

**SIR JAMES GUTHRIE RA, PRSA 1859-1930**

*Boy with a Straw* 1886

Oil on canvas,

388 x 290mm (15 ¼ x 11 3/8 ins)

Signed lower left, J Guthrie '86



For James Guthrie, the summer months of 1882 were crucial. Working at Crowland in Lincolnshire, it is assumed that he also spent time in London.<sup>1</sup> Two visits would have been necessary to see his own picture, *A Funeral Service in the Highlands*, (Glasgow Museums) at the Royal Academy and, later in the summer, works by Bastien-Lepage, Stott of Oldham and Frank O'Meara at various London galleries.<sup>2</sup> At Crowland, in the painting of *To Pastures New*, (Aberdeen Art Gallery) the sombre tonalities of the *Funeral Service* ... would be replaced by a bright plein-air palette and a more systematic 'square brush' handling.

Guthrie's immediate companions, Edward Arthur Walton and Joseph Crawhall, were on a similar path of realization. Indeed, in the previous year, Walton's *Wayfarer* (fig 1) anticipated this change of direction. Steep, grassy hillsides with resting labourers, painted in the open-air, in emulation of Lepage's *Les Foins*, (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) became a favourite motif.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Billcliffe, 2008 ed., p. 58-60.

<sup>2</sup> Bastien-Lepage's *Pauvre Fauvette* and *La Petite Coquette* (now known as *Allant à l'école*) were both exhibited at the United Arts Gallery, London in the spring of 1882 while *Pas Mèche* appeared slightly later in the same year at Tooth's in London. All three pictures entered British collections in the 1880s where they hung beside Barbizon and Hague School pictures. Stott of Oldham's *La Baignade* and *Le Passeur*, along with Frank O'Meara's *Reverie* were shown in July 1882 in an exhibition of British and American pictures from the Paris Salon.

<sup>3</sup> For reactions to Bastien-Lepage's *Les Foins*, see Kenneth McConkey, 'Un petit cercle de thuriféraires: Bastien-Lepage et la Grande Bretagne', 48/14 La revue du Musée d'Orsay, Printemps 2007, pp. 20-33.

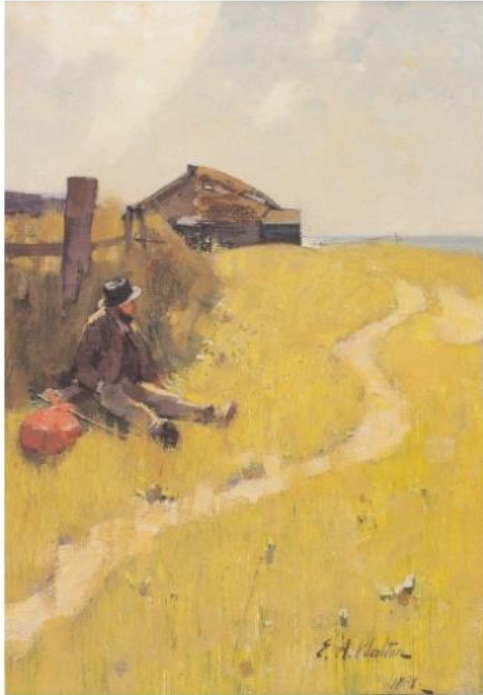


Fig 1. Edward Arthur Walton, *The Wayfarer*, 1881, 46 x 30.5, Private Collection, courtesy Bourne Fine Art, Edinburgh

However, as his work developed throughout the mid-1880s, Guthrie faced insurmountable difficulties that at one point led him to think of abandoning his career as a painter. The astonishing succès d'estime of his early work could not be sustained and even medium-sized canvases such as *Schoolmates* (Musée des Beaux Arts, Ghent) took much longer to complete than anticipated, while large works such as *Fieldworkers sheltering from a Shower* and *The Stonebreaker*<sup>4</sup> were either delayed, destroyed or dismembered.<sup>5</sup> The surviving major work from this period of rigorous self-criticism and frustration, *In the Orchard*, (National Gallery of Scotland), only left the studio in 1887. We look therefore to the few extant smaller works of these crucial years in order to gain access to Guthrie's thinking. They reveal a formidable talent at moments when not under strain. In *Pastoral*, *The Summer House*, *Kirkcudbright* and the small version of *The Stonebreaker*, the handling is fresh and fluent. The present canvas, dated 1886, comes from this sequence.<sup>6</sup> In *Boy with a straw*, Guthrie's brushwork is sketchy, spontaneous and expressive. The trees may be moving in a light breeze; the haystack and foreground debris are swiftly noted, but the artist sees no reason to sharpen contours or finish forms. This boy might be posing, yet having pulled a piece of straw from the haystack, he now engages both artist and spectator. There may be a story, but it remains untold.

Guthrie's important little canvas coincides with Walton's *The Daydream*, (fig 2), and may even have suggested what became its essential mise-en-scène.

<sup>4</sup> *The Stone Breaker*, 1886, Oil on canvas, at 31 x 38cm a similar size to *Boy with a Straw* sold for hammer price: €32,978 NZ\$58,000, at Bonhams 24 Aug 2002, Edinburgh, Scotland, THE SCOTTISH SALE, Lot 1108, Illustrated page 268

<sup>5</sup> Billcliffe 2008, pp. 169-70; for detailed discussion of *The Stonebreaker* (Renfrew Museums and Galleries) see Kenneth McConkey, *Peasantries*, 1981 (exhibition catalogue, Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic Art Gallery), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Billcliffe (p. 60) mistakenly dates *Boy with a Straw* to 1882.



Fig 2 Edward Arthur Walton, *The Daydream*, 1886, 139.7 x 116.8, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

The relationship is obvious: Guthrie's boy, like Walton's girl, sits facing the spectator with his legs splayed out, and boots upturned. Beyond the figures in both canvases, a frieze of trees mottles the sky, forming a screen that verges on the decorative. Yet where Walton perfects his picture for exhibition, Guthrie retains that sense of the temporary unfinished encounter. The movement in his trees would inspire the woodland scenes of his followers at Kirkcudbright – Thomas Corsan Morton, Edward Atkinson Hornel and George Henry – and point to the fiction of sprites and 'brownies' that would later attract them. But in that brief moment of calm in the summer of 1886, when a boy with a straw in his hand marches up a hillside and sits before him, Guthrie's realization was complete - and for Glasgow School painters there was now a new visual turn.

Kenneth McConkey

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Provenance:

Sir James Guthrie gifted to William G. Gardiner [Stirling – Scotland] – Uncle to Sir James.

No issue – left to Great nephew - Dr Neil Guthrie [Christchurch NZ]

Left to son Ian Guthrie [Christchurch]

No issue – left to 1<sup>st</sup> Cousin – once removed – our vendor

Sir James Guthrie had various connection to New Zealand including his uncle Sir Frederick Gardiner spending six years here gaining business experience; his sister's daughter Lorna<sup>1</sup> married James Grant, the donor of the Aigantighe Art Gallery to the city of Timaru; and Charles Goldie is said to have studied portraiture under him. His brother John (1848-1922) arrived in Lyttelton 1874 as surgeon on "Crusade" then worked as Medical Superintendent for Christchurch Hospital. He returned to Scotland but retired to NZ in 1908. Sir James Guthrie gave the first X-ray machine to the Christchurch Hospital where his nephew was the radiologist. Guthrie's major work <sup>2</sup>*Some Statesmen of the Great War* includes NZ Prime Minister William Ferguson Massey

<sup>1</sup> Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū: portrait of Marion Lorna Guthrie by Sir James Guthrie 1895

<sup>2</sup> National Portrait Gallery, London: NZ Prime Minister William Ferguson Massey (Study for portrait in Statesmen of the Great War)