

Edith Collier

EARLY NEW ZEALAND MODERNIST
Jill Trevelyan, Jennifer Taylor and Greg Donson

Edith Collier



Edith Collier

EARLY NEW ZEALAND MODERNIST

Edited by Jill Trevelyan, Jennifer Taylor and Greg Donson



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

07

Forewords

10

Introduction

13

Adventure in art:
INTRODUCING
EDITH COLLIER

61

Whanganui:
ARTISTIC
BEGINNINGS

69

England and Ireland:
NEW
OPPORTUNITIES

101

London:
ENGAGING WITH
MODERNISM

131

St Ives:
A NEW
CONFIDENCE

183

Kāwhia:
THE LAND AND
THE PEOPLE

205

Legacy:
MEMORY AND
INFLUENCE

230

Notes

236

Chronology

240

Select bibliography

244

Contributors

248

Acknowledgements

250

Image credits

252

Index



The forefront of modernism

It is a great pleasure to be introducing this substantial and important publication on the life and work of artist Edith Collier. This is a timely and topical project, as interest grows internationally in telling the lesser-known stories of early modernists, and with growing recognition of Collier's work both in Aotearoa and abroad. This is further supported by our presentation of a significant exhibition of her work in the inaugural programme of the reopened Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui.

After comprehensive restoration of the Category 1-listed heritage building and the addition of a new wing, named Te Pātaka o Sir Te Atawhai Archie John Tairaoa, Whanganui's reputation as a creative hub with world-class creative infrastructure is reaffirmed. This publication celebrates one of Whanganui's own artists who, despite many challenges, found a place on the world stage and at the forefront of modernism. We hope this project will draw more attention to Edith Collier's work, increase our understanding of her practice, and contribute further to the significant reputation she deserves.

We are grateful to Massey University Press for partnering with us to bring this publication to fruition, and to the Edith Collier Trust for funding the project as well as providing access to Collier's work and archives through their long-term placement with the Sarjeant Gallery. We warmly acknowledge the pioneering research of Dr Joanne Drayton, whose work in the 1990s laid the foundations for Edith Collier studies.

A special thanks must also go to author and guest curator Jill Trevelyan for her enthusiasm through which this story has been brought to life, to our other contributors, and to our Curator of Collections, Jennifer Taylor, for her diligent management of this project and of the Edith Collier Trust Collection.

ANDREW CLIFFORD

Director

Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui

Another chapter in the story

Although I never knew my great-aunt Edith Collier, she was well known to me through her artwork that hung prominently at Ringley, the Collier family home in Whanganui; the Stewart homestead, Maungaraupi, near Marton, where my grandmother lived; and in my own childhood home, Keilawarra, near Hunterville. As a child I took Edith's work for granted and I am grateful that my aunt Barbara Stewart encouraged me, as an adult, to learn about and understand the significance of Edith's collection of works. Barbara strongly believed that Edith's popularity lay not just among the family but among the wider community, too, and she encouraged me to become a trustee of the Edith Collier Trust in 1995.

The legacy of the original members of the Edith Collier Trust has been instrumental in guiding the current trustees to commissioning this exciting publication. We had considered the idea for a number of years, and as the concept developed we were delighted and excited to learn that the release of the book would coincide with the long-awaited reopening of the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui.

We have been fortunate in the staff of the Sarjeant Gallery, past and present, who have championed Edith's work over the years, and we are grateful to Jennifer Taylor for her exemplary work as the current Curator of Collections. We also wish to thank art historian and curator Jill Trevelyan for providing a fresh perspective on Edith for this publication and the accompanying exhibition, as well as Massey University Press and its publisher, Nicola Legat, who immediately recognised the importance of this book and threw her support behind it.

I am sure the founding members of the Edith Collier Trust would be immensely proud to see this beautiful book, and we are delighted to celebrate another chapter in Edith Collier's story.

FIONA HORROCKS
Chair
Edith Collier Trust



A Thatch by the Stream, c. 1915
Gouache on paper, 245 × 195 mm

Introduction

JENNIFER TAYLOR AND GREG DONSON

The Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui is privileged to be the caretakers of the Edith Collier Trust Collection, working in close partnership with the Edith Collier Trust. This collection comprises over 450 artworks and 650 archival items, as well as Collier's personal library, and has been in the gallery's care since the mid-1980s. Outside of the Sarjeant Gallery, very few of Collier's works reside within public collections; the majority are in the care of family members.

This substantial new volume builds upon a foundation laid by two earlier publications: the 1980 Sarjeant Gallery exhibition catalogue *Edith Collier in Retrospect* (with contributions from Janet Paul, Gordon H. Brown and Deborah Frederikse) followed in 1999 by Dr Joanne Drayton's *Edith Collier: Her Life and Work, 1885–1964*, published by Canterbury University Press. It provides an opportunity for readers to more fully appreciate the continuing impact of Collier and her artistic legacy on those who knew her and those who have come after her. Twenty-five years have passed since Drayton's publication and the touring exhibition — *Edith Collier and the Women of Her Circle* — that accompanied it and there is now a new generation of viewers and readers who may not be familiar with Collier's work.

The passing of time has the dual capacity of either erasing or illuminating the narratives and provenance of any artist's practice, and we're delighted that this project and the ongoing research around Collier's work has brought to light previously unheard stories. As well as a major essay by writer Jill Trevelyan and a new piece by Dr Joanne Drayton, the publication also includes responses to Collier's work by a range of contributors, each providing unique perspectives.

After Collier's return to New Zealand from her extended period abroad, she visited Kāwhia in 1928, and we're delighted that this is the first time that the whakapapa and family stories of the Ngāti Hikairo kuia whom she painted have been shared publicly. We are grateful to the descendants of these kuia: Esther Tooman, Frank Thorne and Tiriata Carkeek. We are also grateful to Roy Willison, Shirley Tuteao and the Ngāti Mahuta trustees of Maketū marae in Kāwhia, who have generously provided time and space for wānanga and kōrero about Collier's paintings of this special place. These contributions give us unprecedented insight into the people and places Collier encountered.

Particular acknowledgement must be made of those whose previous mahi made this publication possible: Dr Joanne Drayton for her invaluable research and PhD thesis as well as her subsequent book, which has provided a touchstone for those researching Collier's life and work; the former gallery staff who contributed to the cataloguing and care of the collection; Gordon H. Brown (Sarjeant Gallery director, 1974–1977) for initiating the relationship between the Collier family and the gallery; and Bill Milbank (gallery director, 1977–2006 and former executive officer for the trust) for his years of tireless advocacy for Collier and her work. We are deeply saddened that Bill passed away in November 2023, before this publication came to fruition.

We also wish to acknowledge the Edith Collier Trust, which both initiated this book and funded its research, writing and publication, in particular the trust chair, Fiona Horrocks, who placed her complete faith in us to carry out this project, and Gordon Collier,



the artist's nephew and finest champion of her work, who spent hours collating records of Edith Collier's works held in family hands.

A huge thanks must be extended to the incomparable Jill Trevelyan, who has been an absolute pleasure to work with throughout. Her commitment and passion for this publication and the exhibition it accompanies have made it what it is — ngā mihi nui ki a koe, Jill.

Finally, to Edith Collier — thank you for a remarkable body of work that after a century still looks fresh and contemporary. As a team we are proud and privileged to be kaitiaki of such a wonderful collection and archive.

A NOTE ON NAMES

Bonmahon: Both Bonmahon and Bunmahon are used even today, but we have used Bonmahon (unless referring to 'Edith Collier's Bunmahon Heritage Society') because Edith knew it as Bonmahon and used that name in her titles.

Whanganui: We have used Whanganui unless we are referring to an historical organisation, such as the Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society.

Margaret McPherson: Margaret McPherson became famous in Australia as Margaret Preston (her married name) but when she and Edith met she was still McPherson (occasionally Macpherson). Therefore we have used Margaret McPherson (later Margaret Preston) at first mention, and Margaret McPherson thereafter.

Stone Building and Large Tree, 1916
Drypoint on paper, 123 × 169 mm



Adventure in art: Introducing Edith Collier

JILL TREVELYAN

St Ives, summer, 1920. The New Zealand artist Frances Hodgkins is busy with a painting school and a ‘crowd of pupils’ is distracting her from her own work.¹

A seasoned and long-suffering teacher, she has little patience with the ‘duffers’ in her flock — the ‘pampered well fed English woman whose physical welfare is her only thought’.² This year, however, she has a new student who stands out for her talent and commitment. ‘I have one very bright N. Zealander, from Wanganui, Collier by name — who is coming on wonderfully — I’ll make something of her I feel sure,’ Hodgkins writes to her mother.³

Edith Collier was then 35, a mature single woman who had spent the past eight years studying art in England and Ireland. Under the guidance of dynamic teachers, including the Australian Margaret McPherson (later Margaret Preston), she had abandoned the academic realism she had learnt at art school in Whanganui and developed a bolder, experimental style.⁴ At St Ives, galvanised by Frances Hodgkins, she was painting her best work to date. By October 1920, Edith had hatched a new plan — she would travel to the south of France with her teacher and continue to pursue her art there.

But at that point, Edith’s parents intervened. They had supported her for years, funding her art education in the expectation that she would eventually return to Whanganui and establish herself there as an art teacher. They now made it clear: it was time for her to come home. She set about packing her paintings and possessions, which included some 400 books and journals, in crates ordered from a London merchant. When she finally sailed, in 1921, Edith’s cargo included more than 350 artworks — an impressive collection, influenced by British and European modernism, including some of the finest portraits painted by a New Zealander in the twentieth century.

In January 1922 she arrived in Whanganui, returning to the childhood home where her story began.



Edith Collier grew up in Whanganui with considerable advantages as the daughter of a prominent and successful family. Her father, Henry, born in Manchester, England, in 1852, was the eldest son of a textile manufacturer, John Collier, and his wife, Lydia, who had 10 surviving children, all with musical interests.⁵

Like many ambitious young Englishmen, Henry Collier looked to the colonies for opportunity and adventure. Arriving in New Zealand in 1877, he initially worked as a music teacher in Whanganui, then experiencing a surge in European settlement and development after the suppression of Māori resistance in the late 1860s.⁶ In 1878, in partnership with a brother who had followed him to New Zealand, Henry acquired a business importing musical scores and instruments.

H. Collier & Co prospered in the following years, occupying an impressive warehouse at 57 Victoria Avenue in Whanganui and eventually opening branches in New Plymouth and Palmerston North.⁷ A canny businessman, Henry also purchased land in the Rangiwaea district in the Rangitikei, which formed the basis of Wakarua Station, still in the Collier family today.⁸

Henry met his future wife, Eliza Catherine Parkes, a third-generation New Zealander of English descent, when he visited her home as her piano

Henry and Eliza Collier and three of their children, around 1890









PREVIOUS
Children outside the Collier home,
Ringley, in Whanganui, around 1898

ABOVE
Trams in Victoria Avenue,
Whanganui, around 1911

tutor. Music and art were considered suitable pursuits for genteel young women, and Eliza, the daughter of a well-to-do farming family, was also taking private lessons in painting at the time.⁹ Henry and Eliza married in 1883 and their first child, Edith Marion Collier, was born in Whanganui on 28 March 1885. Henry's mother wrote to congratulate him, adding a caveat: 'How sorry I am it is not a little boy.'¹⁰

Soon afterwards, Henry made a solo trip to England for further musical training, and his return, more than a year later, evidently came as a shock to his 18-month-old daughter. Edith had grown accustomed to having her mother's attention and living in a mainly female world. After Henry's return his family grew rapidly: Edith's brother John (Jack) was born in 1887, and Henry and Eliza went on to have a total of nine surviving children over a 17-year period.

Henry was absent for much of Edith's childhood, in 1896 making a second trip to England that was extended to nearly five years. This time, as well as studying music, he helped his brother Arthur in an ultimately unsuccessful venture to develop a two-speed bicycle gear. Eliza, left behind with six young children, was sceptical about the project, and Henry's absence put pressure on his family, even with the domestic help available at the time.¹¹ As the eldest, Edith had special responsibilities: she was expected to be 'a good little nurse' for her mother, helping with the younger children and household duties, and she developed a keen sense of responsibility to others that would endure all her life.¹²



Edith and her siblings grew up at 'Ringley', the family home on St Johns Hill, a sprawling wooden villa on extensive grounds with a croquet lawn and tennis court.¹³ Music was an important part of daily life, and Edith took piano and cello lessons and played chamber music in a family quartet. At school in Whanganui she showed an early ability in drawing and painting, and her parents encouraged her artistic interests.¹⁴ Henry, whose musical life took second place to his career as a businessman, was particularly ambitious for his eldest child.

As a young woman, Edith had opportunities that had not been available to her mother's generation. Women in New Zealand had gained the vote in 1893, a great advance towards equality in citizenship, and the possibilities of formal education and training for the professions were increasing. In particular, the traditional caring professions, such as nursing and teaching, were considered suitable for young women. But in art, too, there were new opportunities: as Edith Collier's biographer Joanne Drayton notes, it 'was one avenue that offered colonial women possibilities for professional credibility and status'.¹⁵

Edith was fortunate to be in Whanganui, which in 1892 had been the fourth New Zealand city to establish a public art school.¹⁶ The Wanganui Technical School of Art and Design (which later merged into the Wanganui Technical College) focused on drawing and design skills, which were essential to many trades. Edith enrolled there in 1903 and was tutored by Minnie Izett, and later by Ivy Copeland and the English migrant Dennis Seaward.¹⁷ Beginning with drawing from plaster casts and gradually progressing to painting in watercolour and oils, her training followed traditional lines, emphasising the importance of careful observation and meticulous drawing.





OPPOSITE
Edith Collier, aged 13, in 1898

ABOVE
Edith Collier playing the cello, around 1913



Under the South Kensington system of art and design, which enabled New Zealanders to gain a British qualification, Edith passed her first examinations in 1909. She completed her course of study in 1911 with first- and second-class passes in subjects such as model drawing, ‘memory drawing of plant form’, freehand drawing and painting still life.¹⁸

Edith’s early work includes watercolours of plants and birds, oil paintings, and Arts and Crafts designs, which were an important part of the South Kensington curriculum. Her oils are uneven in quality, but the finest, such as *Still Life with Glass and Lemons*, are unusually assured for student work. A study in colour and tone, beautifully balanced, it has a quiet luminosity. According to Edith’s sister Dorothy, it was Dennis Seaward who suggested that she continue her studies in London, ‘and once the idea was suggested there was no peace’.¹⁹ Edith received further support from a family friend and neighbour, Herbert Babbage, an artist who had recently returned from study in London and Paris.²⁰ Like Seaward, he recognised her potential.

Among local artists, it was taken for granted that there was no substitute for overseas experience — attending the famous art schools of London and Paris and studying contemporary developments in painting. New Zealand artists had travelled overseas for decades, and women had led the way, beginning with Dorothy Kate Richmond in the 1870s and followed by Grace Joel, Margaret Stoddart and Frances Hodgkins. The challenge for these women, brought up with highly traditional ideas of femininity and duty, was to develop the level of ambition and determination that life as a professional artist demanded. Most eventually returned home, some continuing to contribute to New Zealand’s artistic life, while others abandoned their work due to the pressures of marriage, motherhood and family commitments.

Only Frances Hodgkins managed to establish a reputation in England, but her success, after decades of struggle, came at great personal cost. ‘Art . . . absorbs your whole life & being,’ she declared in 1924. ‘Few women can do it successfully. It requires enormous vitality. That is *my* conception of genius — vitality . . . One’s family, overseas — awaits results — not knowing or realising the fierce obstacles & difficulties. How can they?’²¹

But for Edith Collier in 1912, the future seemed promising. Her family was proud of her talent and ambitious for her. Perhaps one day, her brother Frank suggested, she would ‘paint some famous pictures which will be a credit to the Collier family’.²² There was a precedent, in Henry’s example, in travelling overseas for further study, and an English teaching qualification would provide her with an extra layer of security in the years ahead. As Edith’s aunt Annie commented in a letter, ‘It is a grand thing to be independent & I think it right for girls as well as boys to earn their own living, one never knows what may turn up. You might be left a widow with a family to provide for (of course you will be getting married) & then you could take to your old work again.’²³

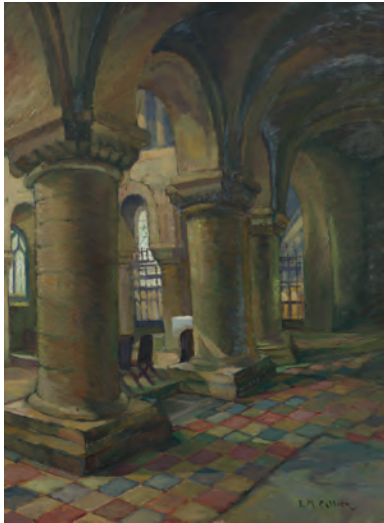
In reality, Edith showed no interest in marriage, then or later. She was droll about the hints of family friends and relatives and their perennial question: ‘Are you engaged, Edith?’²⁴ Perhaps the example of her father, absent for so much of her childhood, and the trials of her mother’s life had dispelled any romantic illusions. Her letters reveal a scepticism about marriage as a prospect for her friends, and her wariness about men was often remarked on — as her niece

ABOVE
Still Life with Glass and Lemons,
1910–12 (see also page 67)

Floral Design, c. 1900–12
(see also page 63)

OPPOSITE
Edith Collier holding a basket
of lilies, around 1912





ABOVE
St Bartholomew, 1914
 (see also page 70)

OPPOSITE
 Edith Collier, around 1912

Patricia Lonsdale recalled, ‘Outside of her brothers, men made Edith nervous.’²⁵ All her life, Edith’s friendships were with women, and women teachers were particularly influential in her artistic development. There is no hint of any romantic involvement in her letters, however; and as far as we know of this very private woman, she never established a long-term intimate relationship with anyone, male or female.

Before departing New Zealand on SS *Turakina* in February 1913, Edith was photographed for the Collier family album. About to leave the world she has known all her life, she is elegant in a formal portrait, a picture of Edwardian femininity in a high-necked white dress and fashionable hat. In an informal image, taken in the garden at Ringley, she carries a basket of lilies and gazes calmly at the camera. At 27 she is handsome rather than conventionally pretty, a mature woman with a quiet presence and strength of character.



After arriving in London in March 1913, Edith enrolled at St John’s Wood School of Art, one of several institutions that attracted aspiring artists from all over the world. She was soon immersed in her new life — studying, visiting galleries and museums, and attending lectures and concerts. ‘I am just in full swing now,’ she wrote to her brother Reg. ‘[N]ever had such a time in my life, working all the time funny old stick aren’t I.’²⁶ Edith’s letters contain many allusions to her sense of being different to other young women. ‘A peculiarity I am & always will be,’ she wrote to her parents in 1916. On another occasion, she warned them, ‘I hope you people are not expecting a fashionable entertaining daughter.’²⁷

Edith had arranged to stay at Queen Alexandra’s House, a purpose-built hostel for female students in Kensington Grove. There she met other ‘peculiarities’ like herself — young, single women, passionate about their studies and determined to take advantage of the opportunities London offered. Her new women friends included the South African art student Charlie Ayliff, who accompanied her on sketching expeditions in London and further afield. Edith painted naturalistic street scenes, landscapes and church interiors during this period, and images such as *St Bartholomew* continued her interest in using subtle tonal effects to create form. Two years later she dismissed some of her early London work: ‘I burnt a lot of the daubs I did the first year no good’.²⁸

When she visited Manchester to meet her father’s family, Edith found an ally in her cousin Frances (Fannie) Collier, a student of economics at the University of Manchester who would later become its first female lecturer.²⁹ Both women were talented, single-minded spinsters, at odds with the conventions of femininity and social life, and they formed an immediate and enduring bond.³⁰ Fannie and her friends were involved in the women’s suffrage movement, then gaining notoriety through a major civil disobedience campaign, and Edith attended meetings with her cousin. A sash with the legend ‘Votes for Women’ is among her personal possessions held at the Sarjeant Gallery. In 1914 Edith had an alarming experience when she visited the National Gallery with her cousin: Fannie was mistaken for the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst and whisked off in a police van.³¹

Edith had arrived in Britain at a time of escalating political strife, with the suffrage movement, labour disputes and the Irish National struggle all causing civil





unrest. Some of those tensions are pictured in the charcoal drawing *Labour Trouble: the students' raid at Albert Hall during Larkin's speech*. Police and protesters confront each other with batons and sticks, and the tall, gloomy buildings looming over the scene contribute to the atmosphere of menace. This work was evidently inspired by the Dublin Lockout, led by James Larkin, which began in August 1913 and had great repercussions in Britain as the solidarity movement for the Irish workers gained ground.

Labour Trouble shows the traditional skills Edith was developing at art school. As the prospectus noted, the St John's Wood student 'becomes acquainted with the principles of draughtsmanship; attains patience, an accurate perception of values, and a knowledge of the human figure founded on the conceptions of the great masters'.³² She found the Life Room, where she drew the nude figure for the first time, the most useful — and initially rather intimidating. She admitted to her parents that she was 'very shaky' in her first class, but she soon overcame her nervousness and applied herself diligently to her studies, as works such as *Standing Female Nude* (see page 73) attest.³³ She also bought anatomy books to improve her understanding of human form.

In December 1913, Edith informed her mother that she had passed her first practical teaching examinations: 'I got excellent for 4 subjects & very good for rest so that is good.'³⁴ In the same month, she exhibited seven works at the St John's Wood sketch club — mainly landscapes, including tree studies and

A postcard sent by Edith Collier to Helen Bethea Collier and Bill Collier around 1913, showing Regent Street in London



*Labour Trouble: the students' raid at Albert
Hall during Larkin's speech, 1913-14*
Charcoal on paper, 557 × 435 mm





OPPOSITE
Cousin Fannie, c. 1914
 Pencil on paper, 330 × 290 mm

Edith Collier with her cousins Fannie and Sylvia, around 1915

ABOVE
 Margaret Preston, *Self-portrait*, 1930
 Oil on canvas, 613 × 511 mm

Margaret Preston,
The Teapot Cosy, 1916
 Gouache on card, 452 × 544 mm

Margaret Preston, 1930

views of Kew Gardens — but by now she was disillusioned with the quality of the teaching. As she later explained to her parents, ‘Those great men who used to come and give a crit at St John’s didn’t criticise you[r] own work but the school as a whole, and they didn’t stay longer than could be helped.’³⁵ In fact, some of the ‘great men’ who were listed as teachers on the syllabus only ‘looked in once a year’.³⁶

Edith was also becoming aware of the conservatism of St John’s Wood in fostering a traditional approach to art.³⁷ She had arrived in London just months too late to visit the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, organised by the artist and critic Roger Fry, which had closed at the Grafton Galleries in December 1912. Like its 1910 predecessor, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* — at which, according to Virginia Woolf, the audience was ‘thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter’ — the exhibition caused a commotion in the British art world.³⁸ It featured work by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso and others — artists who had abandoned academic naturalism in favour of radical invention and self-expression. The exhibition made the news even in Whanganui, where it was reported in a sarky and dismissive syndicated newspaper column.³⁹

Edith’s first contact with modernism was via the Australian painter Margaret McPherson, who was teaching private pupils in London. The artist and novelist Stella Bowen, who met McPherson in 1911, described her as ‘a red-headed little firebrand of a woman who was not only an excellent painter, fresh from Paris, but a most inspiring teacher’.⁴⁰ On her first visit to Europe as a young woman, in 1903, McPherson had been overwhelmed by the avant-garde art she encountered in Munich and Paris: as she recalled, ‘... our poor little artist was obliged to become a very humble student indeed. She found that she had been hopping about on one rung only of the ladder of art.’⁴¹

In the following years, McPherson assimilated the lessons of post-impressionism, finding inspiration in the vigorous, vibrant paintings of Paul Gauguin; the work of the Scottish colourists, including John Duncan Fergusson; and the flatness and linear rhythms of Japanese ukiyo-e prints.⁴² In *The Teapot Cosy*, she imposes a rhythmic, decorative design on a collection of domestic objects, arrayed on a flattened, tilted-up tabletop. Gleaming apples and dishes pirouette around a teapot, which dominates the image in a striking black-and-white cover. Edith Collier acquired the painting and it became one of her prized possessions, serving as a lesson in pictorial design, compositional balance and colour harmony.



In 1914, Edith followed McPherson and her companion, the artist Gladys Reynell, to Ireland, where McPherson had established a summer art school in the small fishing village of Bonmahon (also known as Bunmahon). Located in County Waterford, Bonmahon had once been an important centre for copper and lead mining, but the industry had declined since the mid-1860s, leaving its residents living in poverty. ‘Expect simplicity,’ McPherson warned her pupil.⁴³ Staying with a local family, Edith was captivated by the warmth of the villagers and the stark beauty of the coastal landscape — ‘a grand place for painting’ — with its dilapidated cottages, steep cliffs and rocky shoreline.⁴⁴



Peasant Woman of Bonmahon, 1915
(see also page 75)

Gladys Reynell, *Old Irish Couple*, 1915
Oil on canvas, 653 × 540 mm

Little Schoolboy of Bonmahon,
c. 1915 (see also page 81)

Back in London, Edith took private lessons from McPherson over the winter, learning how to simplify her work and prioritise pictorial structure and colour relationships. She told her family, ‘I have learnt more from Miss Mac than St Johns.’⁴⁵ Always highly self-critical, however, Edith was prone to doubt her abilities. ‘I am wondering if you will be satisfied,’ she wrote to her mother, ‘& father not think well is she worth all the money I have spent & so on’. In the same letter, she mentioned her sister Helen Bethea, who was taking art classes in Whanganui: ‘She is much cleverer than me & not so gloomy as me. I waste half my time in thinking I can’t do things.’⁴⁶

Early in April 1915, Edith returned to Bonmahon to attend McPherson’s classes, telling her parents, ‘All the old souls came up & shook your hand & said welcome back to old Ireland.’⁴⁷ She felt an affinity with the elderly residents, admiring their stoicism and resilience, and some became her paid models. *Peasant Woman of Bonmahon* makes an interesting comparison with Reynell’s *Old Irish Couple*, also painted in the village. Edith’s portrait is more dynamic in treatment: she positions her subject off-centre, dominating the picture; a stoic and monumental presence, her dark skirt anchoring her to the floor. Her expressive hands, neatly folded, draw the eye — their diagonal movement echoed in the forms of the chickens at her side.

In May, Edith wrote home, ‘I am painting a lovely old man just now, 92 is his age tomorrow he is going out to sea fishing.’⁴⁸ *An Irish Fisherman (An Old Salt)* shows her empathy for her subject — a sensitive character study, dignifying his craggy, weathered face and substantial figure. The subtle tonality is typical of her early work, and only the flourish of striped fabric hints at the more inventive post-impressionist style she was developing under McPherson’s tuition.

By contrast, *Little Schoolboy of Bonmahon*, painted in the same period, is a bold and strikingly decorative portrait. Edith uses colour with aplomb, echoing the rosy tones of the child’s face in the sumptuous floral wallpaper.⁴⁹ She flattens the picture plane, merging the boundary between foreground and background and unsettling our sense of spatial relationships — is the green framing device on the left, for example, part of the patterned wallpaper? The opulent colour and fluent brushwork suggest a growing confidence in her work, and a new enjoyment of the sensuous qualities of oil paint.

In August, Margaret McPherson wrote to Edith’s mother about her progress. ‘Miss Collier is working very hard. She will do good things and is sending to a London professional show early next year. I think you will be astonished at the quality of her work . . . I do not want to eulogise her because I am her teacher, but I assure you, she has quite an excellent talent for portraiture & ought to do very well in New Zealand.’ In the same letter, McPherson thanked Eliza for the clothes she had sent, at Edith’s suggestion, for Bonmahon residents: ‘I cannot tell you how much they are appreciated. It is almost inconceivable the poverty here.’⁵⁰

Edith also painted the Bonmahon landscape, exploring the quality of the light in works such as *A Grey Day on the Irish Coast* (see page 85). In *Rocks of Bonmahon, Ireland* (see page 87), she adopts a high viewpoint to dramatise the scene, adding broad brushstrokes of green, blue and lilac to enliven the rockface and water. She also learnt to make monotypes, producing swift



An Irish Fisherman (An Old Salt), 1915
Oil on canvas, 605 x 500 mm