

MICHAELMAS TERM

My first baptism in the lecture hall was during the first week of the Michaelmas term of 1922. Old Musgrove as I affectionately came to call the art history master, was sharp, witty, and precise in tone. He was like an old eccentric grandfather with his patched tweed blazer that caught his gown, twisting the black cloth pulling it out of shape.

'Believe no one except Thornbury!' was Musgrove's opening gambit in that very first session. 'For he stood a pace behind Turner, even on that damn ship where Turner tied himself to a mast during a vicious storm off the Kent coast. The result? *Snowstorm – Steamboat off the Harbour's mouth.*'

Looks of disbelief were exchanged among us students. Turner would have been aged mid sixty at the time of the storm venture. Surely, even he would not have been able to withstand the might of the weather gods.

'Mr Tanners, you have your hand up. What is it?'

'Was Turner really there, Sir?'

'Are you questioning Thornbury? Have you read the passage in the text?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Good for you Mr Tanners!' shouted Musgrove. 'Question season is now open dear students of the arts. You should question every artist. The motive, the evidence, the intention, the invention, the finished article.'

'And Reynolds, Sir?'

'One step at a time Mr Henwood, one step at a time.'

'Thornbury was a journalist but not a friend of Turner? Would he have wanted to record such a feat, championing Turner in the twilight of his career to ensure Turner immortal?'

'Who knows, Mr Tanners. Thornbury allegedly held a conversation with Ruskin. Ruskin was present when the painting was submitted to the Royal Academy. Some thought it remarkable. Others felt rather faint almost grief-stricken at what Turner was asking the connoisseurs to look at. Note from the image before you how the ship rolls, and the sea decides its fate. But say Turner was present? Up high in the crow's nest? It is the myth that has created the legend and Thornbury was taken in.'

'Could the same be said of *Rain, Steam and Speed*. Another storm prevails and more drama. The hare running for his life along the tracks. The storm clearing from the field allowing the farmer to go about his business. The jolly fellows on the calm water. Another myth?'

'You could well be right Mr Cedric. But we are all just bystanders, each and every one of us.'

'And was Thornbury a bystander?'

'He was more than that. Ruskin declined the task of chronicling Turner's life so, it is Thornbury that we must thank for all our debates.'

'So, Turner survived both storms and lived another day to paint these great canvases?'

'Heroism in the name of art! Does anyone wish to say anything more about Turner? Yes Hardinge?'

'Turner was allegedly, married to a great aunt of mine!'

'Ah, the wonderful Sophia Caroline Booth,' confirmed Musgrove.

'Did you know her, Sir?'

'Wicked boy,' remarked Musgrove whilst smiling.