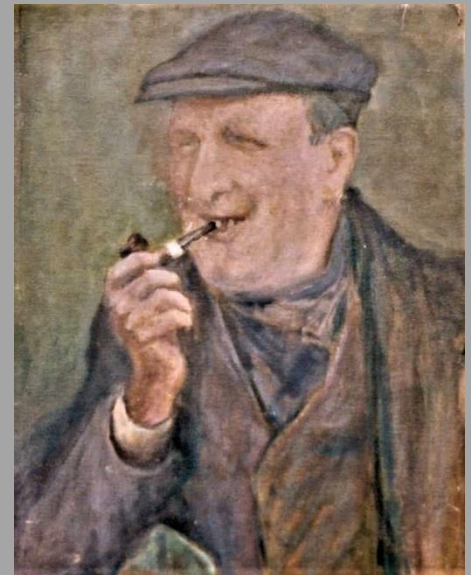


Llanelli Community Heritage

WALTER COLE (1883 – 1967)

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Walter Cole, Self Portrait, oil on board (author's collection)

Written by Brian Davies
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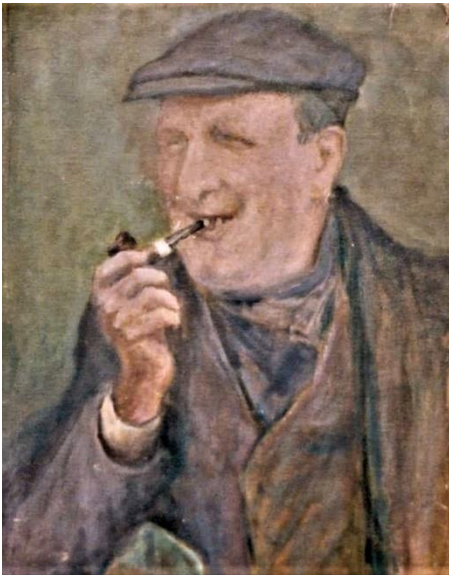
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WALTER COLE (1883 – 1967) ~ by Brian Davies

Around the 1980s I came across a fascinating painting in a Swansea second-hand shop entitled *Dai Bach*, which showed a man cleaning a billiard hall. On the back it bore the label W. Cole, 1 Als Street, Llanelli. It was an excellent painting of a very unusual subject, not at all the sort of chocolate-box painting that many local artists produce simply to get a sale. The painting of Dai was so typical of countless old men that I had seen in Llanelli. It was my introduction to Walter Cole, who was one of the most fascinating and important characters in Llanelli art circles from the early 1900s to the 1960s.

Curiously, however, I found that little was known of him at the time, and numerous museums and libraries I contacted, including the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, and the Glynn Vivian, Swansea, could say nothing about him. No record could be found of him in any of the reference books on artists that had been produced in the last century, and no books about Llanelli that I read at the time so much as mentioned his name. While his name and work were well known in Llanelli in the first part of the twentieth century, he had passed into obscurity. I determined, therefore, that I would try to find as much as I could about this very capable artist.

However, with other commitments I put this on hold for a long time, and it was not until about 2003 that I made a serious attempt to get information by putting a letter in the *Llanelli Star*. In doing that I hit the jackpot, as I had two brilliant responses.



Walter Cole, Self Portrait, oil on board, author's collection

The first was from Dorothy Margaret Davies, then in her eighties, who was a niece of Walter Cole and who knew so much about him. My meeting with her had a humorous side to it, as it is so happened that she phoned my London home on the day the *Llanelli Star* came out and spoke to my wife. I happened to be in Llanelli at the time and my wife phoned my mobile to let me know about her. Later that day I drove over to Margaret's house at 20 James Street, Llanelli, and she was astonished, wondering how I had come down from London so fast. We had an excellent conversation about Walter Cole, and then she did something I will never forget. She told me to wait a minute while she went into another room, and came back with an unframed oil on board of a self-portrait that Walter Cole had painted. With tears in her eyes, she told me that all her life she had wanted someone to take an interest in 'Uncle Walter', and write about him, and she wanted me to have the painting as a gift. It was one of the most touching moments of my life. Later, she was thrilled when I used the portrait in my book *Around Llanelli*, and I also wrote an article on Walter Cole for the WEA's *Llanelli Miscellany*.

The second response came in a beautifully hand-written letter from John Bowen, one of Llanelli's finest artists. He recounted how that, as a young man, he and other students at the Llanelli School of Art and Crafts had been so inspired by Walter Cole, not simply by his ability as an artist, but also by the enthusiasm he had for art. Some of John Bowen's comments will be related later.

Since then, I have had the privilege of meeting the Llanelli historian and author, Philip Thomas, grandnephew of Walter Cole, and nephew of Dorothy Margaret Davies. I visited Philip's home in 2016, and was shown several paintings by Walter Cole, inherited from his parents. They included a delightful portrait of a lady sitting in a church, dressed in Welsh national costume. Philip then kindly drove me to his cousin's house in Cwmffrwd, Carmarthen, where she, Cynthia Stevens, the daughter of Dorothy Davies, also had paintings by Walter Cole. These included an atmospheric depiction of Talley Abbey, and a magnificent portrait of Walter's father, John Stevens Cole.

Philip told me that, as a young child, he frequently visited his beloved Uncle Walter at 1 Als Street on Saturday mornings, and would chat with him for hours at a time. He recalled the aromatic smells of oils coming from Walter's art studio on the first floor, and the smell of pipe tobacco that always filled the house. He also informed me that Walter never married, and was an avid lover of boxing.



Walter Cole (standing, third from left), with his father, John Stevens (seated), his sister, Lena (standing far left), and his sister Edith (standing far right).



Walter Cole, Portrait of Henry Giles, Parc Howard Museum and Art Gallery. Walter Cole was a versatile artist, but he was at his best painting portraits. This is an important painting as it is the only known portrait of Henry Giles, the first Principal of the Llanelly School of Art and Crafts.

Walter Stevens Cole was born in Llanelli on 5 July 1883. At that time his parents lived in 14 Pottery Place but, later, moved to Als Street. Walter's father was John Stevens Cole, a Master Plasterer by trade, who built up a small business employing two or three men. Dorothy Margaret Davies, said that John Cole lived at 1 Als Street, and that he had a shed at the bottom of the small garden where he kept his tools and paid his men. Philip fondly remembers playing in the garden, and was fascinated by the shed in which Walter kept an artificial leg that his sister Edith used before her death. It was at Als Street that Walter was to live for the rest of his life.

From an early age he displayed a great interest and ability in art and this interest was supported and encouraged by his parents. After leaving school he worked as a plasterer for his father, which was very convenient for him, because it gave him the flexibility to continue his painting. He wanted to take every opportunity to learn more about art and, as a young man, he would cycle in the evenings to Swansea, to attend classes at the Swansea College of Art. As well as giving him this flexibility of working hours, his father also designed the house at 1 Als Street to accommodate his young son's interest in painting. A room upstairs at the back of the house had an unusually large window built in it to allow more light for the young artist, and this room, effectively, became Walter's studio. The window can still be seen at the back of the house. His niece described the room as one that was full of books about art, as well as having all his paints, brushes and canvasses, and stacks of completed paintings piled against the wall. He was, she said, a man, who 'lived for art'.

On 31 October 1907, the Llanelly School of Art and Crafts was opened in one room in Castle Buildings for one half day and one evening per week, before moving, in 1908, to a house in Coleshill Terrace. The school was under the headship of Henry Giles who was described in the local press as a product of the South Kensington Schools and a Queen's prizeman and bronze medallist. As a student in the school, Walter Cole had a high regard for Giles, and described him as a very keen master who was well supported by enthusiastic committeemen like the Reverend Iona Williams. At the initial prize-giving ceremony of the school held in Tabernacle Schoolroom - a room used by the Art School for life drawing classes - Walter Cole was the first to be called up to receive a prize for life painting.

Writing about this later, he recalled that he had a letter from ‘Dick (J. D.) Innes’ who was then a student at the Slade, saying that he ‘hoped the brave man who started the school gets lots of pupils.’ As we have seen, that ‘brave man’ was, in fact, Henry Giles who lived in Carmarthen, and was an accomplished artist himself. Innes, of course, would have been well aware of the efforts his father had made to form such a school, and of the difficulties involved in sustaining it. Giles’s appointment, in fact, was to prove a huge success, and he was to remain as Principal of the Art School until ill-health caused him to resign in 1911, playing a significant role in establishing it as an important institution in Llanelli. As well as teaching the techniques of Art, Giles ensured that Art was the subject of discussion and, after the School had closed for the day, Cole relates how he and other students would walk down to the station with Giles, talking about Art.

James Dickson Innes was born in 1887, only four years after Walter, and the familiar way in which Cole referred to Innes shows that they were close friends. During his time at the Slade Innes kept in touch with Walter Cole, and the strength of this friendship between them is shown by the letter written by Innes to Cole in October 1908 from his new home in 10 Fitzroy Street, London, inviting his Llanelli friend to visit, saying that ‘I would like to see you very much while you are up here’, and giving Cole advice on how to find his house from Tottenham Court Road.¹ He suggests that Sunday afternoon would probably be the best time for Cole to visit, when he would be able to show some work to him, and then suggests that Cole ‘take dinner’ with him in the evening when he would be able to meet some of Innes’s friends. Cole, who enjoyed discussions about art, would have loved that, and he would also have appreciated Innes informing him that ‘you are coming at a marvelous (sic) time, as the pictures at the Franco-British Exhibition (sic) are marvelous (sic) and of course (sic) one seldom (sic) has an opportunity (sic) of seeing such a good collection of French pictures anywhere except in Paris.’²

During the First World War Walter Cole served in the Balkans with the Welsh Regiment. His war record shows that he entered the theatre of war in 1915, and was, therefore, entitled to the 1914-15 Star, as well as the Defence and Victory medals. Moreover, as a result of his years of service - with the war service counting for double - he was also entitled to the Territorial Efficiency Medal. Not that these mattered greatly to him. Dorothy Davies recalled him telling a story about a sergeant with whom he had some disagreement and who threatened Walter with taking his medals away from him, to which Walter replied ‘You can have them. I didn’t want the medals in the first place.’



Sgt. Walter Cole, seated in the centre, c. 1916.

After leaving the service in 1919, he continued working in his father’s business. He was a perfectionist in his work and did very elaborate plasterwork for various chapels. In the front room at 1 Als Street he designed an elaborate ceiling, which matched, in elegance, a marble fireplace in the room. Like his father he was regarded as a Master Plasterer.

In 1927, twenty years after the beginning of the Llanelli School of Art and Crafts, the Llanelli Art Society commenced and Walter was a prominent member. Two years later, in November 1929, the society held its First Annual Exhibition in the Memorial Hall of the YMCA. In a review of this exhibition the *Llanelli and County Guardian* praised it greatly and drew attention to some of the more notable works on view. ‘An oil colour

portrait of a former Mayor of Llanelli (ex-Alderman J. L. Jones) executed by Mr Walter Cole is a fine example of brushwork, with plenty of vigorous colouring and a broad effect. Walter Cole is versatile. He is responsible

¹ James Dickson Innes, Letter to Walter Cole, 19 October 1908, Llanelli Public Library Archives, ref: LC 251.

² Innes, Letter to Cole, 1908.

for some excellent landscapes and several other portraits in oil. Watercolours are represented in seascapes and studies of rural scenery.’

Interestingly, in its praise of this exhibition the newspaper drew attention to two young artists singled out of the younger generation for special mention. ‘Among the younger exhibitors are two who are still a long way from the twenties - Bromfield Rees and Robert G. Portsmouth.’ This was an astute observation on the part of the writer as it drew attention to something important that was happening in Llanelli at the time, in that a group of highly talented young artists were emerging who were to have an impact on the development of art in the town. Significantly, from the point of view of this article, they were to be linked to Walter Cole.

Bromfield Rees was born in Llanelli in 1912 and lived in Regalia Terrace. He showed artistic talent as a young boy and, at the age of thirteen, won first place in the drawing and design category at the National Eisteddfod Junior Section. At the age of fourteen he enrolled at the Llanelli School of Art and Crafts where he was encouraged by the principal Derrick E. H. Pratt. At the age of only seventeen he submitted a painting to the Royal Academy which was passed for exhibition by the R.A. judges. Later, after being recommended by Pratt, he became a student at the Royal Academy School in London, where he was viewed as a brilliant pupil. He went on to considerable acclaim as an artist, but he suffered from ill health. After surgery in 1935 he suffered a nervous illness which affected his work. In his final years he lived at Richmond, Surrey, and he died in Brompton Hospital in 1965. In 1989 an important retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Michael Parkin Gallery in London. His friend, Robert Portsmouth, also attended the Llanelli School of Art and Crafts, where his talent was also appreciated. Later, at the school, in 1930, they were joined by another highly talented young artist, John Bowen, who was born in Llanelli in 1914, and was, therefore, just slightly younger. In a discussion I had with John Bowen about Bromfield Rees and Robert Portsmouth in August 1998, he said, ‘Bromfield Rees, I admired his work tremendously. He was a full-time student at the same time that I became a student at the school. Robert Portsmouth - he was older than me and a very fine artist. I learned from those two. You can learn a great deal from your fellow students, sometimes, as much as from your tutors, if you admire their work.’



The Old Red Cow in Hall Street, where Walter Cole would often go down in the evenings to meet student from the Llanelli School of Art and Crafts, after classes.

So, excitingly, Llanelli had these three, highly talented young painters, together with others, of course, and a flourishing art school with a principal in Derrick Pratt who was a very talented artist in his own right, and who had the ability to recognise and encourage the talent of these young men.

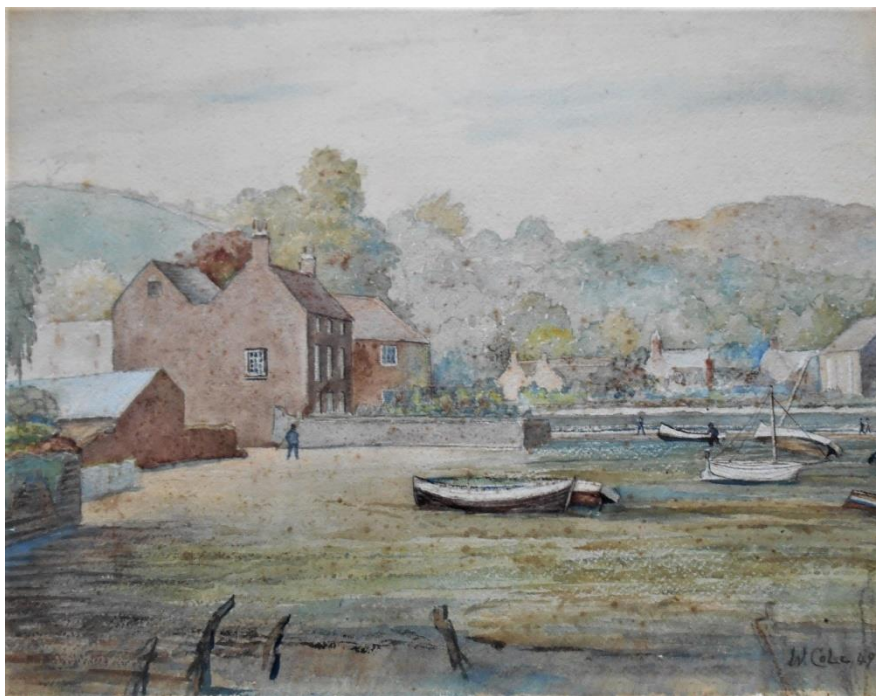
What Llanelli also had was an older man in Walter Cole who was passionate about art and was a source of inspiration and encouragement to these younger artists. John Bowen said of him ‘He was a most extraordinary old character. He knew an amazing amount about what was going on in the art world at that time and it was surprising the amount that we learned from him. He was very slow speaking. He would consider everything for a very long time, and then he would say whatever it was that he wanted to

say, which was usually very interesting stuff, because he could speak about British Art of the day. He knew all about it. He used to come to the evening classes in the art school after his daily work. I remember during our life classes that when the model would need her rest we would all go and sit round Walter’s place, where he was sitting, and look at his drawing and talk about it, and so on, until the model was ready to go on.’



T. V. personality Dr Glyn Daniels poses for a photograph with members of Llanelli Art Society after he opened their annual exhibition in July 1960. Also in the photograph are Mayor and Mayoress, Councillor and Mrs Alfred J. Evans, and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor T. George Thomas. Walter Cole can be seen towards the middle wearing his distinctive cloth cap.

Llanelli together with his characteristic cloth cap and pipe, and he was well known by many people. His niece recalled how that Lady Howard would ride her horse down to the blacksmith's shop opposite his house in Als Street and would greet Walter with 'Hello Walter,' and Walter would lift his cloth cap and reply 'Hello, your ladyship.' Glenys Stone, who was the secretary of the Llanelli Art Society, showed me a photograph of a formal society meeting in which everyone, including Walter, was dressed for the occasion, but Walter stood out in the photograph as he had on his cloth cap. In company he was an excellent storyteller and could hold an audience enthralled.



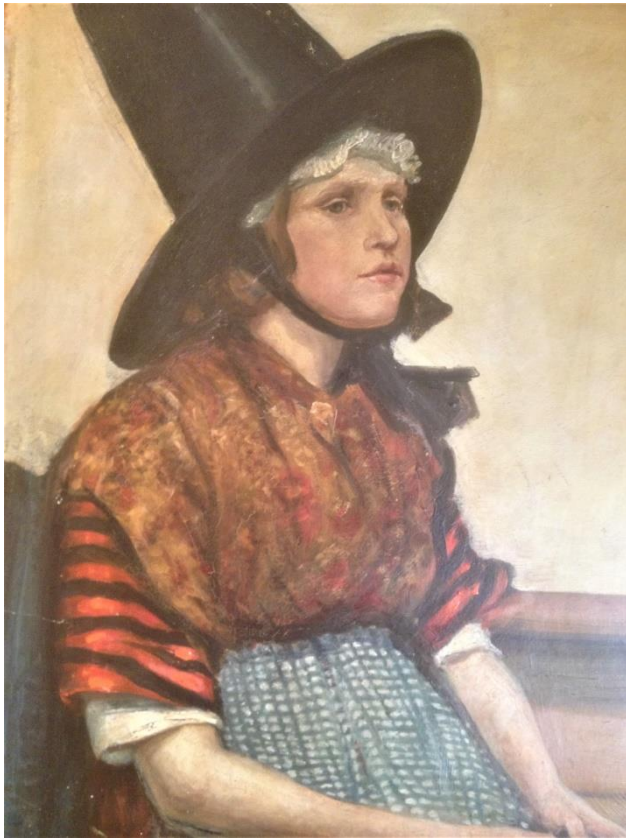
Walter Cole, Laugharne, watercolour, private collection

1 Als Street also became a house where these artists would go to continue discussions on art and look at what Walter was doing. Dorothy Davies wrote a letter to me in which she said 'When I was young, Bob Portsmouth, Brom Rees and Uncle Walter spent hours talking about art at my grandparent's home in 1 Als Street. I was no artist but knew quite a bit about it through Uncle Walter.' John Bowen said 'I used to visit his house sometimes when I was a student because he was always interesting. I remember going there once and he took me into the front room where there was a chest on the floor. He opened up this chest and it was full of sketches and drawings, preparatory drawings, and so on. I was most impressed.'

Walter moved easily in the art circles of Llanelli together with his characteristic cloth cap and pipe, and he was well known by many people. His niece recalled how that Lady Howard would ride her horse down to the blacksmith's shop opposite his house in Als Street and would greet Walter with 'Hello Walter,' and Walter would lift his cloth cap and reply 'Hello, your ladyship.' Glenys Stone, who was the secretary of the Llanelli Art Society, showed me a photograph of a formal society meeting in which everyone, including Walter, was dressed for the occasion, but Walter stood out in the photograph as he had on his cloth cap. In company he was an excellent storyteller and could hold an audience enthralled. Dorothy Davies said that 'when he was young, he would keep us in fits. Nothing dirty, mind. It was the way he put things over.'

He exhibited a lot of work at the Llanelli Art Society Exhibitions that showed a variety of media and subject matter. In one house I visited I saw a good collection of his work including a large, fine watercolour of Laugharne, and a small still life painted in oils. A discussion of his work would occupy another article, at least, but, in my opinion, his finest work was seen in his portraits. He painted a number of the mayors of Llanelli, for example, and I have seen a number of outstanding portraits in private collections. Moreover, he was fascinated by people who did unusual things such as Richard Thomas who went around Machynys selling

shrimps from his hand-drawn cart, and became known, not surprisingly, as 'Dic Shrimps.' And, of course, we have already referred to his painting of a man known as 'Dai Bach' who swept the local billiard halls.



*Walter Cole, A Lady in Welsh Dress, oil on board,
private collection*

In 1967, his health deteriorated and he had to go into Bryntirion Hospital. Sadly, this was something that he could not come to terms with, and he became depressed and resentful about his situation. To a number of people who visited he described his situation as 'a wasted life.' It was understandable, as he was a man who had lived and breathed art, enjoying the freedom to express himself in his paintings, and who, now, felt the restrictions of his situation. On 29 December 1967, he died at the age of 84, and was buried with his parents in Church Cemetery, Sunny Hill, near Old Road.

One day, perhaps, a retrospective exhibition of some of the works of this remarkable man will be held in the town. If so, the person writing the guide to accompany the exhibition, will surely describe him not only as a fine artist, which he most certainly was, but also as a man who, in his enthusiasm and passion for art, was an inspiration to others.

