

Landscapes and Birds of Scotland: an evening with Leo du Feu



Leo du Feu's girlfriend Jennifer is a long-suffering woman; she's accompanied him up mountains, stayed with him in showerless eco hostels and even put up with him pitching their tent on heather (which they soon discovered is not quite the bed that the Famous Five led us to believe...) Leo loves trains, and travels on them to remote parts of Scotland; en route he draws and paints the most beautiful pictures of wildlife, landscapes, derelict buildings, old railways – and especially birds. On Tuesday night at Blackwell's, Leo introduced his new book **Landscapes and Birds of Scotland**, a collection of 230 pictures and some equally fascinating notes.

Leo spent most of his childhood in Linlithgow; at school he won the Primary 7 Art Cup, and an extremely colourful papier mache bird brought him success in the West Lothian Young Artist of the Year competition. He was surrounded by art at home; his mother [Susan Smith](#) is a community art teacher, tapestry specialist and Iyengar Yoga tutor. He graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 2006, and has worked as a full-time artist ever since, recently relocating to Burntisland.

At college he was already interested in landscape and nature, but his interpretation of them was quite different from his more recent work; his early paintings were fantastical, portraying the jagged edge of a leaf as a mountain range, or a sheep's skull as a barren wasteland. Whilst at college he was also able to work on huge canvases, something that he very much enjoys but finds more difficult in the smaller space of his studio.

In 2005 the [UK Astronomy Technology Centre at the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh](#) chose Leo to create a permanent display of four 4m high depictions of land, sea and space. Realising that workers would pass by the paintings every day, Leo hid little surprises for them to find – a tiny ark, an unexpected building – and even a thumbnail sketch of Sir Isaac Newton's death mask. Each of the paintings was worked on three canvases, which were then hung in groups in the foyer of the Crawford Building.

✘ After graduation, Leo wanted to travel around the country to sketch and paint, the only obstacles being no car and no money; he approached Scotrail with what he considered a not unreasonable request for limitless free travel and £10,000 expenses. Sadly, Scotrail couldn't quite come up with that lot, but they did provide a travel pass for the Aberdeen to Inverness route, asking Leo to produce some work that could be exhibited at a celebration of the line's 150th anniversary.

Leo was thrilled to be exploring a new area, sketching everything from whisky barrels stacked beside the tracks to Dunideer Hill Fort near Inch. Whilst he loves large canvasses, some of his works are miniatures measuring as little as 10 x 10 cm. He's also interested in old station buildings, many of which have now been 'adopted' and are used as shops, cafes and galleries; one of his paintings is of the station at Nairn, now also a florist's. After a short exhibition at the anniversary event itself, Leo's work was shown at the [Elgin Museum](#), a visit to which he highly recommends.

Leo makes many sketches from train windows, creating a visual diary of notes to remind himself of colour, wind direction and location. He originally worked from photos as well as sketches but now prefers the latter, saying that these give the artist more freedom. He now does much of his painting on location; all he needs are a small watercolour palette, a sketch book, a few brushes and some pencils. When drawing in

ink he waters it down to get different tones; he also sometimes likes to sketch in biro.

✘ Impressed with Leo's work, Scotrail invited him to paint for the Glasgow to Stranraer line's anniversary; this was followed by work for the spectacular West Highland line from Fort William to Mallaig. It was on a journey to Mallaig that he and Jennifer stayed at that place with no showers; Loch Ossian hostel, which is so eco that it even has bat-friendly paint. One mile from the nearest station, high on Rannoch Moor, the hostel is inaccessible by car; Leo loved it. We don't know what Jennifer thought, but it was no doubt better than that night on the heather.

Although he enjoys sketching station buildings and railway bridges, Leo rarely draws the trains themselves. As his interest in birds grew, he started to hide birds in his railway pictures, and now much of his work concentrates on the puffins, owls, razorbills, buzzards and herring gulls that he sees on his travels. He has recently sketched short-eared owls at Dunbar Quarry, and has also visited the Isle of May, where he advises waving a stick above your head to avoid being 'dive-bombed.'

In 2009, a travel scholarship from the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour allowed Leo to visit Orkney. Despite the wind sometimes being so strong that it ripped the paper from his hands and made cycling physically impossible, Leo was hugely impressed with the islands, enjoying the down-to-earth fishing village atmosphere in Stromness and particularly loving the island of Hoy.

A Royal Overseas League Commonwealth Arts Travel Scholarship enabled Leo to travel across Canada in the footsteps of the 1920s landscape painters 'the Group of Seven.' Travelling 3000 miles by train, Leo sketched as he went; on his return, he self-published his first book, Sketches from Canada; this led to an approach from Jeremy Mills, a publisher who had

followed Leo's work for some years and who was keen to collaborate with him on a project. The result was Landscapes and Birds of Scotland.

This was a fascinating and entertaining evening with a very appreciative audience, who enjoyed not only the artwork but also Leo's laid-back commentary and infectious enthusiasm for his subjects. I'm sure we all sympathised with Jennifer too...

Leo and Susan's exhibition ' [In the Outdoors](#) ' opens at the [Bon Papillon Gallery](#), Howe Street on Friday evening, with an open preview from 5.30 to 7.30. It will then run until 1st June, 9-5 Wednesday to Sunday.

Landscapes and Birds of Scotland is published by [Jeremy Mills Publishing](#) and available direct from them or from Blackwell's at the price of £20.

Leo du Feu and Susan Smith are participating in [Forth Valley Open Studios](#), 7-15 June 2104 – an opportunity to visit over 140 artists in their studios, galleries and pop-up exhibitions

[Loch Ossian Hostel](#) is run by the Scottish Youth Hostels Association and can be booked via their website.