

One man and his art

BUTE AND Cowal artist and author Don McNeil DA will be celebrating the publication of his book, *A Path Less Trodden* – One man and his art, with a book signing at Dunoon's Bookpoint from 12noon to 1pm on March 25.

Don's work expresses the emotional aspect of the wild and rugged Scottish landscape along with the ever-changing weather and dramatic lighting that is only seen in the West side of Scotland. He is indebted to the Scottish Colourists and Joan Eardley.

Don McNeil DA, painter and educator, takes the reader on a journey, tracing his life, his disappointments and successes. His journey takes in the influences his parents have had on him. His mother Jean Hastings, who was regarded as Scotland's finest soprano in the 1930s, gave him his passion and love of music while his dad gave him artistic flair and love for directing and producing. He also believes we all travel a path that continually brings us to crossroads in our lives requiring a decision to be made between the trodden road and the untrodden one...

Don said: "This book came about because friends and, in particular, my wife continually encouraged me to write about my exciting life. So, during lockdown, I sat down and started to write my life story – warts and all."

He ended up with 75,000 words and 150 pictures but knew he would need to reduce it considerably so he put it on the back burner not knowing how to proceed.

Then, on Wednesday February 8 this year, he received an email from Tim Saunders of Creative Coverage inviting him



Don in his studio

to submit an image for his next publication. He contacted Tim immediately, who agreed to read, edit, publish and promote the book, just the catalyst that Don needed. They worked together and a wonderful partnership developed resulting in the book being published on Amazon on Wednesday.

"It has been a privilege to work on this really enjoyable project," the publisher said.

Don was aware that his mum's musical achievements had not been written about, so he set about to rectify that.

He tells of the dilemma his mother had in deciding either to be a watchmaker or a soloist in the Glasgow Orpheus Choir and he writes about the impact his mum's singing had on the musical scene in the UK. When Don was interviewed by Victor on Dunoon Community Radio Victor was able to play two songs, recorded in 1932, by Don's mum and, now for the first time since 1932, broadcast on Dunoon Community Radio.

Don was born in 1940 at Carnoustie before the family moved to Dunfermline, Dumfries

and, eventually Kingarth and Kilchattan Bay on the Isle of Bute.

He was educated at Dumfries Academy and in the book he explains his reason for going to Glasgow Art College despite winning the 15-17 years long jump at the Scottish School's Athletic Championship in 1957, representing Scotland in an international and setting a new school record at Rothesay Academy of 26 feet, 5 inches.

Don graduated in drawing and painting in 1965 from Glasgow School of Art and then taught for 30 years, 23 years as principal teacher at Gourrock High.

During his time in Gourrock, along with Hugh Harris and Carol Leith, they produced three major musicals and, in 1976, they formed Oracle Theatre of Youth and even went to the Fringe in 1980 with Grease.

He was on the council of the Greenock Arts Guild for at least six years and helped to run the gallery with George Wylie. In 1978 he was given the Rotary Award for services to the youth in Inverclyde.

In the book he explains how the Scottish Ruralists were formed on the shores of Traigh Beach up at Arisaig, and he writes about his time teaching art at the week-long art course at Ardentiny for senior pupils in Renfrewshire. It was there that he met his future wife Jean Bell, who is also a painter.

In 1995 he took early retirement from teaching and, along with Jean, set up Fyne Studios – The Hidden Gallery at Newton on the shores of Loch Fyne and together they have had exhibitions in Miami, Broadway, Dublin, London, Arran, Germany and Tokyo.

Together they were founder members of Cowalfest and Cowal Open Studios and ran classes from their studios. They were also responsible for The Window Shoppers Gallery in 2002 during Cowalfest. They are active with Cowal Music Club and, more recently, Dunoon Jazz Festival and the panto in 2018.

It has been a very full 82 years for Don and it's all in this beautifully illustrated book which features his paintings as well as some of Jean's.

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