**Seóirse Macantsionnaigh (**or Macantisionnaigh/MacAntsionnagh and variants) born **George Howard Fox, 1902 – 1997 [DRAFT 6.4.21]**

This painter was born at Brewood, Cannock, Staffs., on 25 January 1902 as third child and second son of George Fox and his wife Agnes Maud Jones (b. *c.*1874). They had married, probably at Brewood, in 1898. George senior was Irish, having been born on 9 May 1870 at Coollagagh, Foxford, Co. Mayo, as one of the children a Roman Catholic farmer called Meredith Fox (*c.*1817–1897) and his wife Bridget Durkan or Durcan, who married at Killasser, about five miles away, on 2 February 1857. At Meredith’s death aged 80 he left estate of just under £60 and evidence of being a serially litigious character, so it was not a wealthy background.

In the 1901 census George gave his occupation as an ‘Inland Revenue Officer’, which suggests that either originally in Ireland, or after a move to England, he became a civil servant (presuming a sound basic education). In 1911, at Ilford, Essex, he stated ‘Customs and Excise Officer’: in short, it looks as though he was a taxation official.

George and Agnes had all their children at Brewood, where the 1901 census shows them living at 1 Shop Lane: the eldest was Mary (b.1899), then Edward (*c.* October 1900), George Howard, and finally Agnes and Annie, twins born in late 1903. On 16 April 1904 the children lost their mother when, despite being warned to take care, she crossed the line in front of a stationary train at Four Ashes Station near Stafford without seeing an express coming the other way: a verdict of accidental death was returned (*Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 19 April 1904). According to a grandson of George Howard, the children were then brought up by their father ‘alongside a notorious housekeeper called Mrs. Onions.’ At the 1911 census, when the family was living at 128 Thorold Road, Ilford – possibly because George senior was re-posted there – she is named as 55-year-old Elizabeth Onions, with her 28-year-old daughter Agnes also present as general servant. Elizabeth was born at Bloxwich, Staffs., and Agnes also at Brewood, so it appears to have been a relationship beginning about 1904 (neither were present in 1901).

Nothing further is known of Fox until he joined the Slade School of Art, apparently in 1923, except that he had by then acquired strong Irish Nationalist leanings and, about the age of 17 changed his name to ‘Seóirse MacAntisionnaigh’, (George, son of a fox): this is the spelling by which he was registered at the Slade. Two minor letters of 1922 by him, possibly connected with bonds called ‘Dáil loans’ sold to help fund the early Irish Republican government, show that he could write Irish Gaelic and he probably also learnt to speak it early (William Martin papers, Irish National Archives). If not primarily from his father, it may have been from childhood association, whether in Ireland or England, with other Fox family members who did so.

As ‘MacAntisionnaigh’, he was a notable painting student at the Slade from 1923 to 1927. He won First Prize (Equal) in ‘Head Painting’ with Rex Whistler in 1924, the Slade only retaining his entry (‘Portrait of a Girl’, ref. PC5101). In the same year he also won Second Prize (Equal) with five others in ‘Figure Painting’, with William Dring and Whistler sharing First Prize: also in 1924, in the ‘Summer Composition’ category – then titled ‘Figure Composition’ – he and five others including Whistler gained Second Prize (Equal), no First being awarded. His entry for this was ‘The Slade Tea Party’(PC5272), showing a group of students and staff, centring round the seated figure of Professor Henry Tonks, in the quadrangle in front of the north wing of the Wilkins Building, University College London. This may also be the painting shown as ‘Strawberry Tea’ in the New English Art Club's 72nd annual exhibition at the Spring Gardens Gallery in 1925, where it received rather negative comment in the ‘Tatler’ of 6 May.

*The Year’s Art* still noted Fox/ Macantsionnaigh’s address as Thorold Road, Ilford, between 1933 and 1938. Sometime in the early 1930s, however, he began a relationship with Marie Reeta Patricia Brown (née Blount, b. 1903), known as ‘Marita’. She was the daughter of an architect living at West Grimstead, near Salisbury, and became one herself: the 1930 London commercial directory lists her (as Miss Blount) at 24 Devonsire Street, WC1. In October 1929, however, she married Francis Bowen Reynolds Brown (later a top SOE agent in the Second World War, d. 1973). How that relationship ended shortly afterwards is not yet clear but in late 1935 or early 1936 she remarried to Macantsionnaigh (using the name Fox on this occasion) in St Helier, Jersey, where family report says he was then working as a carpenter. Their son Brian was born in St Helier on 2 May 1936 and baptised at the Primitive Methodist Church in Aquila Road on 7 June. Given Macantsionnaigh’s Irish Catholic background, the Methodist baptism lacks explanation other than perhaps Marita’s choice.

The Macantsionnaighs’ returned to England before September 1939 when the national Register then compiled shows them living at 87 Cowesfield Green, Whiteparish, near Salisbury, with him noted as a ‘Painter (Fine Art) Carpenter’. This was only a few miles from Marita’s family home at West Grimstead.

After leaving the Slade, Macantsionnaigh had for some time become assistant to Gerald Kelly (later Sir Gerald, 1879–1972, and PRA 1949–54), who had been one of his teachers there. Family report says he helped Kelly with backgrounds and that they remained friends for life. How he became a carpenter and went to Jersey is not known but after settling near Salisbury he turned to ‘teaching art and art history at Bishop Wordsworth’s school [there], and then the same at the William Morris school in Wandsworth until his retirement in 1973. He did continue to paint but he appears not to have ever exhibited after the 1930s.’

The Macantsionnaighs marriage seems to have ended in separation, possibly as early as 1946 and certainly by 1955. It is not yet clear whether Brian was their only child: they may also have had a daughter. Brian married in 1958, had five children (one son and four daughters) and died in 1973. This occurred in Somerset, so he and his family were probably then living with or near his father, who died aged 95 at Taunton in the summer of 1997: his death was registered there in August.