Smythe (later to become an R.A.) – lean and long-nosed as his two greyhounds, Spider and Palm, a ribald, mocking creature, but witty. He lived in a medieval Château near Boulogne and strongly influenced Walter, who admired him enormously."



Percy Clinton Sydney Smythe, sixth Viscount Strangford c. 1808. Miniature by William Haines, Wikipedia



Lionel Percy Smythe: photograph taken from "Lionel Smythe: His Life and Work" by Rosa M. Witlaw

Benjamin Disraeli was known to Percy and a friend of his son George. Percy appears as a character in Disraeli's novel *Contarini Fleming*, described thus: "... handsome and elegant ... aquiline but delicately chiselled nose ... lustrous deep set eyes ... tight lipped as his future profession required, his muscular control was symptomatic of the discipline he imposed on himself and his family."

The evidence points to the sixth Viscount Percy and one can only contemplate what effect this may have had on Lionel. I believe he knew and chose not to tell. It may have helped his career to have a Viscount as a father but without a marriage perhaps he thought nothing of it. His sister Kate seems to have had an unhappy unsettled life – perhaps she knew and was not happy about it. It also had a significant effect on the life of George Smythe, the Viscount's son. George's chaotic sex life, marriage and prospects of an heir were disturbed by the thought of what Mary Millar calls "Strangford's illegitimate brood, if it included a son". Lionel and Alice valued family life. It is rather sad that his children did not marry and did not create their own families. There is no one to trumpet his work and little interest in it. Perhaps it is time that this meticulous, dreamy painter should come out of the shadows?

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LINKS

BBC 'Your Paintings': <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/artists/lionel-percy-smythe>

The Royal Academy: http://www.racollection.org.uk/ixbin/indexplus?*sform=%2Fsearch_form%2Fallform&_IXSESSION_=8xvKwaSUpaw&_IXACTION_=query&_IXresults_=y&works=true&books=true&archives=true&exhibitions=true&_IXSPFX_=templates%2Fsummary%2F&all_fields=smythe&_IX.x=0&_IX.y=0

Victoria and Albert Museum: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/3310>

The Tate Gallery: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/smythe-germinal-n01709>

Whitworth Art Gallery: <http://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/>

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