

# William Irvine

A Painter's Journey



by Carl Little

Foreword by Richard Russo



The "Stimulant" exhibition at David Archer's bookshop gallery, Dean Street, Soho, London, 1957. Left to right: William Irvine, William Crozier, and John Wright, all graduates from the Glasgow School of Art. Photo by Roger Mayne.

Dedicated to William Crozier  
*A fellow artist and lifelong friend*



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MARSHALL WILKES



“And so I have to learn  
to swim inside my dreams  
in case the sea should come  
and visit me in my sleep.”

—Pablo Neruda



Irvine on the ferry to the Isle of Arran, 1947.

First Edition

William Irvine: A Painter's Journey © 2014 by Carl Little

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Published in the United States of America by Marshall Wilkes, Inc., 6 Court Street, Ellsworth, Maine 04605. For information, please address the publisher at info@marshallwilkes.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Little, Carl.

William Irvine: A Painter's Journey / by Carl Little. – 1st ed.  
108 pp. 28.5cm.

ISBN 978-0-9839670-2-6

Design by Karin Marshall Wilkes

Production by Jeffrey Dreher

Proofreading by Jane Crosen

Printed and bound in China

**Marshall Wilkes, Inc.**

6 Court Street

Ellsworth, Maine 04605

www.marshallwilkes.com

FRONTISPICE **Phases of the Moon**

Oil on canvas, 32 x 36 inches, 2007.

Collection Ellen and Derek van Bever.

TITLE PAGE **Yellow Dinghy**

Oil on paper, 14 x 20 inches, 1998.

Private collection.

PREVIOUS PAGE **The Green Sea**

Oil on paper, 30 x 36 inches, 1998.

Collection Elizabeth Rountree.

NEXT PAGE **Evening Cove**

Oil on board, 30 x 24 inches, 1993.

Private collection.

RIGHT Irvine's painting table with quahog clamshells used as palettes.



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## Foreword by Richard Russo

My wife and I have been big fans of Bill Irvine's paintings for many years. We own several now, but back when we met the artist, we had two daughters to put through college and I'd recently quit teaching to write full time, so we didn't have much of an art budget. Each summer Bill's openings in Blue Hill filled us with longing. But kids eventually grow up and move out, and much to your surprise you discover that this year there actually *is* a modest art budget.

So it was one August when Bill and his wife Marge invited us to dinner. His new show had recently opened at his Blue Hill gallery, so we stopped there and fell immediately in love with a small painting of a simple white church on the rugged coast of Maine, Irvine seagulls circling overhead. Our decision to buy it was made so quickly that we needed to kill some time before we arrived at the Irvines', so we lingered at the gallery, chatting with the proprietor about Bill's lovely blues and yellows, his broad, confident strokes, his delightful sense of whimsy, the tippy, three-legged cows and horses grazing on rocky Irvine hills that plunged violently down to the sea.

Over the years, we and others of Bill's friends had given him grief about his animals, a joking criticism that he took surprisingly seriously, inviting us to get up close to the painting in question and pointing to the thin line of paint that hinted at the animal's fourth leg. We couldn't see the appendage, he explained, because it was directly behind one of the animal's other legs.

We arrived at the appointed time, excited to tell the Irvines that we'd just purchased a painting. It was a hot evening, so all the windows were



**Low Tide, Blue Hill Bay**  
Oil on board, 26 x 36 inches,  
2001. Collection Richard and  
Barbara Russo.

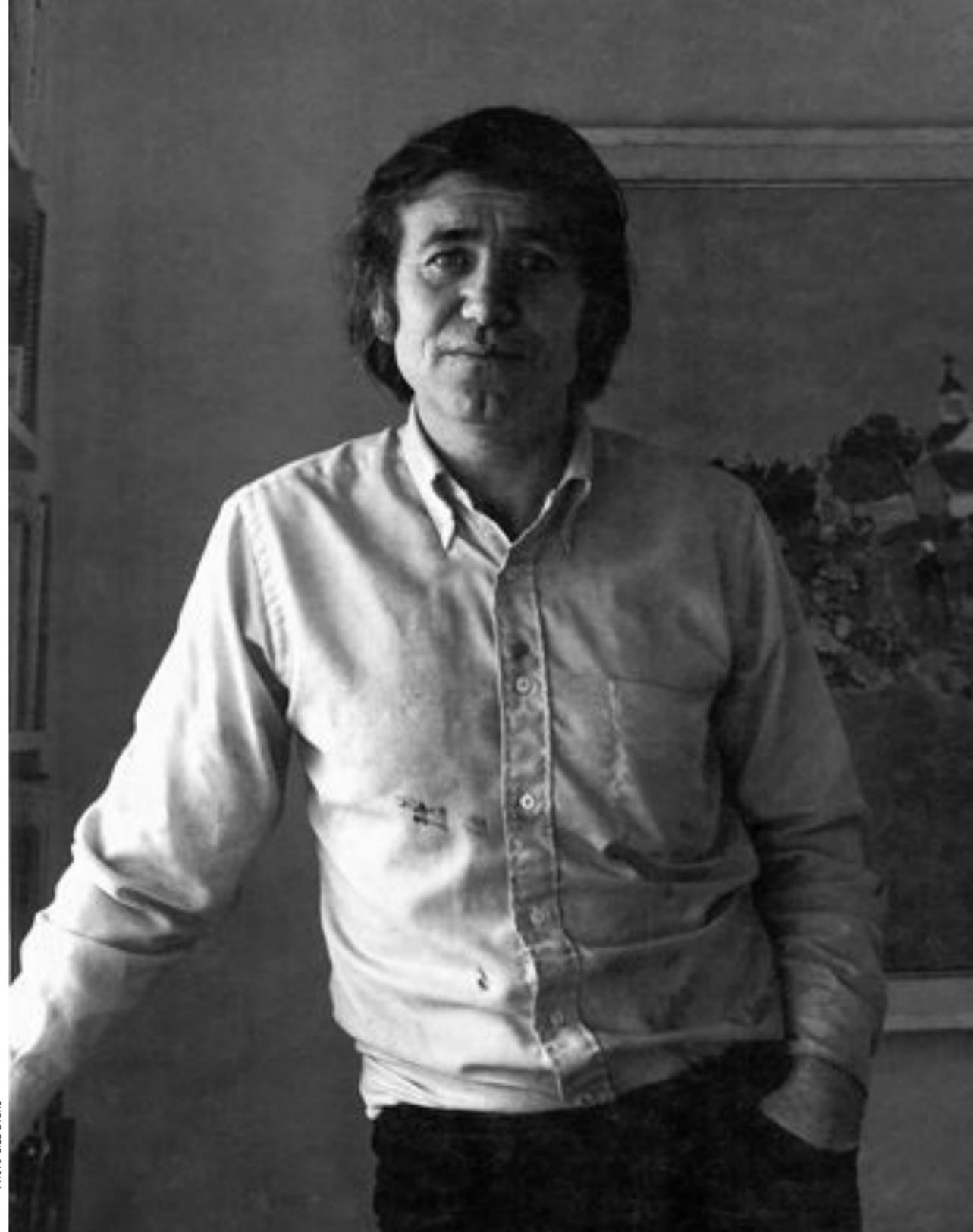


**Low Tide, Blue Hill Bay** Oil on board, 26 x 36 inches, 2001.  
Private collection.

“Anyone who paints  
is a damn fool, unless  
he is born a damn  
fool, then he has the  
right to paint.”

—John Marin

PHOTO BILL BYERS



Irvine in his former  
studio in Blue Hill,  
Maine, ca. 1973.

## The Artist Finds His Bearings

Born in 1931, William Irvine began his life in art in Troon, on the west coast of Scotland, a town, he once noted, “not much bigger than Blue Hill [Maine].”<sup>1</sup> Set on the Firth of Clyde, Troon looks out on the Isle of Arran and the Irish Sea.

Irvine was brought up with a love of coastal prospects and seafaring folk. As he related in a 2000 interview, “Everything seemed so magical, I’d get really excited about things I saw and did—the light and the air, the tides and the way things changed. I’d take a walk and look at the things that happened in tidal pools. It was so moving.”<sup>2</sup>

Irvine’s parents had reproductions of great art on the walls of their home. Rembrandt’s *Man in Armor* (1665), one of the treasures of the Art Gallery and Museum of Glasgow, hung in the living room. In his bedroom Irvine had a print of a van Gogh painting, “one of those sun-drenched landscapes with waving cypress trees.” Studying that image, he realized that the painting served as a kind of “magic window”—he could enter the space and, in his words, “experience the sunlight and the wind and the things that van Gogh must have felt when he painted it.”

Inspired, Irvine began to draw and paint when he was around ten years old, at the beginning of World War II.<sup>3</sup> He came across art in magazines from time to time, but he never saw an actual painting until the family of whiskey magnate Johnnie Walker invited him and his friend and fellow painter William Crozier to see their collection of contemporary art. The encounter was a revelation: To be so close to a creative act, to paintings that another artist had touched, left an indelible mark on the young man.



Irvine in a kilt at the age of seven with his dog Gerda on Troon Beach, Scotland.



For a Scotsman and a former resident of London who was used to stretches of inclement weather, this new home was bliss.

Impressed and excited by the landscape, Irvine felt compelled to incorporate it into his paintings. His period of pure abstraction appeared to be over as he embraced this world of sea and sky, island and trees, rocks and boats. He traveled the downeast coast, painting in Corea, Addison, Jonesport, and other harbors. His canvases became pictorial; the sense of place, so powerful, impressed itself upon the way he responded to the world.<sup>12</sup>

Needing to leave their A-frame home with the changing of the season, the couple moved to Cherryfield to face their first winter in Maine. Irvine remembers it as being very cold: “The Narraguagus [River] was frozen over and there was heavy snow everywhere.” A compulsive painter, he continued to work through the depths of winter.

Returning to Tom Leighton’s Point the next summer, Irvine renewed his love affair with the coast. When winter rolled around again, the pair headed for Florida, to Schram’s parents in Coral Gables. Irvine found a van and took all his paintings with him, hoping to find a gallery.

After settling in, Irvine started to scout around. He took interest in the Rudolph Galleries because they were showing work by Milton Avery, a painter whose work he had first viewed in London and greatly admired.<sup>13</sup> When approached, the owner of the gallery, Lillian Fiolic, said that she couldn’t take on any more artists, but when she learned Irvine had his work with him, she invited him to bring it in. She loved the paintings and gave him his first exhibition in the United States (she also showed him at her gallery in Woodstock, New York).

When the Irvines came back to Maine the next summer, they rented a place on the water in Sorrento. Driving up the coast one foggy day, they visited Blue Hill and discovered a house for sale on South Street, a center-chimney Cape that had once been a farmhouse. Without actually setting foot inside, they decided to buy the “slightly



**Fixing the Roof**  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches, 1976. Collection Erwin and Carol Riven.

**The Quiet Harbor**  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches, 1967. Collection of the artist.

OPPOSITE  
**Red Harbor**  
Oil on board, 28 x 36 inches, 2000. Private collection.





Irvine's cloudscape are among his greatest achievements. Clouds serve as inspiration for abstract-geometric shapes or organic configurations that often hover on the horizon like sculptures. He will also turn to clouds to heighten the sense of natural forces: a number of canvases feature a small sailboat advancing before a storm front that dwarfs it. In other paintings the clouds hug the tops of islands or form powerful banks on the horizon.

Irvine has treated waves in a similar manner, creating striking semi-abstract compositions that play on the patterns they make crossing the water. Rearing breakers coming toward shore form a phalanx of geometric shapes. Windswept waves move horizontally across a canvas, their edges fringed in white. Irvine's crashing wave is more abstract than Hartley's but no less visually forceful.

Irvine is a fearless colorist. His longtime love of the paintings of the German Expressionist painter Franz Marc (1880–1916) may have influenced his use of charged colors. His hues can be bold on the canvas, but also resonant and rich.<sup>26</sup>



**Blue Window**

Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches, 2009.  
Collection Erwin and Carol Rivin.

**Winter Sea**

Oil on board, 26 x 30 inches, 1989.  
Private collection.



OPPOSITE

**Storm Cove**

Oil on board, 36 x 40 inches,  
2003. Private collection.



**Two Fishing Boats** Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches, 2001. Private collection.



**Big Blue** Oil on board, 48 x 48 inches, 2004. Private collection.



**Hanging the Wash**  
Oil on board, 16 x 20 inches,  
2009. Private collection.

**Calling in the Cats**  
Oil on board, 16 x 20 inches,  
2013. Collection of the artist.



**October Nude** Oil on board, 16 x 20 inches, 2013. Collection Norma Marin.



**Clouds Breaking over Tinkers** Oil on board, 26 x 36 inches, 2014. Collection of the artist.



**The White Cloud** Oil on board, 26 x 36 inches, 2014. Collection of the artist.



**The Long Cloud** Oil on canvas, 36 x 40 inches, 2014. Collection of the artist.



**Blue Moon over Tinkers** Oil on board, 26 x 36 inches, 2014. Collection of the artist.



Irvine's gentle oil paintings of Maine have been likened to Milton Avery's landscapes. Analogies can also be made to the innocent joy of Chagall's floating lover and the bottomless, banded color of Rothko—a luxurious blend not of this world.

—*ARTnews*

\$39.95  
ISBN 978-0-9839670-2-6  
53995 >

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