

A ROOM TO LIVE IN

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A ROOM TO LIVE IN

A KETTLE'S YARD ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Tamar Yoseloff



CAMBRIDGE

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‘“A Room to Live in” is a subject which we all have to consider either for ourselves or by letting other people consider it for us, and for each one of us who think for ourselves the answer will be different. You will be ready to say that we all live in rooms—but is this true? Do we really live in them? For how many of us is our room the expression of ourselves, so that when we go into it it just receives our natures, giving us a sense of ease and freedom?’

from a BBC radio broadcast,
given by JIM EDE, 28th November 1931

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Foreword

KETTLE'S YARD BEGAN its life when, in 1956, H.S. 'Jim' Ede came to Cambridge, looking for 'a great house' where he and his wife, Helen, could live and where he could introduce his ideas about living spaces, and the role that art could play in them, to successive generations of students.

Ede had set out wanting to become an artist, but at a young age had found himself effectively the first curator of modern art at the Tate Gallery. It was during those years in the 1920s and '30s that he formed the basis of the collection that was to become Kettle's Yard, largely through friendships with artists such as David Jones, Ben and Winifred Nicholson, and Christopher Wood, but also through the acquisition of the estate of Sophie Brzeska which made him the prime holder of the work of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska.

For twenty years he and Helen lived first in Morocco and then in France before returning to England to fulfil his 'quixotic scheme'. Cambridge could not provide the stately home he sought and instead he adopted a row of all-but derelict cottages nestling beneath St Peter's Church. In little time the cottages had been remodelled as a single house and Jim had begun to open his door to afternoon visitors.

The Edes lived here until 1973 before retiring to Edinburgh. In the meantime Kettle's Yard had become an institution of the University and Jim's ambitions for a great house, where music would also play a part, had been achieved with the addition of Sir Leslie Martin's extension. Since then, Kettle's Yard has continued to grow with an expanding exhibition gallery as an essential foil to the house and there are plans for an education wing to come.

But the house, itself, remains as Jim Ede's unique creation, continuing to enchant and inspire visitors, continuing to ask questions about where and how we live. Periodically we ask artists to bring new work into the house, to introduce new observations and pose new questions. Here we have an anthology of prose and poetry to do the same.

We are deeply grateful to all these writers who have responded with such generosity and creativity to our invitation, to Chris Hamilton-Emery at Salt for so readily agreeing to publish, and to Tamar Yoseloff who has literally given herself over the last months to compiling and editing this rich tribute to a much loved place.

MICHAEL HARRISON
DIRECTOR, KETTLE'S YARD

Introduction

THERE IS A house in Cambridge where you can tug the bell pull and pass through a thick wooden door. You are welcomed by a woman who is not the mistress of the house, but who is at home there. You wander through room after room of paintings and objects, but it is not a museum. You are allowed to sit in the chairs, to take the books from the shelves. There are windows which let in the light, but somehow block out what is beyond. There are no clocks—you may lose track of time.

And so it is for the new visitor to Kettle's Yard. I still recall my first experience, sometime in the early nineties. I had visited Cambridge before, always marvelling, in the usual fashion of the American tourist, at its architectural gems, its handsome authority. Several people had told me to go to Kettle's Yard, had told me about its eccentric layout, its seminal collection of European modernist art. I had an inkling that it would be my sort of place. And it was. And so unlike anywhere else in that city of austere, imposing structures. I remember standing for a long time in front of David Jones's *Quia per Incarnati*, buying a card of it to put on my wall. Over the years, I returned there whenever I had a reason to travel to Cambridge. The house was never the same, changing as it does in different conditions of light and weather, but the experience was always uplifting.

In 2005 when I arrived at Magdalene College as newly-appointed Writer-in-Residence (to take my place in one of those austere structures) I went straight to Kettle's Yard, as a way of getting my bearings. I was fortunate enough to have worked with the artist Linda Karshan, who had exhibited in the gallery a few years before, and who put me in touch with

Michael Harrison. Michael greeted me warmly and said I should feel free to use the house whenever I wanted. And so I did. I spent so much time there that I established favourite chairs: the white armchair in front of the window in the Dancer room; the pale red chair in the Bechstein room, with a view out the window of the church. I wrote many poems in the house that autumn; they seemed to pour out of me without effort. And now when I return to Kettle's Yard, it is as if I am meeting an old friend again, and we fall into conversation where we left off. Once you have felt at home there, you are at home for life.

There are many stories like mine, many relationships established over the years, between that strange, maze-like jumble of a house, with its rare and beautiful objects (some rare and beautiful, some just beautiful) and the people who love it. So many of those relationships were fostered by Jim Ede, the owner of that remarkable house. He opened his doors to students and artists; lent works to those he knew would love them as he did; and educated a generation on how to appreciate what is essential, what is beautiful, not just in art, but in the world around them.

There are still many people in Cambridge who knew Jim Ede and who have stories of his generosity and passion. We are privileged that so many of them have contributed to this anthology. John Mole kept in touch with him for many years after he left Cambridge, and when Jim heard that John was working on a dramatisation of *In Parenthesis* with his sixth-form students, he insisted on setting up a meeting with David Jones (by then in a residential home in Harrow). Andrea Porter just knocked on the door one day, a curious fourteen-year old, and Jim invited her in and gave her a tour. He loaned a Gaudier-Brzeska drawing to Ian Patterson, then

an undergraduate, who lived with it in his room for a term, and although he wasn't sure if he liked it, he felt bereft when it was finally returned. And Michael Bywater's fortuitous meeting with Jim just months before he left Cambridge for Edinburgh, left him questioning his youthful prejudices and gave him his first real lesson in how to look at art. It is particularly significant to have first-hand tales of Jim from those who knew him, as Kettle's Yard is a monument to him as much as to the artists he supported.

So many contributors touch on similar experiences, and their pieces form a dialogue. Fiona Sampson begins with the light trembling in a bowl on the windowsill, and Sarah Skinner charts its progress as it illuminates each object in its journey through the house. A perfect sphere of a pebble is passed from Jeremy Hooker to Jacob Polley. Neil Wenborn imagines the mariner Wallis at sea, and Fred D'Aguiar fashions a boat of dreams. And as John Greening evokes glass and Richard Burns speaks of marble, Martha Kapos praises stone. Some contributors pay tribute to individual artists, whose vision was as essential as Ede's in creating the house, such as Barbara Hepworth (Tony Curtis), Christopher Wood (Tamar Yoseloff) and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (John Kinsella); where others, such as Anne Berkeley and Clare Crossman celebrate Ede as collector, 'the man who kept the light'.

Jane Duran and Sharon Morris, not content to settle on one experience, take us on a sensory tour of surfaces and forms. Ali Smith and Alan Bennett approach the house as a right of passage, a place to return to in different phases of life, for an understanding of the self. Sue Hubbard and Elaine Feinstein find a shelter against the cold, a place to make a migration, a pilgrimage. Meredith Bowles, David Hare and Rod Mengham all write of a source of inspiration which can

be extended into other practices, like architecture or theatre or poetry. A way of seeing, a way of life; as Ruth Padel imagines the journey of the White Buddha, Susan Watson discovers purity of form in a Lucie Rie bowl, and Robert Vas Dias finds solace from the 'gimcrack world'. Perhaps Lawrence Sail puts it best, when he refers to the 'gift of attention', the way that the house forces us into silence, contemplation, recognition. This is Ede's gift to us.

We hope that this anthology repays that gift and stands as a suitable tribute to the first fifty years of Kettle's Yard. Long may it continue to inspire and thrive.

TAMAR YOSELOFF
LONDON, NOVEMBER 2007

A ROOM TO LIVE IN

ANNE BERKELEY

Monday

Try ringing the bell when nobody's there.
It gongs deep. You can hear
the shape of two pianos, spiral stairs, the thumbed harp
of Gabo, wheelback chairs; each plate and glass,
each stretched canvas reverberates
as your hand on the rope
hauls the house out of its dream
where a man gets up from his desk in welcome.

But the door stays black, shut, everything in place:
the bowls and charger on the mantel,
the bundled twigs in the grate, the patterned light
that fills the space he's risen out of.
You have interrupted him now:
he can never return to his bureau
writing cheques with a fountain pen to bring
the wind-stiff sailing ships leaning in to port.

FIONA SAMPSON

The Fire Glaze

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge

Begin with this thought
trembling

 on the brink of form,
the way light trembles
in a bowl on a window sill:

striking the glaze over and over
as if something might catch—
as if clay could break into flame—

As if a new world fires up
in each blink of your eye—
now it flickers to the blue bowl,
now snags on bright
jugsful of forsythia
 or skids away
down the polished table—

Always at the back of your mind
the memory of faith;
that beautiful arrangement
in the bend of a lily
against dark oak.



Work is prayer,
and the woman cleaning these rooms
opens bright panes in waxed floorboards,
or between whitewashed rafters.

Her back records the tilt
of each oak plank and shelf.
She loves the shiny curve of one particular vase—
her wrist knows the distance from bowl
to maquette
 to the three egg-shaped stones
she puts straight
each Wednesday, at around eleven:

setting their symmetry to run again
until it runs down,
dusty and knocked.

ALAN BENNETT

from Untold Stories

from DIARIES: 2003

4 NOVEMBER. PASSING through Cambridge, we pay a ritual visit to Kettle's Yard. It's a house that never fails to delight and though there are features I don't like, it's a place I could happily live in. The attendants are mostly elderly and many of them seem to have known Jim Ede, whose house it was and who gave it and its art collection to the University in the 1970s.

One particularly sparky old lady recommends a video display running in the big room downstairs. At first it simply seems to be a slightly blurred record of a domestic interior: a kitchen, a sitting room with on the floor some toys including a couple of model planes. Suddenly one of these planes takes off, then another lands and soon the kitchen and dining room have turned into a busy international airport, planes crossing the room, landing on tables, taking off from work surfaces and all in total silence. They negotiate the narrow chasm of a slightly open door, deftly avoid a light fitting or a bowl of fruit and it's so absurd and silly I find myself grinning like a child. The artist, whose name I forget to write down, is Japanese and it's the last thing I'd ever have chosen to watch or expected to find in the austere surroundings of a house like this, but it's a delight.

AFTER I TOOK my degree I stayed on at Oxford to do research in medieval history, and also taught a little. I now had rooms in Merton Street, the back looking over to the Botanic Gardens. Some of my pupils were already collectors and possessed of a good deal more expertise than I ever had. David Bindman, later Professor of Art History at University College, London, was a pupil and would show me old master drawings he had picked up for a song, and another pupil, Bevis Hillier, later the biographer of John Betjeman and writer on the arts generally, would fetch along ceramics; I knew little of either and could neither confirm nor deny the confident attributions both boys put forward. But they taught me a more useful lesson than I ever taught them, namely that my own taste was for surfaces.

I was no collector. I cared more for the look of an object than for what it was. My aim was to make a room look interesting or cosy. I didn't see paintings as art objects so much as objects in a setting, and had the unashamedly English notion of pictures as furniture. I preferred them above tables, behind flowers, say, dimly lit by lamps or even half hidden by books. I would never want a room in which a painting was spotlighted; it smacks too much of a museum, or a certain sort of gallery.

It is for these reasons that almost my favourite museum is the Fitzwilliam at Cambridge. It has too much on the walls and there is furniture besides, but it adds up to just the kind of inspired clutter that has always appealed to me. When I was stationed in Cambridge in the fifties I used to go there on Saturday afternoons out of term when the museum (and the town) was virtually empty.

The first room I would head for was on the right at the head of the stairs. There were some grand pictures but they were mostly English paintings then—a portrait of Hardy by Augustus John, some Constable sketches and Camden Town paintings and, presiding over them all, another Augustus John, a portrait of Sir William Nicholson. He's in a long thin black overcoat, hand outstretched resting on his stick, urbane, disdainful and looking not unlike the actor in the films of the time who played Professor Moriarty to Basil Rathbone's Sherlock Holmes. I didn't even know then that William Nicholson was himself a painter; what it was I admired was his detachment and his urbanity to the extent that the first chance I got I bought a thin secondhand black overcoat which made me look as spidery as he did.

If I like the Fitzwilliam for its clutter, I also like another Cambridge museum for its lack of it, though Kettle's Yard is not a museum at all but the home of Jim Ede, who gave it to the university in 1966. It caters to all my notions of art and interior decoration; the paintings (Ben Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Alfred Wallis), while individually delightful, are integral to the overall decorative scheme, even starting at the skirting board; nowhere else have I seen pictures hung so close to the ground. Jim Ede, too, thought that paintings were not always best seen undeflected: 'I remember how in Arezzo,' he writes, 'I went to see the Piero della Francescas, and saw nothing but an old faded curtain by an open window making shadows across the pictures.'

And so it is at Kettle's Yard, the paintings part of an assemblage and subject to the changing light. There's a mixture of old and modern furniture and though I don't always like the stones and objets trouvés on top of tables and chests (the decorative charms of pebbles and driftwood for

me strictly limited) and though I would never paint a room white . . . here the whole house glows.

I would be happy to live in Kettle's Yard, feeling that if I did my life would be better, or at least different. It passes one of the tests of a congenial interior, that you feel you would like the food that is cooked there. At Kettle's Yard you can practically smell it.

JANE DURAN

Objects in Kettle's Yard

'We all want space—we are spatial beings . . .'

—JIM EDE

See where I go with this one.
There are so many spaces
to choose from: polished wood

as if the wind had made it,
were making it what it is;
alabaster birds, stones, a dancer

like a day given up for me.
Almost I went there:
all the way across a mountain plain

where the spaces restore and even out,
yet continuously entangle me;
so a glimpse of simplicity and order

in this quiet house must be a yearning
for something even more open—
a sheen from the wild, and to know

what I am reaching forward a little into:
a word, say, or a conversation that passes
untroubled right across a valley

as if it were happening in the next room
and the door wide open, a few visitors
caught together in the sunlight—

so much of it here, and restraint.
Wanting to see, to see, to see in time,
but never to lose that human warmth.

RICHARD BURNS

from 'Manual'

Notice the statue's hands how caringly
he tucked and folded chisel into marble
to free those moulded fingers from the stone
that would have locked them still and undiscovered
in solid dark like prehistoric bones

had not his own hands risen and in patience
spoken to stone by touch and by their probing
subtle persuasion coaxed those perfect fingers
out of their sheaths and for surrounding rock
substituted charged air and vision and history

MARTHA KAPOS

The Geode

Listen well to the stone:
it releases its bang in the dust
like a statement of fact.

But let's make this
blunt stone into a brain.
Let's make its small

geography light up
like Vienna at twilight
in an ambience of meadows and emerald air.

Let's make it into a yellow
honeycomb of streetlit squares
celled in quiet.

The eye is speechless
as it moves among the resplendent
many-sided gabled houses

and crystal-pointed chimneys
pushed up one by one
like pencils

where even a geologist
meditating
over a packet of cigarettes

would be lost
in the cobbled back streets
of the intelligence.

JOHN GREENING

Glass

to take our transparency
and draw it out

of the bolt that welded
the desert sand

into a vessel for flowers
or for the lips

or with a breath into
blue hollow-ware

or in a square
reflect on the passing

hub running its lodes
out of silica fen

JOHN MOLE

Aquamarine

How blue glass catches light
to bottle it, then spills
in a drizzle of Chinese whispers
and the secret's out. You can hear
so many voices but the one you listen for
is lost among them. It contains
its own reflection as a man
might hold a snowing globe
and make a wish for us all
or wonder at the image of an echo
bounced back innocently
from his childhood, mirrored
by ethereal waves, familiar
yet distant as the moon.