

With an Eye to the Future  
By  
Osbert Lancaster<sup>i</sup>



Charterhouse School

Intolerably irksome as Charterhouse seemed to me at the time and lamentable as the education provided seems to me today, in one respect at least I count myself lucky to have been there, for by great good fortune there existed a long tradition of excellence in the graphic arts, which went back to Thackeray and Leech, in which considerable pride was taken and which was—and I am happy to say, I believe, still is—stoutly maintained. The studio was well equipped and the library was particularly rich in examples of the work of the great illustrators, among whom Max Beerbohm and Lovat Fraser naturally took pride of place, and if one was judged to be serious no discouragement was offered to spending what little free time one had there. In the studio teaching was in the hands of a kindly, enthusiastic water-colourist affectionately known as 'Purple Johnson', whose appearance—thick tweeds, Rex Harrison hat, small sideboards, spotted bow tie—was typical of the artist of the old school, today as extinct as the masher and the knut, and whose works frequently appeared on the walls of the R.W.S. and the Academy. Under his regime drawing and painting (water-colours and lino-cuts only; oils he held, not unreasonably, to be too messy safely to be entrusted to adolescents) were not regarded as useful forms of occupational therapy but primarily as crafts of which the technique had first to be properly acquired before they could with advantage be employed as media for self-

expression. Once, however, one had achieved a certain degree of proficiency, and provided that one did not altogether neglect to turn out a certain number of academic pencil studies, one was left quite free to choose one's subject matter and I spent many a happy hour composing large historical or oriental scenes in a style which I flattered myself nicely combined the more striking characteristics of Lovat Fraser, Boutet de Monvel and Bakst. In the autumn the purely representational was abandoned for the decorative and everyone was busy painting and varnishing vast quantities of little wooden boxes and book-ends with which to delight long-suffering relatives at Christmas time.



Osbert Lancaster looks over the shoulder of Purple Johnson as he sketches a landscape.

Every half-holiday in the summer term we all went sketching, a straggling group of school-capped cyclists whizzing through the deep Surrey lanes heedless of the booming warnings of Purple Johnson—"Have a care, boy, have a care!"—majestically upright sailing along at an even, dignified pace, like a great galleon surrounded by darting pinnaces. Eventually at some old lych-gate or ruined mill a halt would be called and we each, not invariably without some display of precocious artistic temperament, selected our preferred view-point, set up our camp-stools and took out our Watman sketching pads. First we drew the scene lightly in pencil and then covered the whole with a wash of yellow ochre to the smooth, unbroken flatness of which P. J. attached enormous importance. Only when this had been seen and passed were we allowed to carry on; if it was patchy or streaked, back we were sent to square one with

the injunction "Always remember, boy, to take a nice FULL brush!" Pedantic as this insistence always seemed to me at the time I owe to it a simple accomplishment which has proved unfailingly useful, and I remain eternally grateful.



Above four examples of Johnson's watercolors indicating somewhat the purplish hue that Lancaster mentions.

Having finally achieved the required degree of smoothness we were allowed to go ahead, always remembering to use a great deal of purple in the shadows. (Upon reflection I think it must have been his fondness of this particular technique that had originally gained 'P. J.' his nickname.) Finally, after careful inspection and considered criticism, we put our pads and paints back in our saddle-bags, those who had abandoned art for nature and gone off chasing butterflies were rounded up and rebuked, and we all set off to free-wheel back through a still rustic landscape, doomed all too soon to become a commuters' paradise, with the low sun sparkling through the elms, gilding the clouds of midge hanging above the hedgerows and turning the thatch on the old-world cottages from burnt umber to raw sienna beneath a crimson lake sky noisy with rooks.

Below: The Times August 11 1937

MR. C. W. JOHNSON

A correspondent writes:—

Many old pupils and friends at Charterhouse will have heard with regret of the death of Mr. Charles William Johnson, which took place at Washington, Sussex, on August 1. He had been in failing health since April, and had decided to retire from the school at the end of "Summer Quarter," but he seemed to have already made some recovery in the neighbourhood of the Sussex Downs, where he hoped to settle, and which provided him with the subjects of many of his charming water-colours. After studying at the Birmingham School of Art under Edward Taylor he went to Harrow as assistant master in 1898: in 1902 he became drawing master at Charterhouse, where he succeeded Struan Robertson, who had been appointed as far back as 1856. A follower of J. M. W. Turner and the Impressionists, he developed on his own lines, ready to learn new methods and continuing to the last to produce work that was fresh and interesting. But he will perhaps be remembered chiefly for his success as a teacher. Definite in his own views, he was nevertheless ever ready to encourage sincere work of any kind in his pupils, anxious that each should follow his own bent and find perfection in his own way. "Very good, very good," he said to a boy who brought up some work of which he was proud, "now rub it out, and do it again." By his constant enthusiasm and sympathy he was able to control a drawing-class without any obvious discipline, and so spread some measure of artistic taste and attainment over a wide area. By colleagues and pupils alike he was beloved for his genial personality and respected for the honest way in which he served his generation.

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<sup>i</sup> In this short extract from Osbert Lancaster's autobiography the author remembers his art master at Charterhouse: CW Johnson. On January 1 1929 at Compton church CWJ's only child, Audrey, married Lionel Garnet Man. There were no children of this marriage.