

The Quintessential Cornish

The life and work of Norman Cornish

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by

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November 2019 marked the centenary of the birth of Norman Cornish, the celebrated mining artist who came from Spennymoor.

Darlington Library is stocked with several fully illustrated books by and about Cornish and this month they are on display in Local Studies. We have 'A Slice of Life' and 'Cornish and Spennymoor', by the artist himself; in addition, there is 'The Lost World of Norman Cornish' by Mara-Helen Wood and 'Norman Cornish, Behind the Scenes' by Mike Thornton. The latter gives many insights into the background behind the paintings, telling the story of the real-life characters depicted and giving detailed context for the landscapes in which they appear. Whether you are interested in the life, the art, or the landscape from which it sprang, there is plenty to explore.

The Quintessential Cornish, The life and work of Norman Cornish by Robert McManners and Gillian Wales is the authorised biography, with 180 full colour pages and 150 illustrations and it was published five years before the artist's death in 2014. The authors were both raised in mining communities in the north-east and had previously written a book about mining art. Here their work is split into two sections, part one about the life, based on conversations, diaries, and interviews; part two about the work, its techniques, themes and influences and how it became itself influential.

Cornish left school at fourteen to begin work down the mines. The following year he joined the sketching club, the 'Spennymoor Settlement'. For more than thirty years he continued in both fields simultaneously, earning his living as a miner, but considering himself an artist. He was proud of his work in the colliery, 'I was a putter – and a very fine one too', work described here as strenuous, brutal and backbreaking. The Spennymoor Settlement started in 1931 and was part of a far-thinking social initiative designed to offer the working classes some opportunities for 'increasing their knowledge, widening their interests and cultivating their creative power in a friendly atmosphere'. The Sketching Club met every Saturday, not an art class as such, but a communal enterprise: 'Problems of technique have been thrashed out together in argument, and the progress of one is the delight of all'. Norman was encouraged to paint what he wanted, what he knew.

Norman was modest about his art, 'I hope people enjoy my work for what it is – a look at life through my eyes'; but he thought deeply about it too; 'I won't be glib about it. For me, sincerity is everything.' This book amply illustrates his skill and the warm appeal of his representation of his main subject, human interaction in his hometown. There is something instantly recognisable in the slouched figures, the curving streetways, the confident outlines and cosy bar scenes. The most desperate work environs appear not simply as reportage but as a demand for respect for the men at the heart of them. The portraits breathe lifelikeness. Every page in this book demonstrates the truth of the quote from Cornish himself, posted at the beginning of the introduction:

'Art is a language, a bridge between two minds'.