



2

1  
Joan Eardley, *The Clipping*. Image courtesy of the Artist's Estate

2  
Audrey Walker, *Joan Eardley's studio in Townhead*, courtesy of the Walker family

3  
Audrey Walker, *Joan Eardley Catterline 1961 - Painting Beehives*. Image courtesy of the Walker family



3

GREG THOMAS

## THE CRAFT OF GLORIA WILSON

**Gloria Wilson's detailed and groundbreaking writing about Scottish fishing boats made her books a favoured source for poet and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay. He used her work in his poems, and as a nautical artist she contributed to Finlay's poem booklets. But what do we know of Wilson's life?**

Gloria Wilson lives in a little terraced house in the picturesque Victorian seaside town of Saltburn, North Yorkshire, on a street that rolls gently down to the sea. She is spritely, friendly and quick on her feet, inviting me into a comfy living room where I'm offered coffee, tea and food. Once we're seated, though, it's straight down to business: 'What would you like to ask about?' Over the last few years, I've spent a good deal of time tracking down erstwhile creative companions of the poet and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006), whose literary sculpture garden at Little Sparta is the product, among other things, of prodigious collaboration. Some of Finlay's collaborators have become famous artists or writers. Others, like Gloria, have remained out of the limelight, and it's these figures I've generally felt most compelled to write about.

Gloria Wilson was born in Surrey in 1939 but grew up in Staithes on the Yorkshire coast, a few miles down from Saltburn. Her mother was a well-regarded expressionist artist, Lillian Colbourn (1897–1967), while in a 2004 essay on Lillian 'An Appreciation by Gloria Wilson, The Artist's Daughter', she describes her father, Joseph Wilson, as being 'of Yorkshire yeoman stock'. Joseph was a companion on Gloria's earliest trips to sea, she tells me: 'He had a boat just for pleasure . . . we'd go out

fishing for mackerel and we had a few crab and lobster pots.' At the end of our afternoon together, she poses for a snap with the model coble boat he bought her when she was 11 or 12.

Gloria's bohemian childhood included regular trips to London for her mother's exhibitions, with stayovers at an artists' commune, the Abbey Art Centre. From 1960–64 she was a student of Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Rowntree and Richard Hamilton at Durham University, in the era of Pasmore's innovative, Bauhaus-inspired Basic Course. 'These are all paintings I made at that time,' she says, gesturing towards a series of abstract landscapes hung around us on the walls. Sixty years on, she's still ruminating on what she got right and wrong.

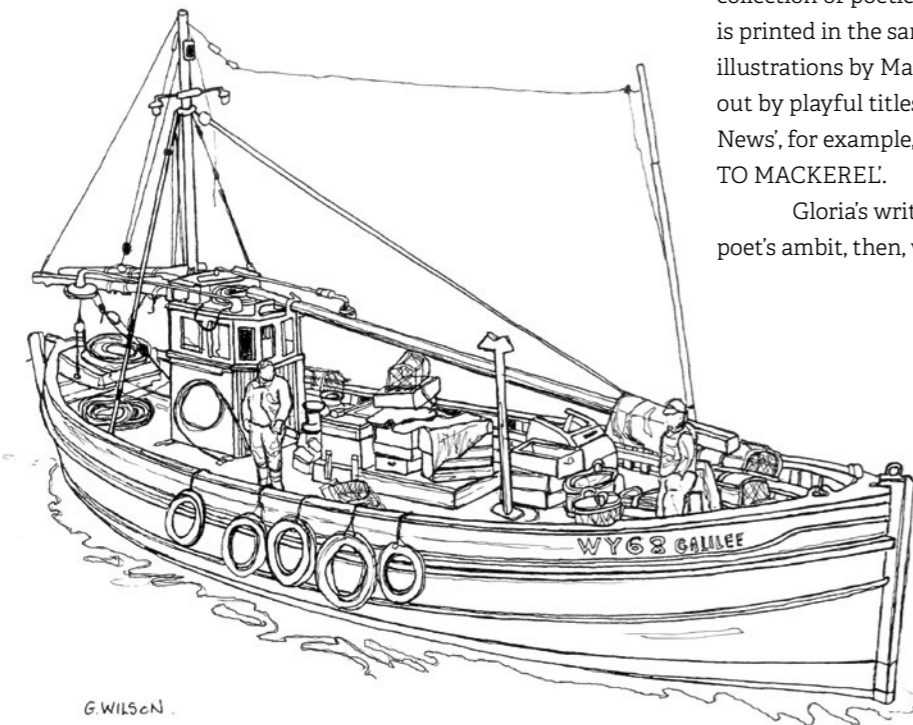


1

first instance, to explore the creative process and understand the fundamental qualities of form, colour, line, space and emotion.' But she was also moulding at this time a deeper and more singular passion. Gloria had always loved being around boats. She inveigled her way onto commercial lobster fishing trips in her youth and even helped to paint the local craft, while sketching and writing about them in her spare time, particularly her favoured vessel, the coble. 'They were lovely shapes, you know, very sculptural, and also a source of adventure.'

As a student she 'kept the interest going', sneaking off to North Shields as a midnight hitchhiker, where 'a lot of the Scottish boats were landing their catches'. She spent hours studying methods of building and construction. Gloria also took the opportunity of another visit to London for one of Lillian's exhibitions to visit the offices of *Fishing News* on Fleet Street. 'I wandered in to see if I could look at back copies, you know, and they said "why don't you write a book and we'll consider it for publication?"' The end result of this informal deal was *Scottish Fishing Craft*, published by Fishing News Books in 1965, a trailblazing study of the design and history of Scottish boats written using Gloria's student grant to fund covert trips north. Another publication, *More Scottish Fishing Craft and Their Work*, followed in 1968, and by 1971 Gloria was the Scotland correspondent for *Fishing News*, based in Aberdeen.

Ian Hamilton Finlay had always loved boats, weaving descriptions of them into his earliest short stories and poems.



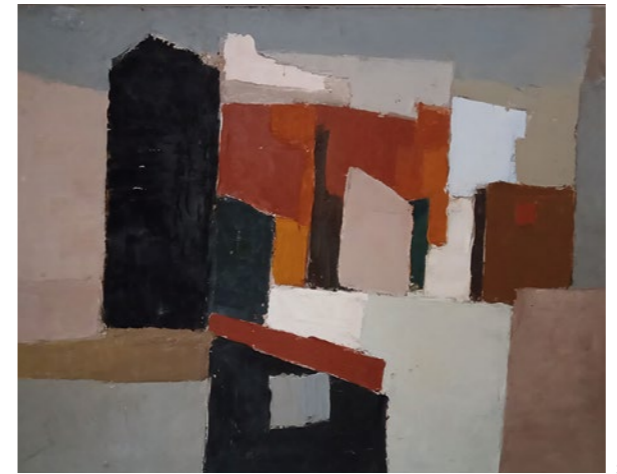
2

**'As a student she "kept the interest going", sneaking off to North Shields as a midnight hitchhiker, where "a lot of the Scottish boats were landing their catches". She spent hours studying methods of building and construction'**

He carried the interest across into his 'concrete phase,' when he began making poems as visual constellations and constructions. He was an avid reader of *Fishing News* and had evidently read Gloria's books before their first correspondence in 1970. A 1968 poem-card consists of the single phrase 'BE IN TIME/ FRUITFUL VINE' stamped in green, boat hull-style lettering on a white background. The caption above the poem, 'FROM THE YARD OF THOMAS SUMMERS & CO. FRASERBURGH, SCOTLAND, FR.64 & FR.195', allows us to locate the phrase to one of the evocative lists of boat names registered to different yards at the end of *Scottish Fishing Craft*.

Finlay described these lists as 'a beautiful litany', with their biblical, folkloric and bucolic references. That description appears in a letter sent to *Fishing News*' offices in 1970 with a copy of his concertina-booklet poem 'Fishing News News'. This collection of poetically ambiguous headlines from the magazine is printed in the same boat-hull capitals as the earlier card, with illustrations by Margot Sandeman, and double-meanings teased out by playful titles: 'From The Metamorphosis of Fishing News', for example, announces 'FISHERMEN TURN TO MACKEREL'.

Gloria's writing had already passed into the Scottish poet's ambit, then, when in May 1970 she contacted Ian on



3

the back of his letter to *Fishing News*, enclosing various photographs and prints. The pair began corresponding and collaborating, resulting in the 1971 poem-postcard, 'A Sea Street Anthology', using an image Gloria had sent. This photograph, from 1968–69, shows boat names chalked on a wall in the yard of Richard Irvin & Sons Ltd, Peterhead. The names appear in a layered, organic tangle, almost like cave painting, but words and phrases can be picked out, such as 'Ocean Crest', 'Honeybourne', and 'Prevail', all very much in the spirit of transportive litany which Finlay evoked. But what were the names doing on the wall in the first place? 'That I don't know, because obviously there are offices and proper documentation that could be used for record-keeping . . . I could only think maybe it was a group of fishermen and builders standing there, just reminiscing, "oh, do you remember this one?" and "oh, they built that one last year, we'll put her name down."'

Finlay treasured the lexicon of fishing boat names and numbers that Gloria had unlocked for him. But a long gap in correspondence followed. Over the coming decades, Finlay's poetic universe began to incorporate darker, more martial themes (the squat little fishing boat of youthful imagination was replaced by the nuclear submarine) while Gloria began more concertedly to sketch the fishing craft of Scotland and northern England. These later drawings are in a precise, naturalistic style, very different from the abstract canvases of her training. Many were published in her 2015 book *Fishing Boats of Scotland*.

In 1998, however, Finlay contacted Gloria again. 'It is a long time since we were in touch,' he writes on 5 June that year: 'how the boats have changed, how the world has changed. I am writing to ask if you would do a few wee illustrations for me – just fishing boats, quite simple.' A follow-up letter of 30 June specifies that Ian wanted Gloria to recreate several photographic illustrations from *Scottish Fishing Craft* as line

drawings for a new booklet. 'Your first two (*Fishing News*) books are still on my shelf,' he adds, 'and are still often referred to.'

This final collaboration resulted in 'A Wild Hawthorn Re-Reader' (1999), containing scaled-down versions of Gloria's elementary but spirited sketches, with captions lifted from her 1965 text, such as 'Lead Us 11 entering Whitby harbour, taking the rough weather in her stride' (this boat name had probably inspired Finlay's 1968 poem-sculpture 'Lead Us'.) On the closing recto, we are asked to consider Gloria's text alongside Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus* and Cristina Rossetti's *Letter and Spirit*, a devotional exegesis of the Commandments. The citation is typically gnomic, but it clearly invites us to consider the New Testament resonances of fish and fishing, and, perhaps, to think of the lives of fishing communities as bearing a spiritual profundity to match scriptural narrative. Gloria is open in her puzzlement as to the company in which she has been placed – 'and why a re-reader? That's always confused me' – but her curiosity is a marker of sympathetic and intelligent interest.

Finlay had intended to rekindle his work with Gloria on an ongoing basis in 1998, but a stroke around the turn of the millennium slowed him down. Gloria was disappointed not to collaborate with him again, but she treasures the items that remain from that period. Later, as we look through a little pile of cards Finlay sent her around the time of 'A Wild Hawthorn Re-Reader', she bounces on her heels with excitement at getting reacquainted with it all. 'How much the fishing has changed,' Finlay reiterates in his final letter to her, on 1 February 2001. 'And the boats. It is a different world now.' I was happy to meet Gloria, and, perhaps, to help a little in preserving what shouldn't be lost.

*Greg Thomas is a critic and editor based in Glasgow*

1  
Gloria Wilson with model, photo by Greg Thomas

2  
Chosen for Whitby, from *Fishing Boats of Scotland*, reused in *Wild Hawthorn Rereader*

3  
Gloria Wilson, *Henrietta Street, Whitby 1960-64*