

## An Unknown Portrait by Wyndham Lewis

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Paul Edwards

Richmond Noble wrote to Wyndham Lewis on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 1922 from his home in Dunmurry, County Antrim:

My Dear Lewis,

Just a line to let you know I shall be in London from September 22<sup>nd</sup> at Mount[?] Hotel, York St., Baker St. I mean to do myself the pleasure of calling at your place to see my portrait which Ginner tells me you still have got.

Yours sincerely,  
Richmond Noble

P. S. Hope things are going well.

The letter is in the Lewis archive at Cornell, but until recently there has been no public knowledge of the portrait to which it refers. It is not recorded by Michel. But it has now surfaced after recently undergoing conservation, and it is reproduced on the cover of this volume of *JWLS* by permission of the current owner and the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust.

The portrait is an oil-painting, size 107.4 x 72 centimetres, and thus quite a substantial work. It is signed in the bottom right, 'W Lewis. 1923'. The reason for the conservation work is clear even from the reproduction; there is a great deal of cracking of the paint surface in the background, and this seems to be the result of Lewis making the portrait on a canvas that had already been used. This was not unusual for Lewis: *Praxitella* (1920-21; M 30), *Portrait of the Artist as the Painter Raphael* (1920-21; M 28 and 29) and the portrait of Edith Sitwell (1923-35; M 36) were executed on canvases previously used for Vorticist compositions, outlines of which are visible to the naked eye, particularly in raking light. There does not seem to be a Vorticist design under Mr Noble, however, and x-rays do not help in discovering exactly what the image was.

According to the conservator, the previous image was not painted out before the new one was begun. The earlier design may thus have influenced the creation of the image as well as affecting its subsequent physical condition.

The painting is an important addition to Lewis's *oeuvre*, coming from the period when he was at the height of his powers. The distortion of the perspective of the chair (the same chair as in *Edwin Evans?* [1922; M 35]), the disarticulation of the limbs, and the 'cubist' use of chiaroscuro to evoke rather than describe the fall of light on a three-dimensional object, all show invention typical of Lewis at this period. The glaring white collar and diagrammatic tie, flat to the picture plane, reinforce the impression that Lewis was as keen to make this a 'modern' painting as he was to convey a likeness of the sitter. As in other portraits of the period, the head is particularly well painted with a precision we recognize as akin to that of Mrs Schiff (1923-24; M 37) and Edwin Evans.

Who was Richmond Noble? He was, as his home address suggests, an Ulsterman. It is said by the portrait's current owner that Lewis intended to convey some of the traditional Ulster Protestant obduracy in the portrait. Certainly the viewpoint, putting the viewer's eyes at about the level of the sitter's shoulders, gives the sensation that it is we who are under visual scrutiny rather than the sitter. He is looking down at us, or past us, and his thin-lipped mouth indicates some determination. Mr Noble had need of determination. He had fought in the First World War on the Western Front, and been so badly injured that he was left for dead. This happened at the Battle of Messines Ridge in early June 1917 – coincidentally the first action that Lewis himself saw, and the aftermath of which he memorably described in a letter to Ezra Pound on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June. Noble's injuries left him suffering continual pain for the rest of his life (he died in 1940), and included the loss of his left eye. Although he wore a glass eye that was cosmetically effective, Lewis carefully recognizes the injury by leaving this eye uncoloured as a slightly alarming drawn outline rather than a fully realized conduit for an inner consciousness.

After the War, with the benefit of a private income, Mr Noble was able to pursue his artistic interests. As his letter to Lewis indicates, he was acquainted with Charles Ginner (1878-1952), and it was through him that he met Lewis. The tone of the letter to Lewis suggests an easy and friendly relationship rather than a strictly commercial commission;

*An Unknown Portrait*

perhaps the shared war experience meant that Lewis took enough personal interest in the sitter to finish the painting – if it is finished. It is notable that it is dated 1923, while Noble’s letter from the previous year talks of Lewis still having it in his possession. Did the sitter expect it to be somewhere else (with Ginner, perhaps) by then? By contrast, the portrait of Edwin Evans, produced at around the same time, was left conspicuously uncompleted.

Richmond Noble was the author of two important books on Shakespeare. A modern reviewer (Google reveals) calls his 1935 volume, *Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge and use of the Book of Common Prayer: As Exemplified in the Plays of the First Folio*, published by the SPCK, a ‘landmark study’. While being painted by Lewis he must have been working on his earlier study, *Shakespeare’s Use of Song: With the Text of the Principal Songs*, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1923.

This is a wonderful new find, but was it a good likeness of the sitter? Evidently it passed the ‘innocent eye test’, for when it reached Mr Noble’s home in Ulster, his dog immediately barked at it in apparent confirmation that something of its owner’s identity had migrated onto the canvas.