

Circles and Tangents

by Vice-President of The Terence Rattigan Society, Michael Darlow

An exhibition at Dorset County Museum in Dorchester will have been of interest to Rattigan fans. Cranborne: Art in the Shadow of the Chase included works by **Peggy Rankin**, elder sister of **David Rankin**, whose death, aged twenty, in the summer of 1938 had a major impact on the writing of *After The Dance*. David, the son of a clergyman's daughter, went up to Oxford in autumn 1937 where he started keeping a diary in which he charted his moral struggles, anguish over his religious faith and awakening homosexual feelings. He joined OUDS, The Oxford University Dramatic Society, and it was probably at an OUDS event late in 1937 that he first met Rattigan. Rattigan had been a member of OUDS and regularly returned to attend its events.



Rankin appears to have been among the first in the succession of good looking, slightly below average height young men to whom Rattigan would repeatedly be attracted throughout his life.

On 22nd March 1938, his twentieth birthday, Rankin records his disappointment at hearing nothing from Rattigan and speculates that he “may have decided that my good looks are accompanied with too much intellect.” However, the following day he receives a telegram from Rattigan inviting him to stay for a weekend and enthusiastically accepts, adding in his diary: “Mummy was rather worried, to such an extent that I wondered whether she guessed his intentions. However, I like him and am not afraid.” There follows a three month gap with no further entries until 5th July 1938 when Rankin records how in the past three months he has become “gradually dispossessed of my ideals”, and speaks of his feelings of moral confusion and fear that he will “find no more of life ... [than] fruitless quests for pleasure.”

Throughout their relationship Rankin remained both in awe of Rattigan and somewhat disappointed in him. In a poem he wrote, dated 7th July 1938, he records his impressions of Rattigan:

*The man had grey-blue twinkling eyes,
And gracefully walked and talked
His way through life with an obscene jest,
A drink, or a substitute wife.
His riches raised from a few light lines
Quoted from a London stage,
And he did not mind, nay, was rather proud
That there was not a profound page.
His talk was easy, and clever, and bound
By no other convention than this:-
That it should never discuss a man's soul
Nor a subject for laughter miss.*

Two weeks later Rankin went to Cornwall intending to write a play called *The Suicide* about a middle-aged man who, having failed to live up to the ideals of his youth, kills himself. Upon arrival Rankin, a strong swimmer, went for a swim in the sea. He never returned. Two days later his body was washed ashore. The coroner's verdict was accidental drowning. But to this day members of his family believe that his death was suicide.

When Rattigan met Rankin he was suffering severe writer's block following the unexpected success of *French Without Tears*. During the months of their friendship Rattigan worked with Anthony Goldschmidt on the satirical farce about Hitler, Mussolini and the Chamberlain government's policy of appeasement, *Follow My Leader*, and probably read parts of it to Rankin. The play was completed around the time of Rankin's death, but was immediately banned by the Lord Chamberlain as "not in the nation's interest" – it might offend Hitler! But at the same time Rattigan had also been struggling with a much more serious play, *After the Dance*. This play was not finally completed until some weeks after Rankin's death.

Although events and characters in Rattigan plays are rarely drawn directly from people he knew, elements in them do frequently owe more than a little to events in his own life and the lives of those around him. So while none of the characters in *After the Dance* can be said to be Rankin or Rattigan, elements of the play and its characters do, I believe, owe something to Rattigan and Rankin's relationship. That belief is strengthened by the evidence from Rankin's diary and his other writings. The relationship may also have influenced some of the later plays.

David Rankin's death had a lasting impact on his sister Peggy. At David's funeral she dropped a sunflower into his grave. She never forgot the thud it made as it landed on his coffin. For the rest of her life Peggy Rankin's paintings frequently featured sunflowers and children in states of 'togetherness'. Many reference the power of the subconscious and she often depicted her brother as a boy. In one, painted not long after David's death, she sees him as a boy cradling a dandelion head full of seed, but the stalk of the dandelion is broken while in front of him lie two swan's feathers.

In its subject and its symbolism the painting reflects Peggy Rankin's continuing bond with her brother but also her sorrow and sense of the loss of potential in a brilliant young life cut short. For me there is a strong affinity between paintings by Peggy Rankin and some of Rattigan's most deeply personal plays. □



The exhibition was at Dorset County Museum until 21st January 2012 and is expected to move later to Salisbury. Vivienne Light's book *Circles and Tangents: Art in the Shadow of Cranborne Chase* is published by Canterton Books. I am indebted to Peggy Rankin's daughter Linnet Allardyce for much of the information in this article and permission to reproduce Peggy Rankin's painting and the photograph of David Rankin. M.D.

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