

BOOK REVIEWS



Andrew Robinson
Photo: Jonathan Bowen

The art of directing

ANDREW ROBINSON REVIEWS

THE NATIONAL GALLERY: A Short History

By Charles Saumarez Smith

Frances Lincoln, hb, 192pp, £14.99 • ISBN 9780711230439

'LOOKING BACK at the history of the National Gallery from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is a curious narrative', writes Charles Saumarez Smith, who was the gallery's director from 2002-7 and is now chief executive of the Royal Academy of Arts, in the penultimate paragraph of his informative, elegantly written history of the National Gallery. 'Born out of eighteenth-century indifference to the public subsidy of art institutions, dogged by frequent stinginess on the part of the state, it has been made possible, most of all, by a small number of outstandingly generous connoisseurs and donors, who have had a sense of public duty and of the opportunity that is afforded by the study and enjoyment of great works of art; but also by the occasional interventions of politicians, and even Prime Ministers, who have had an understanding that politics can, and should, extend beyond the realm of bread and circuses into the belief that each generation should seize the opportunity to acquire works of art as they become available on the market (or are offered by private owners) in order to add masterpieces to the national collection.'

Most of the issues discussed by the author are implied in this statement, except perhaps the role of the trustees *vis-à-vis* the director, which understandably preoccupies Saumarez Smith. From the National Gallery's difficult birth in 1824 up to our own time, as he discovers from

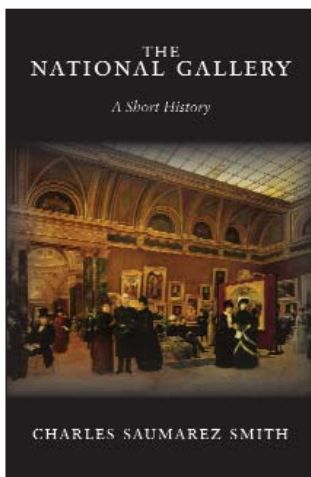
his research, there has been more than the degree of tension usual at the top of a great national institution. It is true that Sir Kenneth Clark, director from 1934-45, and probably the director best known

to the general public because of his later television appearances, enjoyed a particularly good relationship with his board of trustees (while being detested by nearly all of his staff). But the majority of the directors suffered from poor relations with the trustees – most notably Sir Edward Poynter (director from 1894-1904), Sir Charles Holroyd (1906-16), Sir Charles Holmes (1916-28) and Sir Augustus Daniel (1928-32). Daniel, despite having been a trustee, went so far as to resign in disgust from the directorship. Saumarez Smith's own experience fitted the

general pattern, and he frankly says that writing the book has provided him with some consolation. In years to come, one imagines, we shall be treated to a fuller, and no doubt juicier, account of his own bumpy ride as director.

The present book consists of a longish introduction about the origins and establishment of the gallery, followed by fifteen chapters of varying length, each one dedicated to a director and his regime, finishing with a fairly brief and understated *envoi* dealing mainly with the author's own period in office.

It began life when he was director, and was somewhat overtaken, he admits, by the publication in 2006 of Jonathan ▶



BOOK REVIEWS

Conlin's more substantial book, *The Nation's Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery*, based on a Cambridge PhD thesis. Conlin assisted Saumarez Smith with his research. However, neither of their books has been able to overcome the surprising lack of documentary evidence about the thinking of many of the directors. 'I would love to know more about what my predecessors thought and felt ... but their mind-set is frequently unexpectedly opaque and hard to identify behind the impersonal façade of official memoranda.'

If this suggests that Saumarez Smith's book is hard going in places, it is not, by virtue of its judicious selection of material and its artful brevity. Even the dullest of the directors, Sir Martin Davies (1968-74), comes alive. 'An austere bachelor, who always carried a string bag filled with library books and oranges', he was known as 'Dry Martini' to his colleagues. 'He was obviously totally out of sympathy with the mood of the late 1960s, setting out a course for the National Gallery that it should keep itself aloof from vulgar populism.'

Sir Charles Eastlake, director from 1843-47 and again from 1855-63, is clearly the author's favourite. He calls Eastlake a 'great hero' of the National Gallery. Not only did he make superb acquisitions of Italian Old Master paintings for the collections at advantageous prices, he was a fine scholar and writer, and he attracted just short of a million visitors in 1859 – a figure not exceeded until after the Second World War. Eastlake 'was the right person at the right moment to fortify the collections of the National Gallery with wide-ranging acquisitions, travelling during the late summer and autumn round Italy, staying in the *palazzi* of impoverished Italian nobles, and able to buy works of art with relative freedom.' Those were the days – which will surely never come again.

Clark, by contrast, merits more respect than affection from Saumarez Smith, who calls him 'one of the most remarkable' of the directors. His great wealth allowed Clark to fill his office with works of art from his private collection, and to keep his salary cheques uncashed in the drawers of his desk. But it is wrong, says his successor wisely, to regard Clark as too rich, successful and worldly to be a proper scholar – as many art historians do. Clark 'was extremely knowledgeable and had a good eye, as well as being a serious student of Leonardo and having much more serious academic qualifications than most of his predecessors.' In addition, for all his undoubted elitism, Clark presided over the transformation of the National Gallery during the dark days of the Second World War – through his introduction of concerts, cups of coffee and exhibitions of modern British art – 'into a place of mass democratic culture'.

Nonetheless, Clark embodied the tension at the heart of the gallery from its inception. Was it for the benefit of wealthy private collectors and art connoisseurs, or for the education of the general public's taste in art, or for both groups? The trustees, over the generations, have tended to favour the first view; the directors more often the second. Today, when only the generosity of private individuals and foundations will allow the further acquisition of fantastically expensive old masterpieces, yet the chief metric of a gallery's success is measured by its visitor numbers, the balancing act has become ever harder to maintain. No wonder the job of National Gallery director is so tricky. ■

Andrew Robinson is the author of The Art of Rabindranath Tagore, with a foreword by Satyajit Ray, and a visiting fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge.