

EMILIO COIA
HonLLD (Strath)

It has been rightly said by Alan Taylor writing in *The Guardian* that Emilio Coia personified the Edinburgh Festival. As *The Scotsman's* resident caricaturist for nearly fifty years he drew all of the great actors, actresses, musicians, ballet dancers, artists, and personalities who performed in that great feast of culture. Among them (whose pictures with many hundred other Coias, adorn the walls of *The Scotsman* office) were the conductors Solti, Previn, Barenboim, Ozawa, Von Karajan and Gulini; the singers Teresa Berganza and Jessye Norman; Margot Fonteyn, Peter Ustinov and Duncan Macrae. He was a kindly caricaturist and many of his subjects loved him and became close friends. Yehudi Menuhin said of him 'He is every musician's favourite caricaturist! I look forward to his drawings as much as anything else in *The Scotsman* when I visit my beloved Edinburgh'. There was only one artiste who did not appreciate his talents. At the 1984 Festival, as he was sketching the dancer Nureyev in the wings of the Playhouse, he had his pad snatched from him and the drawings (he managed to salvage one) torn out. 'The rudest man that I have ever met' was Coia's judgement. As well as drawing for *The Scotsman* he did a long series of caricatures for *Scottish Field*. Faces fascinated him: 'The face to me is the greatest visual miracle on this planet and a never-ending source of wonder'. He was a compulsive artist. And he drew not only the famous. Anyone sitting opposite him at a dinner party was liable to be the 'victim'. Many a restaurateur paled in apprehension as he set to on the linen tablecovers and napkins with his pen. Then the apprehension turned to beaming admiration as the portrait emerged. But for many of us the abiding memory of Emilio is not that of seeing him draw but of seeing him dance, an ability that he inherited from his mother. He danced at my wedding and he danced at my son's wedding. I like to think that he is dancing his way through eternity to immortality.

Emilio was born in Glasgow on 13th April 1911, the son of an immigrant Italian, Giovanni Coia, who owned ice-cream parlours in the Dennistoun/Townhead area of the city. He was educated at St Mungo's Academy and at the age of 16 he entered the Glasgow School of Art where he was strongly influenced by one of the teachers, Maurice Grieffenhagen, who early identified his abilities as a caricaturist. At the Art School there was an annual beauty contest. Emilio persuaded the authorities that there should also be one for male students - and of course, he won it! With a fellow student, Marie Neale, he eloped to London (both families apparently disapproving) with £12 between them. It proved to be an extraordinarily happy marriage which ended only with Marie's death (which devastated Emilio) in 1978. She was also an artist of considerable merit and a delightful and gentle lady.

In London they had their tough times and in his early days he walked the length of Fleet Street selling his caricatures. He was taken on as caricaturist by the *Sunday Chronicle*. Soon his abilities came to be recognised and he drew and became friends with Bernard Shaw, G K Chesterton, W H Auden, Rebecca West, T S Elliott, Evelyn Waugh, the Sitwells, Max Beerbohm (whom he visited in Rapallo in 1956 and whom he idolised), D H Lawrence, Henry Moore, Augustus John (who drew Coia while Coia was drawing him), Stephen Spender, George Braque, W H Auden, Alfred Hitchcock, Hugh McDiarmid, Cary Grant, Henry Moore and Stravinsky, among many others from the realms of art, literature and the theatre. Many of them featured in his first one-man exhibition in 1932 at the Reid and Lefebvre Gallery in London. But high prices were not paid for caricatures; and he also lost his newspaper job at the insistence of the well-known and influential *Chronicle* columnist, Beverly Nichols, who objected to Coia's caricature of his friend, the novelist, Ethel Mannin. Emilio later remarked that her surname was appropriate.

Coia had now to earn a living, and the 1930s were not the best of times for employment. A Scottish industrialist, who was a friend, got him a post as assistant advertising manager of a heavy engineering firm in Rochester, Kent. Later, when war broke out, he became (rather improbably - for organising people was never Emilio's strong suit) personnel manager with the same firm, which had turned over to shell production. After the war he moved into advertising with the Dolcis shoe company and then moved to Kilmarnock, in a similar capacity, with the Saxone company. He continued drawing in his spare time and, although he and Marie were happy in Kilmarnock, the pull of Glasgow was strong and he jumped at the chance to move there and to draw caricatures for the *Evening Times*. He became friendly with Roy Thomson and through him met and became close friends with the then editor of *The Scotsman*, Alastair Dunnet, who employed him with the words 'I will never tell you who to draw. I will never disapprove of who you choose to and I will never interfere with your work'. He became Art advisor to STV (also owned by Thomson at that time) and became 'weel-kent' on the small screen. He was also well-known and respected as an art critic.

He was always immaculately dressed, cutting a dashing figure wherever he went; in addition to his many, many suits and shoes he had hundreds of hand-painted silk ties which were on show when he put on a display in the Glasgow Art Club a number of years ago. He was three times President of that Club and it, together with the Edinburgh Arts Club, were his favourite haunts. Perhaps he was unique in that he was equally well-known and well-loved in both cities.

He had notable exhibitions of his work in the Compass Gallery in 1972; in the Merchants Company Hall, Edinburgh in 1981; in the Ancrum Gallery in 1989 and many in the Glasgow Art Club. The Scottish National Portrait Gallery has seven of his works including drawings of George Blake, Neil Gunn, James Maxton, Douglas Young and John Laurie. The Gallery is negotiating for the purchase of seven of his early sketch-books and hopes to put them on display as a memorial. The Keeper, Duncan Thomson, was quoted in *The Herald* at the time of Coia's death 'Coia has made what must be considered a very important record of living Scots which gives the feel of a particular society; but, on an even wider canvas, his early caricatures especially - when he was at his most brilliant and original - will give him a permanent place in any history of the art of caricature'. Each Christmas, Emilio sent his friends a highly personalised card: the most memorable was probably that of 1996 in which the figure and face of the central of the Three Graces was Emilio himself embracing the other two. 'What fool said that three is a crowd?'

A number of people painted him but the best representation of his noble head is a bronze bust by Archie Forrest which has a prominent place in the Glasgow Art Club (of which he was an Honorary member). In 1986 Emilio was awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws of Strathclyde University. We marked it with a party in my home to which many of his close friends were invited. In 1995, to his great delight, he was awarded an Honorary Fringe First Award. In 1984 he was

elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. As we drove through to the ceremony together he was a little nervous: 'What do I do?' he asked. I replied 'Don't worry about that: let's concern ourselves rather with what you don't do. You don't kiss anyone' (for such was always his greeting regardless of the sex of the recipient.) As we walked up to the front, there in the front row sat a bevy of august Fellows, their bald pates shining neath the lights. The temptation was too great. He kissed each of the bald pates including that of his sponsor and old friend, the learned Law Lord Jock Cameron. And he got away with it! Many a lesser man would have got 20 years. He later made a posthumous sketch of Sir Alastair Currie for the Society. In 1998 he was delighted to be made an Honorary Fellow of the Glasgow School of Art.

Unfortunately his long-promised biography never materialised; he was always too busy to write it and it is doubtful if he could have mastered the intricacies of the word processor. Nor did he live long enough to make a proposed trip with BBC TV to his ancestral home in Italy.

Emilio died of cancer on 17th June 1997, aged 86, in the St Margaret's Hospice, Clydebank. He is survived by his son Gino, who came over from Australia to look after him in a most devoted manner during the last few weeks of his life. On Friday 21st July 1997, a secular service was arranged in Glasgow University Chapel by Professor David Green. It was attended by many of his friends from all walks of life. There was a string quartet of students from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Four of his friends - John Cunningham (artist), Alan Taylor (*The Scotsman*), Lord Macfarlane of Bearsden, and the present writer, each paid a ten-minute tribute to him. A cremation service conducted by Father Kenneth Nugent was held at Glasgow Crematorium.

Con amore, Emilio.

BILL FLETCHER