

George Fiddes Watt RSA

RSA Obituary Transcribed from the 1960 Annual Report

Those Members of the Academy who recollect the artist's rise to fame—the classical story of early struggles and his later success and distinction as a portrait painter—will grieve the passing of Fiddes Watt. He was 87 when he died in Aberdeen on 22nd November 1960, where he spent the declining years of his life, having in his time painted the celebrated men of the day, statesmen, politicians, the legal profession and churchmen.

He was born in Aberdeen on 15th February 1873, and when he was later bound apprentice to a firm of lithographers, he attended night classes at Gray's School of Art, where he met Douglas Strachan and Robert Brough.

Fiddes Watt came to Edinburgh at the age of 21 and studied for a time in the R.S.A. Life School. While still a student, he was able to exhibit and carry out commissions, one being to paint a portrait of ex-Provost Smith of Peterhead when he may be said to have started the foundation of his career as a portrait painter.

It was in 1905 that he exhibited a charming painting of a lady in white—a portrait of his wife, which received general acclamation from the public and artists alike. One remembers in these early days a portrait of Lord Haldane which exemplified the qualities of his work, his pre-occupation with the force of personality in his male sitters, his interest in strong character expressed with a masculine bluntness of conception and freedom of handling.

The influence of Raeburn may have been his early model but one felt that Sir George Reid influenced the composition and spirit of his later work, while the fluency of Sargent and Brough, with whom he had much in common, was not exactly suited to his temperament. When he spoke of his aims and conclusions, he expressed himself cogently and with a painter's insight.

Among his outstanding portraits were :—Lord Haldane (for Lincoln's Inn); Lord Asquith and Lord Loreburn (both for Baliol College, Oxford); Lord Grey, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, Lord Ullswater ; the Duke of Atholl and numerous Scottish portraits.

On his 80th birthday, Fiddes Watt was honoured at a complimentary dinner in Gray's School of Art, and five years earlier the Degree of LL.D. was conferred upon him by Aberdeen University. Sir Gerald Kelly paid tribute to him when his death was announced

"Fiddes Watt and I were contemporaries. We both took part in the founding of the Modern Society of Portrait Painters. He was much more gifted than myself and in his time immeasurably more important."