Almost single-handedly, Anthea McWilliams keeps alive the memory of Sir Richard Wallace, the benevolent landlord who, in 1870, inherited more than 50,000 acres of income producing land in County Antrim in Northern Ireland, of which the town of Lisburn is the center. The area was the heart of the flax and linen industry.

Among many philanthropic acts, Wallace donated land for a school, the Wallace High School, and a people’s park called Wallace Park. He built a courthouse, supported churches and choirs, improved infrastructure and donated five Wallace Fountains to the town in the 1870s and 1880s. Wallace also represented the area as a Member of British Parliament serving twelve years from 1873 to 1885.

Of the original five donated Wallace Fountains installed throughout the town only two remain. According to the town clerk in a letter written in 1959, three of the original fountains were removed in the 1920s to make way for road improvements. They were stored in the Council yard. Unfortunately, during the scrap iron drive as part of the World War II effort, “some overzealous dealer collected them and by the time this was discovered they were unable to be traced.” Anthea is keen to re-instate a third fountain in Lisburn if funding can be found.

Anthea grew up in Lisburn in the 1960s, attended Wallace High School and played around the Wallace memorial and fountain in Castle Gardens, but she knew little of the history until later. In 2001, she completed a Masters in Cultural Management at the University of Ulster, writing her dissertation on the cultural and historical legacy left to Lisburn by Sir Richard Wallace. In 2003, she established with others the Richard Wallace Trust (Lisburn) as a local charity. She produced an illustrated story book of Sir Richard Wallace and established firm links with the Wallace Collection in London.

Now, she continues this work through R-Space gallery where, with support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, she curates an annual exhibition which sees a Northern Irish artist spend one week in residence at the Wallace Collection to create a new body of work celebrating the story of Sir Richard Wallace in Lisburn.

Past exhibitions have featured artist’s works in ceramic, glass and print. Last year a short, animated film was commissioned entitled ‘Oh, l’eau, l’eau!’, with composers from Paris and County Down adding original music. The animation creatively reveals the story of Richard Wallace growing up in Paris and the life that awaited him. A linen tea towel also was commissioned to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the first Wallace Fountains in Paris. For 2023, textile artist Emma Whitehead will exhibit her new works in June. Visit www.rpsacelisburn.com for more information.

With her partner and co-founder, Robert Martin, Anthea set up the R-Space gallery in 2011 and thereafter established the first Linen Biennale in Northern Ireland in 2018. A second Biennale will follow in August 2023.

Anthea’s enthusiasm for Wallace fountains, Richard Wallace and linen is contagious. If you plan to visit Lisburn, be sure to contact her and visit R-Space gallery. A Northern Irish welcome awaits you!

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