## Chapter One

# Slag Heaps and Rabbit Stew

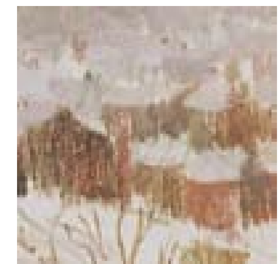
*"The mining village where I was born was dominated by a mountain of slag. To us children it was a challenge to climb or toboggan down. To our parents it was a symbol of back-breaking toil, tears, and tragedy."*

Ted Harrison is a magician. With a few tubes of paint and a vision only he can imagine, he transforms mountains, sea, and sky into rainbows of joy. His paintings reflect a fusion of influences: a working-class upbringing in an English colliery village; military service in India and East Africa; and years living in Malaysia, New Zealand and throughout Canada. These adventures merged to inspire an artistic style so distinctive it defies definition. His genius is more than an assemblage of line, plane, and texture. It reflects compassion and humility, qualities that breathe and move throughout his work.

Harrison paintings are accessible, yet sophisticated. Fresh, spontaneous, and fun. They convey a sense of place that attracts not just gatherings of the cognoscenti, but also throngs of everyday people who line up hours before his shows open. Yet, he is as approachable as his art.

Although Ted Harrison is a Canadian celebrity, his attitude toward life is decidedly small-town. He prefers hot stews and cold beer to champagne and oysters, and he will pass the time with most anyone who crosses his path, for he knows we all have a story. Intellectual brilliance lies below the surface of his everyman appearance. He reads a book a week, a habit developed in his childhood; speaks German and a smattering of Urdu and Swahili; takes pleasure in a rigorous debate (pick your subject); has lived on four continents, and holds strong opinions. He is thoughtful, generous, and can toss up a quick-witted quip in the most unlikely circumstances.

And he is very, very lucky. Throughout his youth and in his personal and professional life, the gods have smiled upon Ted Harrison. Rather than becoming a miner as his father had been, his parents and an insightful teacher propelled him toward higher education. Japan surrendered



Opposite:
Wingate Colliery in the Snow *(detail)* 1950
*Oil on Board*
*Ted Harrison Collection*

on the day before he left for boot camp, saving him from wartime combat. While in India, amoebic dysentery nearly made off with him, but he miraculously muscled his way back to life. He met a remarkable woman in Malaysia who became his wife, and in 1969 when living in Canada, a well-connected businessman from Ottawa, killing time in the Whitehorse library, wandered into Ted's first Canadian exhibition. He admired what he saw and introduced his work to galleries and collectors in Toronto and Ottawa. The rest, as they say, is history.

The prevailing notion that Ted Harrison's style has changed little over his career underlines the need to examine his personal and artistic spheres. His evolution as an artist is nothing short of dramatic, for the work from the first half of his life significantly contrasts in style and genre to that of his mid-life and beyond. Even within his Yukon genre, significant variations demarcate distinct periods. He continues to experiment with style, colour, and technique.

Ted Harrison's story begins in Wingate, a small colliery village in County Durham, northeast England. The folks there work hard for a living, trust in God, and help their neighbours. They believe a hearty meal and a strong cuppa tea can ease many of life's bumps. And they're tough. On Saturday nights — even during the bitter North Sea winters — coatless girls in high heels and party dresses promenade the streets with their shirt-sleeved beaus as they might have done in Ted's day. A nod, perhaps, to their hardy Viking ancestry.

Durham County is a delight of woodlands and rolling fields studded with Norman and Saxon architecture. Lakes and glens call to hikers, boaters, and anglers. Durham City, and its grand Norman cathedral, exudes the romance of a history that dates to 995 A. D. When spring seduces winter, lambs graze on meadows and streams fill with trout. Hazes of primroses and bluebells besiege meadows, from which ancient ruins still rise, casting over the land an aura so enigmatic it inspired the likes of J.M.W. Turner, the nineteenth-century "painter of light" who set the stage for impressionist painting. Turner's water-colour, *Gibside from the North* (1817), depicts the graceful beauty of the countryside near Newcastle where sits the ancestral home of the late Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, Queen Mother. Poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge celebrated County Durham in verse. Dickens used the market town of Barnard Castle as the setting for his classic *Nicholas Nickleby*. Poets, writers, artists, and dreamers found much in County Durham to inspire the muses. Today, the county is as lovely and green as it was back then. But it wasn't always so.

From as early as the fourteenth century, coal from County Durham was making its way to London. But from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1970s when the last of the coalmines closed, the belching pollution of heavy industry escalated. Scathing scars of pit mines and filthy streams near the colliery villages blotted pockets of the gentle landscape. Tailings from the mines grew from mounds to mountains. The shape of its slag heap defined each village. "On misty days it loomed ghostlike above the miners' cottages," said Ted. He spoke of the ever-smoking chimney of the Wingate mine and the skeleton-like ribs of the pithead from where the cage sped down to the depths carrying miners and empty tubs to the seams below.

Ted told me of boys growing into men underground, living their best years in a maze of damp, narrow tunnels

and pitting their intuition against the deadly foes of noxious gases, falling rocks, and cave-ins. The adverse working conditions and the unpredictable dangers of the mine created a tight community below — and above — ground. It was a community Ted's paternal and maternal families knew well. They likely migrated from the coalfields in Wales, settling in County Durham when the Wingate Grange colliery opened in 1839. Ted's father, Charles Edward Harrison (whom his friends called Charlie), began working there in 1900.

On November 11, 1925, at age thirty-seven, he married Martha Thirlaway, a thirty-three-year-old seamstress, whose father was also a miner. The birth of Edward Hardy (or Eddie, as his family and childhood friends called Ted) and his twin sister Mary Algar on Saturday, August 28, 1926, was for Charlie and Martha the brightest event in an otherwise turbulent year.

At that time, as Britain was recovering from the devastation of the Great War, the coalminers began fraying the edges of labour stability. Ted explained how precarious a miner's life was in those days. "They lived by the whims of the owners who would shut down a mine if it became unprofitable. This forced families to move from one colliery village to the next in hopes of finding work." Death from black lung, gas poisoning, and suffocation came with the job, as did shifts that ran around the clock and holidays without pay. Accidents, caused by collapsing shaft roofs and gas explosions, were all too common. "You could always tell a miner by the marks on his head," said Ted. "Injuries from falling rock created indentations in their skulls. Over time these became ingrained with black coal dust, giving the impression of tattoos."

*Top: Mary Algar Harrison (L), Edward Hardy Harrison (R), 1926*

*Bottom (2): Ted and Algar, age 3, 1929*

On January 16, 1926, a BBC radio play featuring an imaginary workers' revolution generated panic in London. Three and a half months later, fiction became fact when British mine owners, who were losing market share to new competitors from Poland, Germany, and the United States, decided to reduce wages while *increasing* working hours. This incensed the miners. "The men earned six pence per ton for what they hewed from the coalface, and the local squire *also* received six pence per ton for the quantity which passed over his land by rail en route for the nearest port," exclaimed Ted, his blue eyes flashing as he explained inequities his father and the men with whom he worked, endured. "What a contrast in effort!"

The miners' union, exasperated by its unmet demands for fairer wages and safer working conditions, precipitated a General Strike on May 3. The nation's economy froze as North set against South, friend against neighbour. Charlie Harrison joined in the strike that spilled out of the villages and into every corner of the country. For nine tumultuous days, English commerce teetered on collapse. From John o'Groats at Scotland's northern tip to Land's End at the south of England, mines and factories closed and trains stopped running. Altercations between workers and police escalated and families hunkered down, anticipating a long, fractious, and hungry summer. But the strike turned out to be a short, unmitigated disaster.

Just a few days after strike action commenced, the Trade Union Congress, which had backed the miners and encouraged the walkout, called it off. The miners were livid and their union pressed the men to continue the strike, advancing the slogan *not a penny off our pay, not a minute off the day*. "It was easy for union bosses to insist that miners hold the line," said Ted. "They had food on their tables." Men held out as best they could, but by early December, necessity forced the holdouts to return to work under conditions worse than before the strike.

The memory of those difficult times settled heavily on mining villages throughout England. Although Charlie Harrison stood by his fellow workers throughout the unrest, when it ended, he resolved to find employment elsewhere. He was a man of unbendable integrity and would not work under the unjust terms imposed on the miners. He also resolved that his children would become educated. His son was not going to work in the mean, hard world below ground.

But the transition was not easy.

Mining was all Charlie Harrison had ever known. At the age of twelve, he was caned for being truant from school. In defiance of the schoolmaster he quit school, declaring to his mother he was going to work. Within days he was squeezing himself into a crowded cage and descending down the shaft of the Wingate colliery. For ten-hour stretches, he sat alone in the dark, opening and closing the trap door to let pit ponies and their drivers in and out of the tunnels. "It was one of the worst jobs," said Ted, as he topped up our tea. "My father's only relief from the solitude and the darkness were the little ponies that came through." (By 1911, laws protected children under fourteen years old from working in mines.)

Charlie Harrison worked harder than most because of a bad leg that plagued him since childhood. When he was very young, a doctor thought to remedy an injury to

his right knee by removing the synovial fluid. Over time, the leg atrophied, leaving him with a noticeable limp and chronic pain. But Charlie soldiered on without complaint. At the end of each shift, he trudged home as black as the inside of the coalseam. He'd shed his clothes while his mother poured hot water into a tin tub placed before the fire. Then she went to work on him with a scrub brush being careful to leave a little coal smudge at the base of his spine, for miners believed that kept the back strong. Dinner followed, whatever the hour. Collieries operated twenty-four hours, the women adjusting their routines to the shifts worked by their husbands and sons.

When Charlie grew stronger, he moved down into the tunnels, hewing coal from the seams with an axe and pick. In his mid-thirties he worked above ground as a "fireman." Stripped to the waist, he heaved coal into boilers to create steam. This drove the winders that pulled the cage up and down the shafts. Charlie's stoic determination deeply impressed Ted. "I was proud to be his son, indeed, proud to be the son of a miner."

After leaving the mine (likely in 1927), Charlie Harrison landed a position with the Hartlepool Laundry, driving a horse-drawn delivery cart. At that time, unemployment was a respectable three per cent. Life in the Harrison household was now more predictable. Ted and Algar (his twin sister went by her middle name) had their father at home in the evenings and Martha knew her man was safe. Ever present in her mind, and in the minds of all those who lived in the village, was the Wingate mine explosion in 1906 that killed twenty-six men. Among them was Martha's uncle, shifter Edward Hardy, for whom Ted is named.

*Top: Wingate Grange Colliery, circa 1950s*
*Middle: Colliery Pit, circa 1950s*
*Bottom: Wingate Mine Disaster Funeral, circa 1906*
*Photos courtesy of Billy Middleton*

Miners' Funeral, 1966
*Acrylic on Board*
*Ted Harrison Collection*

"As the midnight hour approached fast
From lip to lip the word was passed
'The Pit has fired!' In grief and woe
The crowd go rushing to and fro,
With many a sad and aching heart
Awakening by the dreadful start
Around the fatal shaft they stand
And watch the brave, heroic band
Of volunteers prepare to go
In search of their dear ones below.
The mother, the wife, are standing there,
Offering to God an earnest prayer.
In anxious groups the children gather
Hoping to catch a glimpse of father."

~ P. Leavy, October 19th, 1906

Charlie's move to quit the mine might be assumed to be a step up, but it was the miners who occupied the top rungs of the working-class ladder because of the dangerous conditions under which they worked. But because Charlie had stood with his mates during the General Strike, he remained part of their close, and closed, fraternity.

Charlie Harrison felt secure in this new job, but a few years later the Hartlepool Laundry replaced its horses and carts with delivery trucks. He did not drive, and never learned. Now he was looking for work when the Great Depression was waiting in the wings. Employment was scarce. By 1933, the effects of the crashing U.S. economy spread worldwide, sending unemployment rates to a staggering twenty-two per cent. "Poverty was pervasive and a 'make do and mend' attitude was the order of the day," said Ted, who has always lived modestly.

Charlie learned the Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society, a reputable insurance company founded in 1843, was hiring. He identified with its mission "to assist people on low incomes to maintain a basic standard of living for their families, save for a decent funeral and making financial security and peace of mind available to more than just the privileged few."[1] Charlie Harrison, former miner and laundry cart driver, now became an insurance agent. He attached a Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society plaque near the front door of their home and declared he was open for business. In those uncertain times, it was almost as hard to make a living as an insurance agent as it was to be a miner. He worked long, long hours, bicycling each day from village to village throughout the gentle countryside of County Durham selling the Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society's peace of mind.

"My father started the job just before the Depression strangled the country," explained Ted. "Throughout the years, in even the coldest weather, he'd trudge from door-to-door, selling policies." Ted occasionally accompanied his father, seeing first-hand the plight of some of the villagers. "I remember we called on a family so poor that the wife's clothes were made from sugar sacks. I fear they had very little coal, certainly not enough to heat water for bathing. I'll never forget how she smelled of baking bread and sweat."

The Harrisons, however, were more fortunate. "We'd collect a couple of bob here, a half-crown there," Ted remembers. "My father saved a little money each payday even though he made as little as seven pounds a week. In this way, we had a bit aside when the times turned really grim." His mother was clever and resourceful, using every trick she knew to keep her family fed, clean, and well turned out. Not a scrap of food, material, wood, or coal was wasted. The family tended an allotment garden and Charlie raised rabbits. "Even now, when I see a little rabbit, I think not of a cute, cuddly thing, but rich rabbit stew!" said Ted with a chuckle. His sister recalled those days in a letter to her brother, writing, "No matter how desperate times were, we always had plenty of good grub. Lots of Sunday dinners with homemade pies and gingerbread men."

On holidays, when the Harrisons occasionally went to the seashore, Ted watched the most destitute down at the water's edge sifting the sand for bits of wayward coal. These sea-coal gatherers, as the locals called them, filled sacks with whatever they could scavenge, straddled them onto their bicycle crossbars, and went off to sell what they could. Some made that trip two or three times a day. Others rummaged through the slag heap behind the colliery for bits of coal to fend off the chill in their little rooms.

The camaraderie of the dark trenches in which the men worked, spread to the embattled citizens who were struggling to survive. No one in Wingate with a little to spare refused a person in need. "We did what we could — a little bread or a few eggs," Ted recalled. "Being poor was just a way of life. However much we suffered, others were worse off."

Those lean years infused Ted with a respect for honest, hard-working people. He proudly identifies himself, not as the son of a white-collar insurance agent, but as a miner's son. "They are the best of men," he said. "Proud and honest and straight-up." This egalitarian sensibility that lodged within him during his childhood was the beginning of the making of Ted Harrison. Years later, when he left England to live in Canada, it radiated through every brush stroke he rendered.