

JOHN BUSBY

Silent Landscape

Edinburgh Art Festival

29th July - 2nd September

2019



1. *Twelve-winded Sky*, oil, 1956, 140 x 260 cm (front cover)

2. *Moorland Landscape*, oil, 1977, 107 x 127 cm

John Busby RSA RSW (1928-2015)

Silent Landscape

John Busby grew up in the Yorkshire Dales. The limestone landscape of Wharfedale, with its crags, moorlands criss-crossed with drystone dykes and the deep glacial valleys, shaped his thoughts throughout boyhood. He spoke of cycling the wartime-quiet roads, following streams and becks to their source, drawing and learning the rhythms of nature. John carried aspects of this landscape in his mind's eye throughout his life. For him the land has always been experienced by walking it, drawing it, observing the plants and wildlife which gave it a particular identity.

His discovery of the moorland haunts of the merlin or the nightjar delighted and excited him but he also responded deeply to the spirit of place where these events happened. Attuned to the direction of the wind, the shelter and habitat of the shifting terrain, his landscapes equally acknowledged the enduring land, shaped by generations and still bearing the marks that Bronze Age man carved into the very rocks that comprised it.

The *genius loci*, the reading of symbol and shape within the landscape, the significance of a sudden light spill on a distant ridge, have all run like threads through John Busby's paintings. His career as an artist evolved over many years. His wife, Joan, and his young family settled in East Lothian and John taught in the School of Drawing and Painting at Edinburgh College of Art. A generous and supportive tutor and colleague, he was held in affection by staff and students alike.



John Busby in his studio at Addingham, near Ilkley, early 1960s

John has spoken of his admiration for the work of Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland, and their influence can be seen in early works such as *Silent Landscape* of 1954, and *Butterfly Landscape* 1960. His strong interest in the form and atmosphere of the land, its animals and particularly birds, saw him travelling widely. His interpretation of nature as a painter and then illustrator of many books has made a significant contribution to the observation of the natural world and has inspired generations of wildlife artists. His fluid drawing, his quickness of observation and understanding and his virtually worldwide travel opened up new areas of wonder, and all of these continued to feed into his painting practice.

Although his landscapes may have recognisable elements — sky, rock pool, hillside, valley —they become meditations on the nature of being present in those landscapes. Contrasting with the immediacy, liveliness and fluidity of the drawings of birds in flight, capturing swift instantaneous movement, the whole idea of time revealed in the landscape paintings is very different. It is as if the landscapes occupy a much longer time span, one in which the land has an elemental, enduring presence, long outlasting the brief lives that flit across its surface. *Moorland Landscape* of 1977 is one such painting, with its brooding feeling of constancy.

Many of John's paintings have great compositional simplicity: in works like *Ensign for Winter* 1972, *Small Oasis Landscape* 1971, and *Ensign for a January Day* 1971, the divisions of landscape elements have become minimal strips of colour and tone with some textural variation.

This tendency towards abstraction, dispensing with horizon line and concentrating on the interplay of shapes (whether natural or man-made) removes any sense of a topographical landscape. The dialogue between abstraction and observation continues through much of John's work. *Snowhill* 1977, has qualities of utter silence, stillness, inevitability and permanence. The poetically titled *Landscape under a Dark Wind* 1973, has chevrons in the 'sky' area, reminiscent of birds in flight or torn storm clouds... there is an air of heightened reality.

John's childhood game of pretending he was actually in the toy plane he ran about with at arm's-length, gave him another perspective on the land – a bird's eye view which influenced many of his landscapes; *Flight over Yellow Fields* 1977, a tiny kite flying above the patchwork of East Lothian countryside, or *Flight Over Local Fields* 1983, where the pale shadow of a hot air balloon drifts over planes of colour. The *Bay of Rackwick* also 1983, is an aerial painting of vibrant drama, crashing seas, movement and is somehow almost musical in its intensity. This sense of music and drama is also present in the *Sky Canticle* of 1973 and in the most up-lifting *Rainbow Landscape* of 1972 where the refractive elements of sunlight are held by a static green triangle of land.

From the moorlands of Yorkshire and the landscape of East Lothian to the last series of rock pools in the littoral zone between land and sea, John Busby's boyhood sense of wonder at the natural world never left him. His enthusiasm masked his ageing.

As John himself wrote, "The roots of landscape experience go deep into our subconscious and its moods reflect our states of being. Landscape becomes a metaphor in art and music and literature for spiritual dimensions"



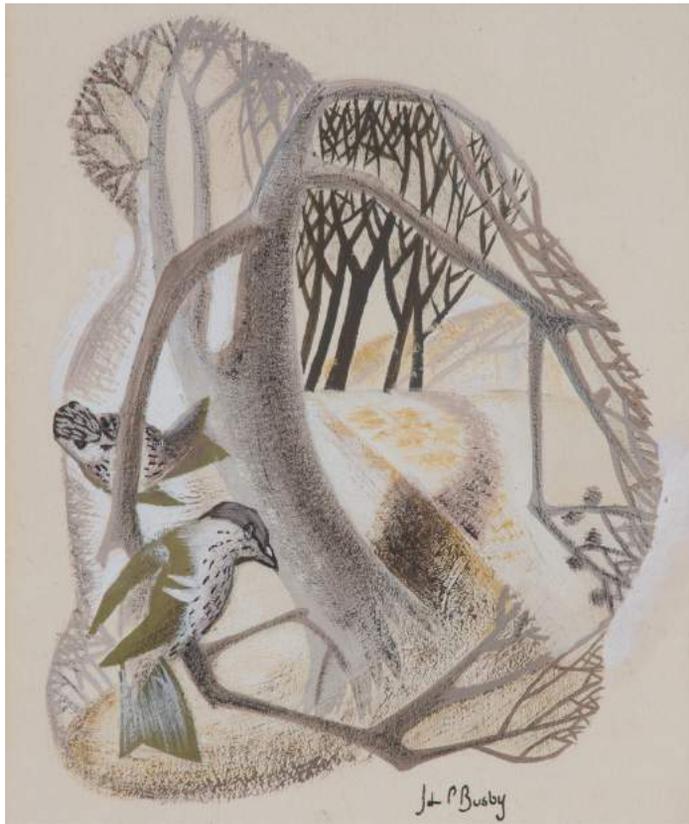
3. *Silent Landscape*, oil, 1954, 52 x 90 cm



4. *The Heart of the Wood (Young Owls)*, oil, 1953, 50 x 38 cm



5. *Butterfly Landscape*, oil, 1960, 33 x 48 cm



6. *Dunnock, Hedge Sparrow*, pencil on paper, c.1950s, 14 x 11.5 cm

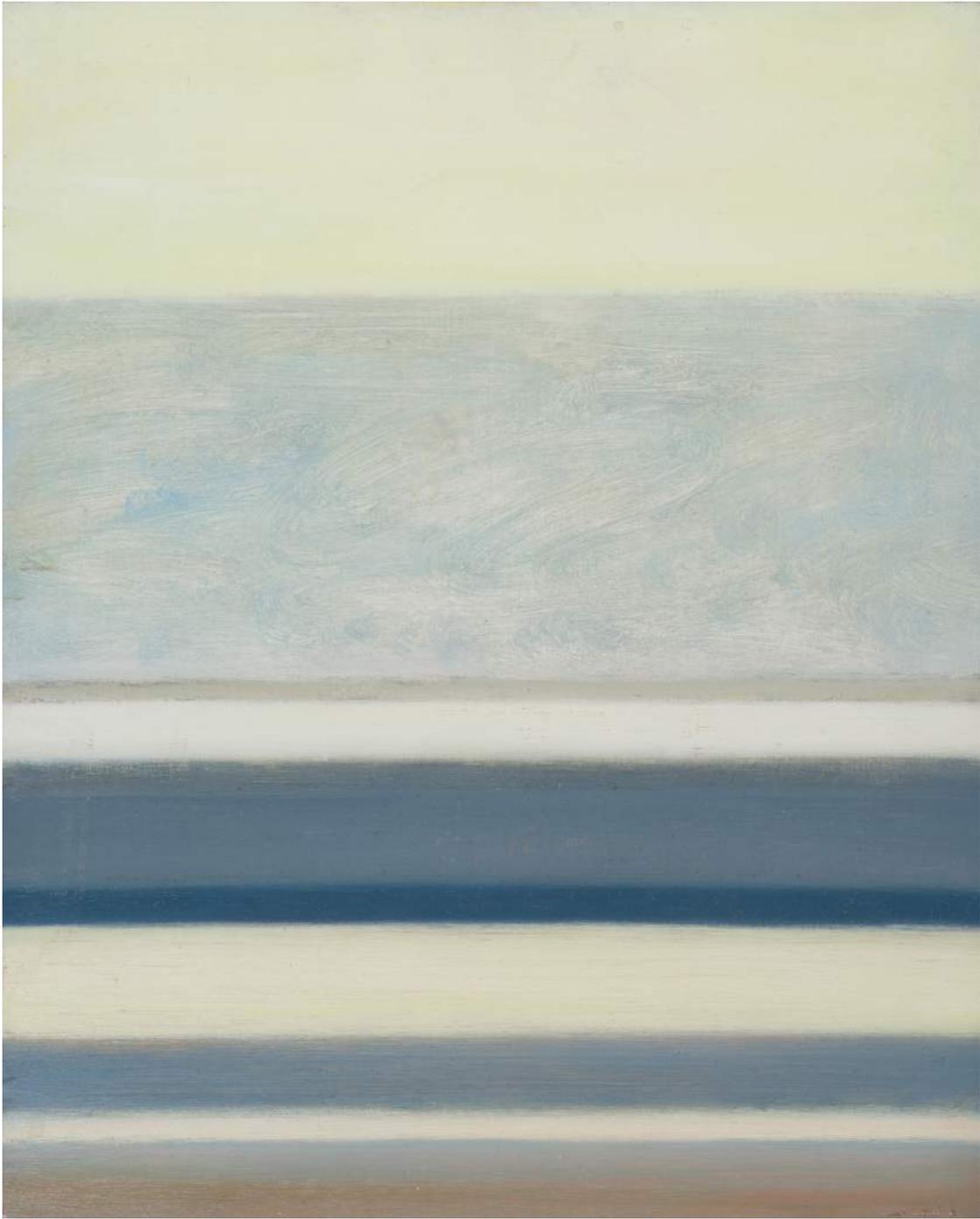
7. *Wigeon*, watercolour, c.1950s, 14 x 15.5 cm



8. *Landscape for a Hunting Kestrel*, oil, 1988, 71 x 66 cm



9. *Snow Hill (June '77)*, oil, 1977, 69 x 90 cm



10. *Small Oasis Landscape*, oil, 1971, 50 x 40 cm



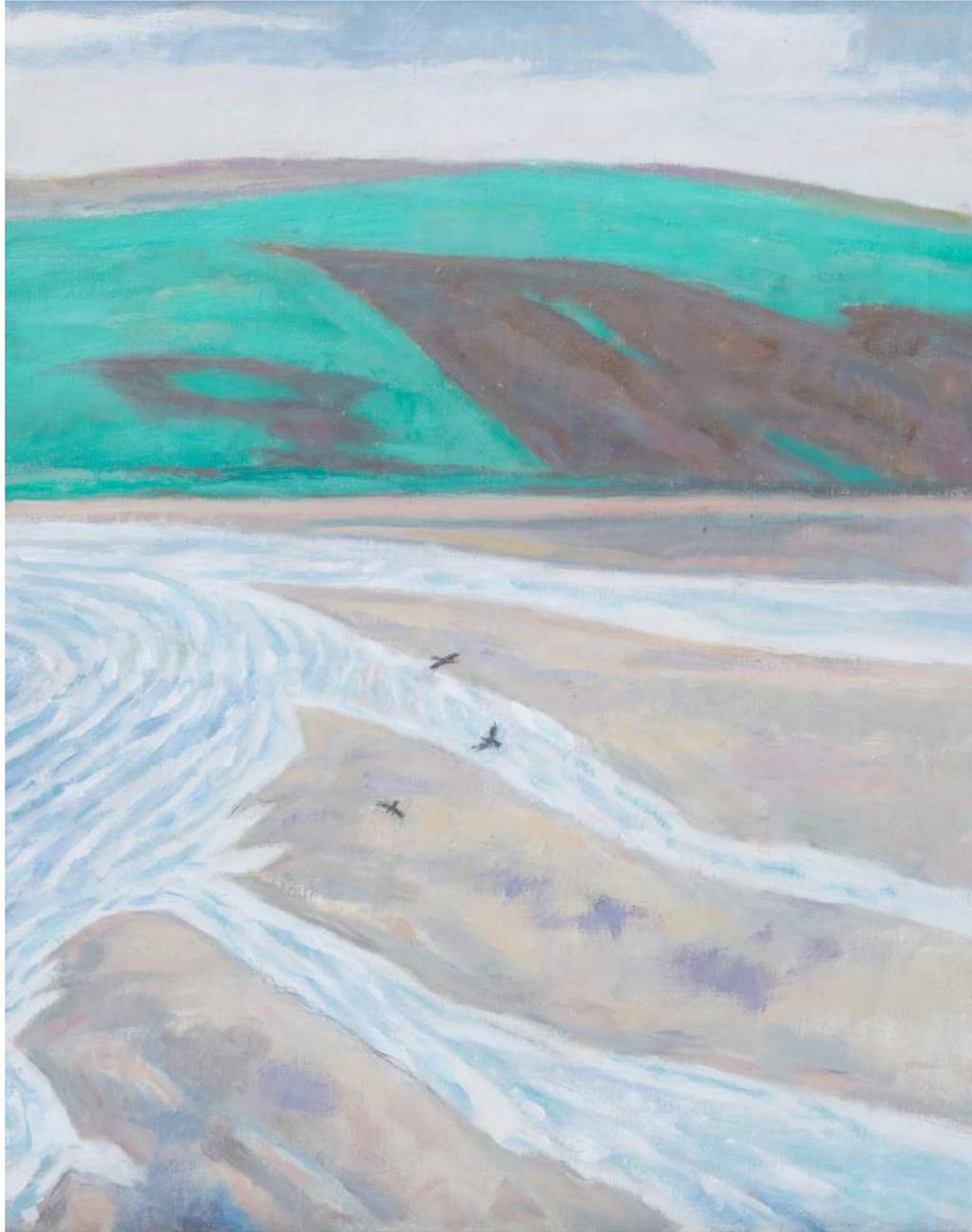
11. *Landscape During Rain*, oil, 1961, 82 x 106 cm



12. *Landscape of August Clouds*, 1961, 85 x 110 cm



13. *Landscape Remembered, Rackwick Bay, Hoy*, oil, 2007, 70 x 91 cm



14. *Birds Over Estuary*, oil, c.2004, 70 x 91 cm



15. *Kite Landscape*, oil, 1977, 96 x 101 cm



16. *Flight Over Local Fields*, oil, 1981, 28 x 40 cm



17. *Coniston from above Kilnsey*, oil, c.1950s, 69 x 89 cm



18. *Cliffs and Reflections at Etretat*, oil, 1982, 36 x 40 cm



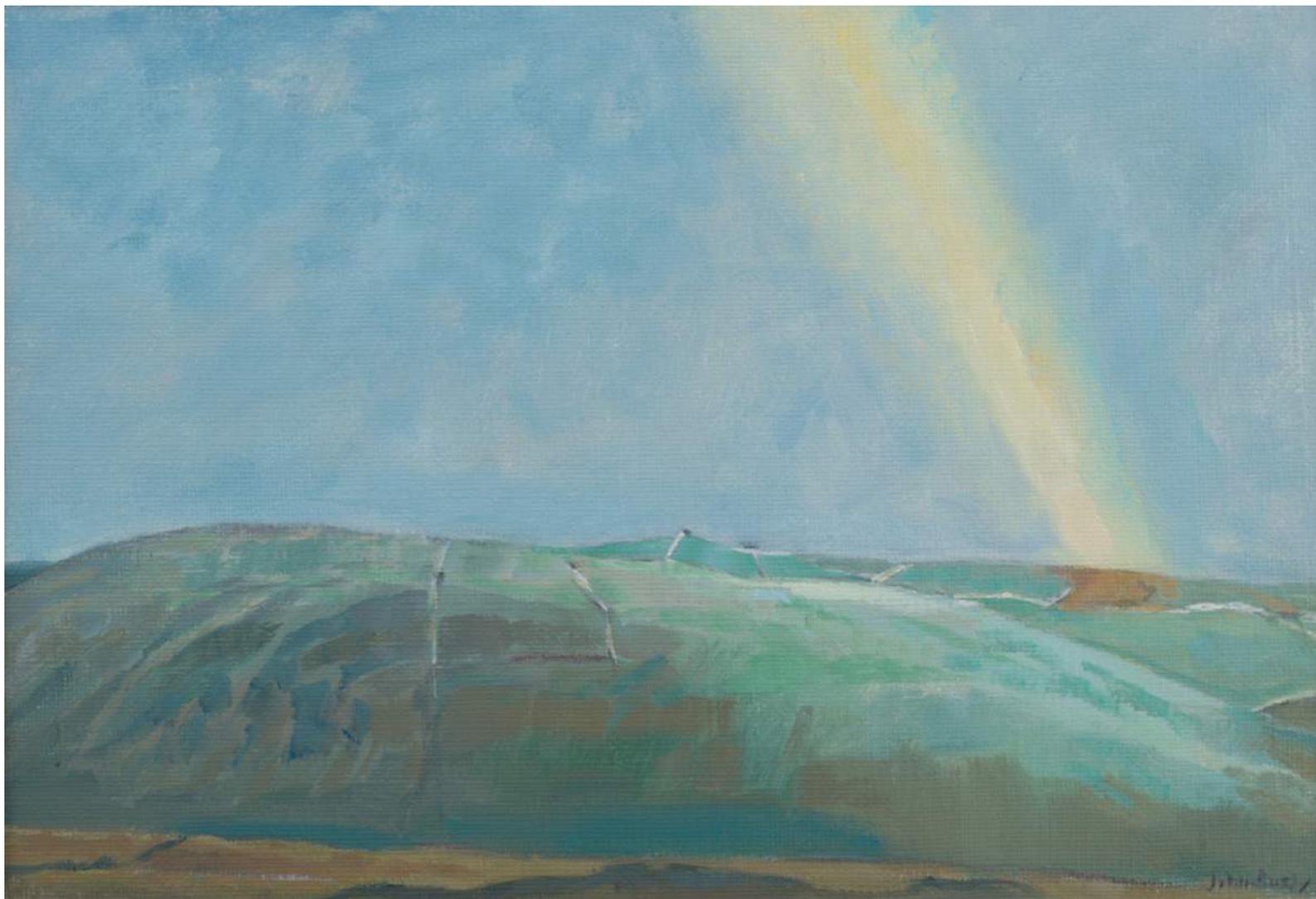
19. *Forms of Basalt*, oil, 1984, 43 x 69 cm

20. *Landscape within a Granite Rock II*, oil, 1988, 86 x 110 cm





21. *Flight over Nebraska*, oil, 1987, 92 x 66 cm (overleaf)
22. *Wharfedale above Kilnsey*, oil, 1981, 72 x 93 cm (above)



23. *Light over Kail Hill, Appletreewick*, oil, c.1959-61, 16 x 39 cm



24. *Northern Landscape*, oil, 1962, 101 x 92 cm



25. *Landscape Under a Dark Wind*, oil, 1973, 92 x 101 cm



26. *Rock Pool Orange*, oil, 1989, 63 x 100 cm



27. *Landscape*, oil, 1967, 86 x 105 cm



28. *Ensign for Winter*, oil, 1972, 75 x 66 cm



29. *Ensign for a January Day*, oil, 1971, 96 x 91 cm



30. *Ingleborough*, oil, 2004, 39 x 64 cm



31. *Crichton Evening*, oil, 1993, 36 x 46 cm



32. *Lothian Landscape, Haddington II*, oil, 1980, 65 x 95 cm



33. *Border Fields*, oil, 1974, 72 x 101 cm



34. *Sky Canticle*, oil, 1973, 102 x 102 cm



35. *Rainbow Landscape*, oil, 1972, 120 x 173 cm (above)

36. *Cranes Dancing*, oil, 2001, 75 x 50 cm (overleaf)



JOHN PHILIP BUSBY RSA RSW SWLA (1928 – 2015)

Artist, writer, teacher and naturalist

John Philip Busby was born in Bradford in 1928 and attended Ilkley Grammar School. After National Service he studied at Leeds College of Art and then at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) where he was awarded post-graduate and major travel scholarships. On return from France and Italy he was invited to join the staff of ECA, where he taught drawing and painting from 1956 until 1988. In 1959 he was commissioned to paint the mural Christ in Glory in the Scottish Episcopal Church, St Columba-by-the-Castle in Edinburgh.

A member of the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA) and the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour (RSW), he served as President of the Society of Scottish Artists (SSA), 1976-79. A life-long bird watcher and naturalist (at age 17 he was at the inaugural meeting of the Wharfedale Naturalists Society in 1945) he was a founder member of the Society of Wildlife Artists (SWLA).

He led courses in Switzerland, Crete, the Falklands and Galapagos Islands, in Orkney and at Nature in Art in Gloucestershire, and in 1989 he began a Seabird Drawing course based at North Berwick. This has continued each year since, attracting participants from many parts of the world. He took part in projects with the Artists for Nature Foundation (ANF) in Holland, Poland, Spain, Ireland, India, Portugal and Israel, and in SWLA/Forestry Commission projects in the New Forest and in the oak woods in the west of Scotland. In 1991 he was filmed in Shetland for the Granada TV production "Portrait of the Wild – Summer".

John illustrated over 35 books about birds and animals, mostly about behaviour, ranging from seabirds and garden birds to tigers and otters, plus a book of poems by Kenneth Steven (*Wild Horses*) and many of the illustrations in *The RSPB Anthology of Wildlife Poetry*. His own books are mentioned elsewhere but also include a booklet *Landscapes at the Edge of the Sea* in 2010 with his rock pool paintings, and another for the first Curious Eye exhibition which he curated at the RSA in 2007. In 2009 he was declared 'Master Wildlife Artist' by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wisconsin USA.

He exhibited widely both at home and abroad and had a major retrospective exhibition at Bradford City Art Gallery in 1999/2000. More recently a retrospective exhibition, planned before his death, was held at Nature in Art, Gloucester in August 2015, and two major exhibitions to celebrate his landscapes (at the Royal Scottish Academy) and drawings

(at The Scottish Gallery) were held in Edinburgh in June 2016, with another at the Wildlife Art Gallery in Lavenham, Suffolk in November 2017.

He lived near Ormiston in East Lothian, married to the mezzo-soprano and singing teacher Joan Busby. Music was an abiding passion and he was a life-long Christian. He died in Edinburgh in June 2015



Selected Publications

Lines from Nature, Langford Press, 2016

Looking at Birds: An antidote to Field Guides,
Langford Press, 2013

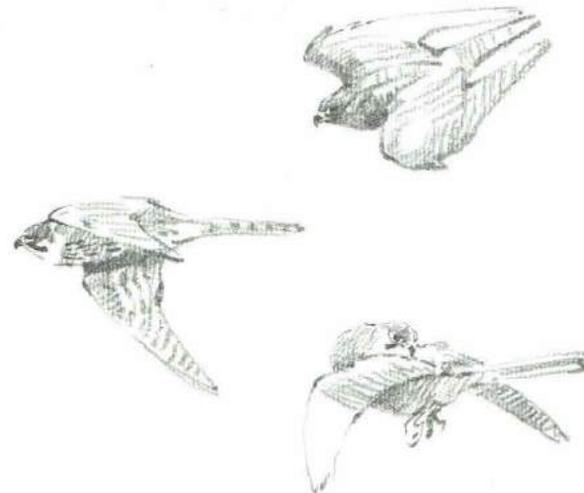
Land Marks and Sea Wings,

The Wildlife Art Gallery, Lavenham, 2005

Nature Drawings, Arlequin Press, 1993

Birds of Mallorca, Helm, 1988

Drawing Birds: an RSPB Guide, 1st edition,
A & C Black, 1986





38. *Migrating Swans over a Highland Glen*, oil, 2010, 66 x 91 cm

39. *Flight Over Yellow Field*, oil, 1977, 76 x 91 cm (overleaf)

