



MICHAEL LEVEY

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Michael Vincent Levey

1927–2008

SIR MICHAEL LEVEY, who devoted his professional career to the National Gallery, became one of its most distinguished and effective directors. During his time in office (1973–87) many changes took place, and he was substantially responsible for modernising the Gallery in both its attitudes and services to the public. New programmes were introduced and new galleries were built, and, most important of all, a number of masterpieces were added to the collection. With amazing energy he also achieved a brilliant literary career, publishing widely on art, but also on music and literature, as well as several novels. He had an unusual intensity of emotion and conviction, which informed personal relationships and public polemics in every area he touched.

Born in Wimbledon on 8 June 1927, he was the only child of Otto Lemuel Herbert and Gladys Mary Levey. His father, of Irish descent, was a civil servant working in the Air Ministry. ('Few things were to irritate him more than the common assumption that all civil servants are timid, plodding, bureaucratic creatures, with no purpose but to paralyse the body politic.'¹) His mother came from a rural community in the North Riding of Yorkshire, very different from her husband's urban background. They met during the Great War, when he was nursed by her in hospital. They were disparate in character and temperament; he was open and jovial, she shy and withdrawn. Levey's close relationship with his parents and his childhood experiences were delightfully described in his memoir, *The Chapel is on Fire. Recollections of Growing Up* (London, 2000). One unsolved puzzle was that of the family name; his great grandfather, a

¹ Michael Levey, *The Chapel is on Fire* (London, 2000), p. 50.

musician, was registered at his death as O'Shaughnessy (Levey), having for uncertain reasons changed his name from the former to the latter, but by the time of his father the family name was simply Levey. Despite the Jewish sound to the name, and the presumption of Jewish blood, Levey's father was a fully committed Roman Catholic. Levey himself amusingly mused how it might have affected his subsequent career had he followed his youthful inclination to change his name back to O'Shaughnessy.

He was educated first at the Oratory Preparatory school, at that time housed in Caversham Park, a classical building on a hill overlooking the town of Reading, which was shared with the senior school, the Oratory. The headmaster of the junior school, Ronald Ritchings, known as Ronnie to the boys, and amusingly portrayed by Levey in his memoir, might have stepped from an Evelyn Waugh novel. Gin, as a stack of empty bottles outside his study testified, kept him fortified to cope with life with the boys. Sometimes things got out of hand. The present writer's uncle, returning his son and myself to the school after a day out, was startled to be greeted by the boys clattering down the stone stairs, crying out: 'Ronnie's drunk, Ronnie's drunk.' In his alcoholic haze the headmaster had forgotten the service known as Benediction had already taken place, and was now insisting that the school should return for a second session. My cousin and I fell in with the bacchic rout heading for the chapel. With his head in the air and his missal held even higher, 'Ronnie' led the singing with abandon. But redemption was at hand in the person of a new, pretty, young matron, much admired by the boys, including Levey, as he much later told the present writer. Yet the elder male took precedence in her affections; intimate *tête-à-têtes* in the headmaster's study after lights-out led eventually to matrimony and life lived happily ever after under a juniper tree.

Levey already had developed some of his later recognisable characteristics, which made him stand out from the other boys as unusual and exotic. The present writer retains a clear image of him, reclining over a baluster overlooking a large internal atrium, animatedly talking to another boy. The legs were nonchalantly stretched out behind him, the toe of one shoe resting on the heel of another; the already slightly tonsured head; the Baroque rolling eyes. Above all, one recalls the finely shaped hands, framed by brilliant white cuffs, dancing vivaciously to the tune of his lively thoughts.

In 1940 both senior and junior schools were removed from Caversham Park. The latter was closed down, while the senior school, which Levey had now entered, was accommodated for a year at Downside before set-

ting up again, with a very few boys, in a large house near Pangbourne. It was there that he spent the remainder of his school years. In 1946, faced with national service, he volunteered and was commissioned into the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. He was subsequently attached to the Royal Army Education Corps in Egypt, where he achieved the distinction of reaching the rank of acting major in a very short time. As he wrote many years later, 'I dearly loved all my Egyptian days'.² At Exeter College, Oxford, where he read English, he had the good fortune to be tutored by Nevill Coghill, 'humane in spirit, generous, cultivated, kindly and also shrewd'.³ He recognised Levey's exceptional ability and persuaded him to take his degree after two years; he got a first. When he accidentally left his unfinished B.Litt. thesis in a café in Oxford, he decided it was time to leave academe and face the real world. Coming down from Oxford he was undecided what to do, until a girlfriend asked for help in completing an application form for a vacant post of Assistant Keeper in the National Gallery in London. Immediately recognising the attractions of the job, he also put his name forward and was duly appointed an Assistant Keeper in 1951.

The situation in the Gallery, at that time under the directorship of Sir Philip Hendy, was so very different from that of today, when with a hugely increased staff there are specialists covering every field of activity, that it is worth quoting Levey's description of his early life there:

Only shortly before I went to the NG had Cecil (?) [Gould] ceased to hire and presumably fire the warders, and yes, the keeper staff (2DKs [Deputy Keepers] in Martin [Davies] and Neil [MacLaren], 2 AKs [Assistant Keepers], C and I) were responsible for the library, indexing the periodicals and giving each book its shelf number, as well as physically putting it away (all duties of mine, as lowest of the four), weekly visits to the sale-room, all general correspondence, photographic ordering (from Cooper's), generally dealing with the press and most dogsbody duties not financial. There was no real concept of public relations, for which no staff existed. It was *aut Hendy aut nihil*. He himself personally wrote the press notices, which usually dealt only with acquisitions. He had made a novel appointment in George Fox, creating an administrative post, responsible under him for the building and hence the security (hardly bothered with, before the Goya theft). Additionally, Neil had been in charge of the Conservation Dept., but already the restorers were up in arms over the inferiority that implied. [In addition, there was the Keeper, Willie Gibson, who came up from the country daily, and was not to be found in Trafalgar Square before 11 o'clock.]

² Letter to the present writer, 8 April 2007.

³ *The Chapel is on Fire*, p. 264.

Strange to reflect that we, the Keeper staff, wanted to be involved in running the Gallery, while Hendy wanted us to be—as he put it—in the library. Perhaps his view has prevailed?⁴

The disparate characters that made up the keeper staff were remarkably united when it came to dealing with the Director. Levey, a rebel against authority in his early years, particularly found this degree of exclusion from involvement in ‘his’ galleries unpalatable, but where Hendy was personally concerned he got the last laugh. In the year of his retirement, Philip Hendy, seeing a copy of *Fifty Works of English Literature We Could Do Without* (London, 1967: see below) on display in a bookshop in St Martin’s Lane, said to his companion, a fellow museum director, ‘That man will never be director of the National Gallery.’

At a New Year’s Eve party in 1953 he met Brigid Brophy, an up-and-coming novelist, the daughter of the writer John Brophy. Love was instantaneous and in six months they were married. He said of her: ‘Blondes appealed to me. I was struck by her blondness and the unmissable diamond-like quality of her mind.’⁵ She said of him: ‘He is a natural creature. He’s like a cat. I prefer animals to people, which is why I married Michael.’⁶ (Her novel, *Flesh* (1962), was said to have been inspired by their courtship.) Their union was loving but unconventional. They greatly rejoiced in sharing the experience of their blossoming writing careers, stimulating one another in the process. (Levey’s writing will be discussed in a separate section below.) They had many interests in common, obviously the arts, but they were also keen vegetarians with an in-built love and respect for animals. Although their marriage took place according to the Roman Catholic rites, Levey abandoned Catholicism shortly afterwards, and, to his father’s great chagrin, refused to have their daughter, Kate, baptised. The latter led to the break-up of his formerly close relationship with his father, as ‘unyielding, merciless almost, in the pressure he put upon me to bend to his wishes’.⁷

Both Leveys entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of the 1960s and became part of the public scene. They appeared on television quiz shows of a greater sophistication than anything to be seen today. As a writer he took up the pen wherever and whenever he was invited. He wrote general art criticism, for example, for *The Tatler*; he had opted for the pseudo-

⁴ Letter to present writer, 14 Nov. 1999.

⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Aug. 2000, p. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Louth Leader*, 12 July 2000.

nym, Rosetta Stone, but in those days no sex changes were allowed. The manner was extravagant. The clothing was flamboyant and trendy. He was not averse to personal publicity. A gossip column in a Sunday newspaper, devoting several paragraphs to colourful behaviour in the Old Brompton Road, where they lived, was headed 'I am so baroque in bed'. There was a much-remarked-on dichotomy between the life of a civil servant in Trafalgar Square and a follower of the swinging sixties.

Spreading his fame further, Levey was invited to give the prestigious Wrightsman lectures at the Metropolitan in New York in 1968. He did not go alone. The *bande* Levey, consisting of himself, stylishly dressed *à la mode*, his young secretary Robert, wearing military dress uniform, Brophy and Maureen Duffy, surprised conservative New York society. They for their part didn't much care for what they saw. A letter from New York gives the flavour—the reference is to a party given by Jacob Bean, the then Curator of Drawings at the Metropolitan Museum: 'We all (Maureen *and* Robert) dressed up in our swingiest clothes and went to a Beanfeast. It was square beyond Euclid's belief. I think we shattered the whole thing, but everyone remained stonily polite.'⁸ While in the United States he was grateful for a number of personal kindnesses and he greatly enjoyed the students at the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Subsequently he developed one of two friendships through an exchange of letters, but overall he was less than enchanted with the country. 'I'm afraid that for people like us it already seemed that American friendliness was not profoundly meant or really spontaneous. That is *one* reason why I disliked the country. I felt that one had only to experience the slightest difficulty or failure for the smiles to stop and the "friends" disappear.'⁹

The years were passing by and what one might call the scherzo of Levey's was over, as he grew in status and reputation both as a scholar and a writer. In 1968 he leap-frogged a more senior colleague, Cecil Gould, to become Keeper of the Gallery. It says much for both men that they were able to re-establish good collegial relations, and when Levey was appointed to the Directorship, he made sure that Gould succeeded him as Keeper. There was a change in his attitude towards authority and his behaviour became less extrovert, but the wit, charm and warmth were not diminished. His clothing remained distinctively personal if less flamboyant; he wore red shoes for one Trustees' meeting. A natural gravitas emerged, but, like his father, he deplored 'the pretentious and the

⁸ Letter to present writer, 3 Nov. 1968.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21 Nov. 1971.

pompous and . . . conventional social values'.¹⁰ He was exquisitely polite and considerate to everyone he had dealings with, whatever their station in life. The higher he rose the more truly egalitarian he became. Several people in secretarial or junior positions were quick to notice his spontaneous friendliness towards them. (It figures that after his death his local postwoman wrote a letter of condolence.) Yet underneath this carapace of courtesy lurked a will of iron, and occasionally, it has to be admitted, a whim of iron, as anyone who tried to cross him quickly discovered. Recalling his father's intransigence after Levey's apostasy, one can see the effects of inheritance at work. A more historical analogy would be to recall what was said of Peter Paul Rubens by a contemporary: 'his demands are like the laws of the Medes and Persians, which may not be altered'.¹¹

He was very sociable on a strictly informal basis. He rejected without a moment's hesitation any invitations to join a club. His flowing conversation was marked by sparkle and great charm of manner. With his sharp eye for human traits and foibles, his remarks about friends and colleagues were delightfully piquant, and generally warm if sometimes critical or satirical. The pompous, the self-regarding and the self-promoting, of which there were a good few in the art world, were, however, mercilessly pilloried. He was an accomplished mimic. Whereas his formal prose was carefully crafted, his very numerous letters offered free expression of a lively mind, full of wit and erudition lightly worn. Anthologised, his characterisations of friend and foe would offer an irresistible *Bonfire of the Vanities*. He often displayed a gift for parody. He, for example, brilliantly caught the unmistakable tone of Sir John Pope-Hennessy, at that time Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum:

Last week I received from J.P.H. the sort of phone call that one's mother used to put through to the grocer in the thirties: ½ lb of best quality sultanas by this afternoon, please. He omitted the last word but otherwise asked for a wrapped-up lecture on Ingres ('you have one, haven't you?') in October. Dumbfounded by my refusal. 'Some *other*(?) neo-classical subject (I'll take raisins, if you're out of sultanas) will do'. Silence on my declining; a determination to patronize another grocer in future . . . appalling service, uncooperative shopkeeper . . . don't know what the lower classes are coming to (answer: to revolution).¹²

¹⁰ *The Chapel is on Fire*, p. 43.

¹¹ Ed. W. Sainsbury, *Original Unpublished Papers . . . of Sir Peter Paul Rubens* (London, 1859), p. 53.

¹² Letter to the present writer, 13 May 1972.

Or describing of a characteristic conversation with Sir Oliver Millar, at that time Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures :

I must also mention that I lunched with Oliver whose tour of Scotland in the summer had taken in various *recherché*, difficult of access Scottish castles, etc. 'But, of course,' he kept saying, '*you* know Fergus McCluskie and his house, I'm sure, Michael'. By the end of the meal, otherwise agreeable, I had, truthfully, denied knowing about 20 lairds, 7 castles, 6 houses half-designed by Adam and a quantity of dowagers living on islands in the middle of lochs in or around the Trossachs. 'Just those people who have Balmoral', I feel like murmuring at the umpteenth enquiry.¹³

On his own clearly defined terms, he was a very warm friend, capable, as many will testify, of great generosity, both material and spiritual. His habit of paying charming compliments was usually genuinely meant. But he had a complex personality, one aspect of which was well caught by his colleague, Cecil Gould: 'He has a need of affection, and feels hurt if he does not receive it. What this means is that in keeping with his extreme intellectual subtlety he is far more sensitive than an ordinary person. His antennae miss nothing.'¹⁴ And, as he himself acknowledged, he could be difficult and extremely touchy to deal with. One area in which he was notably prickly was publishing, as many in the profession will ruefully testify. Demands for *prima donna* treatment and a substantial advance towards a book-project were as much about demonstrating a mark of respect towards the author as a natural desire for proper remuneration.

His likes and dislikes, usually very strongly expressed, were unpredictable, and could sometimes seem perverse. In literature, Dickens and Trollope were particular favourites, while the negative side can be seen in *Fifty Works of English Literature We Could Do Without* (see below). In music, Handel, Mozart above all, Bellini, Puccini and Tchaikovsky were very much 'in', whereas Bach, Beethoven and Verdi were very definitely 'out'. The dislike of Beethoven could lead to embarrassing moments as occurred at a dinner given to the Leveys by the Gombrichs at their home: '... after Brigid had indicated her opinion of Beethoven, we were—to all intents—asked to leave'.¹⁵ In art, eighteenth-century painting throughout Europe, above all Venetian, and German Renaissance painting, a rare

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16 Oct. 1984.

¹⁴ Cecil Gould, 'Michael Levey', *Apollo*, CXXXV (1986), p. 369.

¹⁵ 'Memorable indeed was our dinner in Briardale Gardens, where the grand piano loomed figuratively as well as physically, with much of the inspiring effect of a coffin. The intention in asking us was extremely kind, arising from the fact that I was succeeding him as Slade Prof at Cambridge, but it was a struggle to cope with the combination of high thinking and plain living.' Letter to the present writer, 4 Feb. 2000.

taste in Britain, were favourites. Rubens was admired but Rembrandt was definitely 'out', although he had no hesitation in buying a major painting by him (*Hendrickje Stoffels*) for the National Gallery.

In 1973, Levey was appointed, unusually without a public competition, Director of the National Gallery. The prime minister of the day, Edward Heath, had wanted Sir John Pope-Hennessy, then Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, but he was strongly opposed by the Chairman and Deputy-Chairman of the Trustees, Lord Robbins and Sir John Witt respectively, who, being intimately acquainted with their candidate, successfully promoted Levey.

He was a masterly and efficient administrator; any visitor from the mid-morning onwards would be confronted by a completely clear desk and an empty in-tray. He was treated by his staff with some awe but much affection and loyalty. He maintained a degree of formality in dealing with them, but was punctilious in keeping in close touch through regular, pre-arranged meetings with individual members; he did not, as a rule, drop in on them. Feeling that he himself had been deprived of responsibility as an Assistant-Keeper, he was generous in giving his younger colleagues more freedom of action. In opposition to Henty's behaviour, Levey believed that curators, in addition to writing catalogues, should be responsible 'for hanging and framing the pictures of the relevant national school, which is their speciality'.¹⁶ This did, however, lead to a lack of coherence in the overall appearance of the galleries. In general he was greatly opposed to business being conducted by committee and certainly never set one up unless forced to. He preferred to confront issues on a one-to-one basis. Often better informed and quicker in the uptake, he was more often than not able to defeat a single opponent. To the accusation that he was manipulative, he answered that no one who was not manipulative had any business in being in the kind of post he held.

His first day in office saw the commencement of the bitterly debated entrance charges, the brainchild of Lord Eccles working with the approval of the Prime Minister, Edward Heath. Fortunately the government fell almost immediately afterwards, and by March all charges had been promptly abolished by the incoming Labour administration. No less agreeably for the new Director the year marked the 150th anniversary of the Gallery's foundation. This was celebrated by an exhibition entitled *The Working of the National Gallery*, which was intended to break down some of the mystery of what went on behind the scenes by explaining the

¹⁶ *The Working of the National Gallery* (London, 1974), p. 12.

activities of the various specialised staff who worked there. It was Levey's opportunity to present his notion of the gallery's function. 'The primary intention still remains to serve the public by increasing the general stock of enjoyment and understanding. "The purpose of art is pleasure", no less a painter than Poussin declared; and perhaps his words should be written up in letters of gold over the entrance to the Gallery.'¹⁷ And perhaps, one may add, inscribed on Levey's mythical tombstone, since they encapsulated his own beliefs, whether relating to his activities in the Gallery or in his writings. And bearing the artist just cited in mind, one should mention what must have been his most painful moment in his career in Trafalgar Square when, in 1978, he was summoned from his office to be confronted with *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, savaged by a madman, and now lying in pieces on the floor.

In general Levey was very critical of the Trustee system, at least as far as it pertained to the Gallery, and often found himself frustrated by meddling, dithering and lack of enthusiasm. (Levey was never indecisive. His position on any given matter was carefully thought out and firmly adhered to.) Trustees, of varied backgrounds and interests, came and went, some more appreciative, supportive and knowledgeable than others. One Trustee at the end of Levey's reign stated unequivocally that 'his Trustees, past and present, love him'.¹⁸ If this love was not always reciprocated, his dissatisfaction was motivated more by having to suffer collective authoritarianism than by any personal feelings. At one time he spoke of

... mounting problems over launching a public appeal for the Titian. Most of them, in small admin. ways, have been passed to me as 'in charge' [*sic*] and I enjoy getting something done. Of course, it is hardly done before it is undone by the Trustees whose eye for detail equals Dürer's—without any concomitant way of utilising their obsession with small print, blotting paper and drawing pins. Please suppose a ten page memorandum follows on the deep evil of the Trustee system—not a whit (or Witt) improved by such personal friendliness as an individual Trustee may display.¹⁹

To a complaint about an unresponsive governing body of another institution, Levey replied:

I was vividly reminded too of those times when N.G. board wouldn't light up, even though a great painting for acquisition confronted them. They'd agree, but the *con amore* aspect was lacking. Sometimes the minutes had to be mildly

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁸ Recorded by Lord Rothschild in his farewell speech to Levey at the National Gallery on 18 Dec. 1986.

¹⁹ Letter to the present writer, 21 Nov. 1971.

faked: instead of: ‘the Board sat like puddings’, it had to be: ‘the Board enthusiastically welcomed the possibility outlined by the Director . . .’.²⁰

The relationship between the Chairman of the Trustees and the Director was, however, the most crucial for setting the overall tone in running the Gallery. During his period of office Levey had four very different incumbents, who coloured his life in different ways. He began with Sir Edward Playfair, a senior civil servant, ‘the most rational chairman I encountered at the Gallery’,²¹ with whom Levey had a very harmonious relationship. With the advent of Sir John Hale, it came to be perceived that the Director and an acquiescent Chairman were running the Gallery, while the other trustees were left with little to do but rubber-stamp their decisions. As a result, his relationship with his third Chairman, Lord Annan, began on a discordant note, with governors and governed frequently at loggerheads. There were painful disagreements over such matters as voluntary charges and domestic issues such as the colouring of the walls in the galleries. An unfortunate rehangng of the Spanish room by the curator responsible led regrettably, as far as the staff was concerned, to the establishment of a Trustees’ committee to oversee such work in future. Levey was particularly exacerbated by Noël Annan’s often will-o’-the-wisp behaviour, influenced by the last person he chanced to have spoken to.²² It was a particularly difficult period dealing with government over the plans for a new building on the area to the west of the Gallery, known as the Hampton site, which made the indecision and the lack of harmony between them the more frustrating. It unquestionably represented the nadir of his directorship. Levey’s last Chairman, Lord Rothschild, in his speech at Levey’s farewell dinner, gave a subtle reading of their relationship:

. . . no one could describe the Director as ‘homely’. I have to admit that I myself am a little bit afraid of him. He is uncomfortably perceptive and the high standards he sets himself he also expects from those he thinks should reach them

²⁰ Letter to the present writer, 28 Dec. 1992.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31 March 1999, which continued: ‘Some piquancy arose from the fact that Noël [Annan] and I, unknown to each other, contributed to his obituary in *The Independent*, and I tacitly contrasted Eddie’s admirable behaviour, total support for the Director, etc., with that of a certain other chairman.’

²² See above, n. 21. It was an indication how bitterly Levey felt about his treatment by Noël Annan, that he would not accept the latter’s presence at his farewell dinner. An invitation was only sent when it had been arranged for Annan to be otherwise engaged. But on his death, Levey wrote: ‘Thinking of him in personal rather than public or official NG terms, I found myself surprisingly saddened, recalling how much about his character was spirited, zestful, intelligent and generally amiable. Whatever he did, he never—in my experience—bore malice.’ Letter to the present writer, 1 March 2000.

too. You have to be careful, not only *what* you say, but how you say it. Michael is pinpoint accurate in his choice of words and needle sharp in answering not only the spoken but often and unnervingly, the *unspoken* thought. . . . he has restrained my excesses most effectively and I am eternally grateful. Michael had been warned that my instinct is to accelerate, but he knows how to apply the brakes.

If Levey felt that dealing with the Trustees was often an uphill struggle, it was nothing to the war he waged openly with the Government. One of his battles constantly fought was the latter's view that display was more important than acquisition, with the result that the purchasing grant, at that time ring-fenced, was constantly being cut. At the time of his retirement, Levey had no hesitation in stating publicly that 'the present position is indefensible. It is deeply shocking that someone bears the title of Minister for the Arts and does nothing for them. It makes one wonder whether the arts would be better without a minister. We used to have a Minister without Portfolio. We're in danger of having a Minister without the Arts.'²³ And in referring to one Minister *for* the Arts, Levey noted, on the occasion of a dinner, that the use of a preposition came perilously close to satire.

Levey left the Gallery a very different place from the time he took over, with visitor numbers hugely increased. His predecessor, Martin Davies, a great scholar, had not been a dynamic force as Director. Exhibitions had never been a major part of the Gallery's programme, but under Levey's leadership they were given a much higher profile and there were considerably more in number, varying from such general manifestations as *Art in 17th Century Holland* (1976), a pioneer exhibition in as much that it included sculpture and the decorative arts, *Venetian 17th Century Painting* (1979) and *Danish Painting: the Golden Age* (1984) to the series entitled *Painting in Focus*, which concentrated on a single masterpiece and which proved to be a great popular success. The staging of exhibitions was greatly helped by Levey's success in obtaining a large gift from the Sunley Foundation to build extra galleries for the purpose. But in this respect, it should be added, he was not a director in the modern mode, out with his 'begging-bowl' at social events in the evenings. The official day came to an end at 6 o'clock, and then another life began.

Two other new programmes, the *Artist's Eye*, in which a contemporary artist selected pictures from the permanent collection to be hung beside a selection of his own work, and the artist-in-residence scheme,

²³ *The Times*, 31 Dec. 1986, p. 10.

whereby a distinguished young painter worked in the Gallery for a six-month period, interacting with the general public, were in fact the brain-child of the then Head of Education, Alistair Smith, but were given all the support they needed by Levey, who saw them as a means of promoting an active response from the public.

His most wide-ranging innovation in the administration of the Gallery was the creation of a fully professional Education Department. Before, a number of lectures and guided tours had been offered by a small staff, but now there is a fully developed programme of the kind that is today mandatory for every museum. 'It consists of education officers, an audio-visual and video team, and full-time and part-time lecturers. The Department organises daily talks, tours and audio-visual programmes for adults, and a large range of children's events—quizzes, demonstrations, competitions and talks—designed to make the Collection accessible to the young.'²⁴

Within the building there was much activity in refurbishing and rehangng galleries, but he was not someone caught up in the movement for the restoration of historic interiors. For him it was the experience of the individual painting which counted. Aiming for a feeling of intimacy rather than for the overall space of a gallery, he introduced suspended ceilings, screens and changes of level, all of which have since been removed. The Gallery was increasingly involved with building projects both on the Hampton site to the west of the Gallery and to another site on the north. During his whole period of service Levey had to contend with the Public Services Agency, which had total control over all building work in the Gallery, including any work on the fabric or the decor. Release from their clutches only came in 1988 after his retirement. As Keeper he played a major part in the design of the Northern Extension which was opened during the second year of his directorship. In addition to new galleries, the Northern Extension provided much needed purpose-built accommodation for the Scientific and Education Departments (as well as the rapidly expanding Education service).

Far more contentious and difficult, demanding skill and energy in dealing with an obstructive Government, indecisive Trustees and very vocal public opinion, were the plans for the Hampton site. These had started with the abandonment, apart from the Northern Extension, of the William Kendall masterplan for Trafalgar Square (1964–5), followed by the rejection of the 'monstrous carbuncle' (so described by the Prince of

²⁴ *The National Gallery News*, Dec. 1986.

Wales) designed by Ahrends Burton Koralek, winner of the 1982 competition, and ending successfully with, thanks to the Sainsbury brothers' magnificent gift in 1985, the eventual construction of what is now known as the Sainsbury Wing. In 1986 the design was entrusted to Robert Venturi and his wife, Denise Scott Brown, shortly after which point Levey was able to hand over responsibility to his successor.

Ultimately his greatest achievement must be the addition of no less than fifty-five paintings to the collection, and will surely be the one for which he will be admired by posterity. (An exhibition of thirty-eight of his acquisitions, with a catalogue containing his personal remarks about each picture, was held at the time of his retirement.) These included a substantial number of masterpieces, such as Altdorfer's *Christ taking Leave of his Mother*; Rubens' *Samson and Delilah* ('Looking at these lovers, one is moved to murmur with the Chorus from Milton's *Samson Agonistes* "Yet beauty, though injurious, hath strange power"');²⁵ Van Dyck's *Balbi Children*; Claude's *Enchanted Castle*; Velázquez's *Immaculate Conception*; Stubbs' *Milbanke and Melbourne Families* ('If a single picture can crystallize all Stubbs' qualities, this one has good claim to do so');²⁶ and Monet's *Gare St Lazare*. One of his favourite acquisitions, Jacques-Louis David's beautiful portrait of *Jacobus Blauw*, the first work by the artist in the collection, involved him in extended negotiations in Paris and New York over a number of years before the French authorities agreed to its export. The picture has, *par excellence*, the brilliance and coolness masking an expression of deep feeling which was perhaps the hallmark of Levey's taste.²⁷ Yet his out-and-out favourite acquisition was a simple and straightforward picture; the *Still Life with Oranges and Walnuts* by Luis Meléndez, of which he wrote: 'We [note the plural] deliberately took some years considering before finally selecting our Meléndez—with almost as much care, perhaps, as the painter took in selecting the objects for one of his still-lives.'²⁸ With works by Klimt, Matisse and Picasso he brought the collections well into the twentieth century for the first time. Having so brilliantly enriched the collection, his appeal for more funds was answered, not by a parsimonious and uncaring Government, but by a private individual, not even a national of this country. In 1985 J. Paul Getty Jr

²⁵ National Gallery, London, *Director's Choice: Selected Acquisitions 1973–1986*, p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁷ This quintessentially eighteenth-century picture was very nicely balanced by his successor's acquisition in 1994 of a later, more Romantic portrait by the artist of the *Vicomtesse Vilain and her Daughter*.

²⁸ National Gallery, London, *Director's Choice: Selected Acquisitions 1973–1986*, p. 30.

made the munificent gift of £30 million, later increased to £50 million, to serve as an endowment fund, which has played a significant part in the Gallery's acquisitions ever since.

Although all those who worked with him or knew him were well aware of the great transformation he had effected in the Gallery, one can feel that his overall achievement has not been sufficiently recognised by the outside world. (In the first serious history of the National Gallery (*The Nation's Mantelpiece*, London, 2006), Jonathan Conlin does scant justice to Levey's directorship; totally negative in its references to the latter, it fails to acknowledge, amongst other things, his great success in making the Gallery not only visited but loved by a much wider public than previously.) Unfashionably for the time, Levey did not proclaim his achievements from the housetops. His successor, Neil MacGregor, who went on to make his own outstanding contribution, wrote of 'my early years at the National Gallery, where I lived very much in the world, and the ideals, that he had shaped. His unshakeable conviction that a great picture could speak to *everybody*, and that *everybody* must be allowed to see the collection, informed the whole National Gallery. It was a rich and happy inheritance for everybody in the house, and all that was required was to stay true to the course that he had set.'²⁹

Graced by the presence of the Prince of Wales and most of the British art world, one of the grandest dinners ever given in the National Gallery was held on 18 December 1986 to mark Levey's retirement after thirty-five years' service, thirteen spent as Director. After dinner the Chairman of the Trustees, Lord Rothschild, paid warm and generous tribute to, in his words, 'a truly great director, to be thought of in terms of an Eastlake' and 'an individual of quite extraordinary gifts and unique sensitivity'. Levey rose to reply, his stance with his head thrown back like that of an actor, speaking from a large scroll of paper held theatrically before him. In giving a memorable account of his stewardship, he spoke in the spirit of those words set to music by his beloved Mozart: 'Nehmt meinen Dank, ihr holden Gönner! So feurig, als mein Herz ihn spricht (Accept my thanks, kind patrons, with all the ardour that my heart feels).' The guests' response could surely have been heard the other side of Trafalgar Square.

At the conclusion of the dinner, Jacob Rothschild, in an act of kindness, drove him home to begin what Levey hoped would be a carefree new life totally given up to writing and looking after his wife, who some years earlier had been diagnosed as suffering from multiple sclerosis. But it

²⁹ Letter to the present writer, 2008, undated.

didn't work out like that, and there followed an unhappy period. He quickly became aware that he was facing an insurmountable problem of trying to cope with a patient increasingly under sentence from the debilitating effects, both mental and physical, of that incurable disease. Discussion of the situation between them became impossible as 'She has a deep block (possibly part of the illness) against facts that could disturb her.'³⁰ 'It did gradually lock her away from me, although I was there physically. It was taking its toll on me as well as of her. I think she felt angry at what it was doing to her.'³¹ Eventually he decided to leave London and move, at first for short periods and subsequently permanently, to the attractive small Lincolnshire town of Louth, where his daughter and family lived. His wife soon joined them, spending her remaining years, until her death in 1995, in a nursing home in the town. It was in Louth that he found the peace of mind he sought. Not long before his death, he praised 'its small town character, handsome architecture and pleasant people, who are friendly without [a very important point] being inquisitive'.³² A pamphlet, entitled *About Louth*, written by him with photographs by his daughter, was completed before his death.

For twenty years he lived in what was essentially a workman's cottage in Little Lane, his accommodation in due course expanded, because of his dislike of noise, to include the house next door, and, finally, the one beyond. Inside he created what one might see as a jewel box redolent of his exotic taste. The town is situated just to the north of the beautiful Wolds. The magnificent wide open skies of eastern England meant much to him. He was always happy to traverse the whole length of Somersby, but he was not a walker. For such exercise as he took, he preferred to wander through the town or stroll from a car to a small church, of which there are many beautiful and varied examples in the county, situated out in the fields. Not long after he moved, he wrote: 'Life has gone on here very pleasantly, though I am well aware of the "solitary" state in which I exist. Still, it's different from loneliness, which I am fortunately free from.'³³ And a year later: 'I am getting very "stuck" here, happily or contentedly, and I think the solitary state, modified of course by Kate & Co, is deepening into quite serious anti-socialness, friends excluded from that naturally.'³⁴ His much loved family—Kate and her partner Bill Nicholson,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 May 1990.

³¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Aug. 2000, p. 19.

³² *Louth Leader*, 13 Feb. 2008, p. 2.

³³ Letter to the present writer, 18 Sep. 1991.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 Nov. 1992.

and Levey's grandchildren Roland and Emily—were a constant source of pleasure. Yet he was very careful not to obtrude on their daily lives, he did not want to become an emotional burden to them. There was not, as one might expect from such a close-knit family, any casual dropping in to one house or the other; every proposed visit was prefaced by a telephone call to determine whether it was convenient or not. Staying with him was to engage in a never-ending conversation covering every topic under the sun, which progressed animatedly without a break from the time you descended for breakfast until the moment you said goodnight. And during those hours spent together the rest of the world faded into the background. He continued to communicate regularly with a select range of friends in lively letters. But several would-be correspondents were, not always for obvious reasons, asked, politely but firmly, to restrict their contact with him in future to an annual postcard.

Writing provided the intellectual *raison d'être* for his life; without a project in hand, he felt listless. For entertainment 'I read voraciously and ask little of a book except that it be stylishly written and entertaining.'³⁵ With his interest in human nature, biographies were especially favoured. But insatiable as his reading may have been, his innate reverence for the English language did not allow solecisms to pass without adverse comment. (He once sharply rebuked the present writer for his use of slang.) Recommended Barbara Skelton's two memoirs, *Tears before Bedtime* and *Weep no more*, he read them with much enjoyment but noted that 'she certainly is stylistically a mistress, a mistress of the floating participle, with some distinctly bizarre results, e.g., "Driving into the jungle, a tiger leapt on the car". Clever old tiger to be able to drive.'³⁶ Later on in his life: 'I've come to believe that music is now the art which means most to me—the one which will matter most at the end, when reading may be impossible and the visual arts have become inevitably remote. The direct assault on the emotions is what I enjoy, and I feel happy in the conviction that any simple funeral service for me will be largely a matter of music.'³⁷ He became increasingly reluctant to come to London. ('Over me, like ivy, reclusiveness has grown, and I am beginning to feel rather unpresentable, at least in a London environment.'³⁸) Eventually the trials of old age caught up with him. 'At present I have a problem. It's at once not grave but tedious. My hearing badly needs attention—to the extent that any-

³⁵ Letter to the present writer, 16 March 1997.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 Dec. 1993.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3 April 2002.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 March 2003.

thing can be done to improve it—and the audiologist I've been using is not at all satisfactory—in fact, she's lymphatic, lazy and largely uninterested except when it comes to selling equipment.³⁹ Fortunately he found better advice elsewhere. In addition he had several periods in hospital, suffering from a serious kidney problem.

The end to Levey's life came unexpectedly. Two days before Christmas 2008 a telephone call found him as sharp and lively as ever. As usual, the call was lengthy, but the agenda short. Like a jeweller with an uncut diamond, he liked to explore and polish every facet of the subject under discussion. On Christmas Eve he told his daughter that 'the sky was SO beautiful this morning, I just didn't know what to do about it'—as if he had a premonition. On Christmas morning, she telephoned him, and sensed there was something wrong. Hastening round with her partner, they found him standing, gazing out of the window, with, in her words, 'a serene smiling demeanour'. Removed to hospital his health quickly deteriorated, and it was over painlessly and peacefully three days after Christmas. Apart from stipulating cremation, he left no testamentary instructions about his funeral. He recognised that whatever took place should be the decision of those left behind to find what comfort they could. In a short ceremony attended only by family, he was cremated in a Mediterranean blue coffin enlivened with gold sparkles and surmounted by a bouquet of white lilies. The music? Mozart, of course—'Un aura amorosa' from *Così fan Tutte*. It was the simple, intimate occasion for which he would have wished. His ashes were scattered in Somersby churchyard.

Overall he was a brilliant and gifted person of great strength of character and purpose, who happily made the most of his talents.

Levey was knighted in 1981; he had been appointed LVO in 1965. In 1983 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. He had been elected an Honorary Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, in 1973, and in 1986 a Foreign Member of the Ateneo Veneto; in 1989 he was awarded an Hon. D.Litt. by Manchester University.

* * *

Living in an environment dedicated to writing, Levey and Brophy, would, notably in the 1960s and 1970s, both retire to their studies whenever there was a free moment. Such was the extent of their joint output, they created what one might irreverently call the Old Brompton Writing Factory. But their styles were very different. She wrote in clipped, finely

³⁹ Ibid., 28 June 2004.

chiselled sentences. His style was more expansive, more opulent. If Firbank was her model, his was Walter Pater. With an impeccable choice of words he conveyed a highly personal and sensuous appreciation of works of art. He wrote so felicitously that it would be easy to imagine that he did so without struggle. In fact his writing was carefully crafted. He himself said that ‘I have definitely decided that I shall haunt most horribly any person who dismisses all my hard labour over writing in such a phrase as “gifted with a fluent pen” . . . Quite as though it were a physical appendage.’⁴⁰

He more than paid his dues to his hero. *The Case of Walter Pater* (London, 1978) was a deeply felt biography dedicated to an unfairly neglected Victorian figure, who, as the blurb says, was ‘the instigator of a daringly hedonistic approach to the arts’. An essay prefacing a paperback edition of *Marius the Epicurean* (Harmondsworth, 1985) gave a good introduction to that little read novel today. Levey’s interest in Pater extended to more earthly matters, namely the erection of a plaque on his house in Broadmore Road in Oxford. After extensive research about the house in order to obtain permission to install, involving tenants and sub-tenants, it was eventually found to belong to Oxford University, and then began a saga which anyone who has ever been associated with that institution will know only too well.

The details I spare you but you can guess that another committee, meeting infrequently, had to consider the matter solemnly and reach a decision. I was none too optimistic but ventured to write beforehand to the Deputy Land Agent, declaring an interest to the extent of being willing to pay ‘towards’ the plaque (actually will have to cough up virtually the full, fortunately modest sum, being Michael Muggins). Very much a case of ‘Nunc dimittis’, as I never thought the matter would ever be resolved. If the [Walter Pater] Society cannot settle the wording, and of course there are differences of opinion, minor ones—to be fair—I shall scream loudly and stop the cheque.⁴¹

Fortunately perseverance and unacknowledged generosity paid off, and Levey was invited to make the address at the installation ceremony.

In addition to their quantity, what is remarkable about Levey’s writings is their wide-ranging subject matter. (As well as the books discussed here, there was a plethora of articles, often containing substantial scholarly contributions, and reviews on very varied topics.⁴²) Rather than pursue a

⁴⁰ Letter to the present writer, 3 March 2000.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 2002.

⁴² A bibliography of his principal writings on the visual arts up to 1986 is given in National Gallery, London, *Director’s Choice. Selected Acquisitions 1973–1986*, pp. 44–8.

subject already covered in greater depth, he more often than not preferred to write about a new one. When it was appropriate Levey was diligent as any leading scholar in undertaking original research, such as his archival enquiries into the lives of Walter Pater and Sir Thomas Lawrence, but for the most part his writing was concerned with interpreting works of art, in which he was a gifted practitioner. (In this respect he followed one of his predecessors, Kenneth Clark, later Lord Clark, of whom Levey wrote a penetrating, if not uncritical memoir for the British Academy. Although they were different in style and approach, there was one very strong bond between them; ‘Clark looked at paintings out of sheer pleasure’.⁴³) As a colleague wrote about Levey, ‘Almost any page of any of his writings will reveal insights which no one had shown before felicities both of thought and phrase.’⁴⁴ Moreover, he did not fear to step out of what was regarded, like it or not, his own field of specialisation—‘not wishing to be treated like a donkey, I deny having a field’⁴⁵—and write on anything that gave him real pleasure. Sometimes he was praised by the experts in the ‘foreign’ field, such as was the case with his wonderfully evocative book on *The World of Ottoman Art* (London, 1976);⁴⁶ on other occasions, as happened with his biography full of devotion, *The Life and Death of Mozart* (London, 1971), he was treated to such hostile reviews that it leads the detached observer to suspect tribal antagonism towards a writer from another discipline. It was some consolation that the popularity of the latter with the reading public called for a second edition (London, 1988), published in the same year as the second edition of his wife’s book on *Mozart as a Dramatist* (London, 1964), which had preceded his own book on the composer.

In the national museums, the curator and his catalogue used to be linked as closely as Linus with his blanket. It was their professional justification; it was their comfort when confronted by an unfriendly world. Some kept it with them the whole of their time in office, sighing, on retirement, that they would now at last have time to complete it. It goes without saying that some took unfinished fragments of catalogue entries to their graves. Others, however, such as Levey, got on with it. He swiftly

⁴³ M. Levey, ‘Kenneth Mackenzie Clark’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXX (1984), p. 389.

⁴⁴ Cecil Gould, ‘Michael Levey’, *Apollo*, CXXIV (1986), p. 369.

⁴⁵ Preface to *Rococo to Revolution* (London, 1966), p. 7.

⁴⁶ ‘I realised that the part of me that isn’t entirely Russian (by instinct if not, alas, nature) is Turkish. I am an Ottoman—though with no wish to be sat upon.’ Letter to the present writer, 17 July 2006.

completed for the National Gallery *The Italian Eighteenth Century School* (London, 1956), which was followed soon afterwards by *The German School* (London, 1959). In 1971 he expanded the former catalogue to cover *The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Italian Schools*. And as a generous *bonne bouche* in the field of painting catalogues, he compiled *The Later Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen* (London, 1964), which was later substantially revised (Cambridge, 1991).

By temperament Levey was glad to escape such detailed down-to-earth work, and write on a broader palate. His youthful masterpiece was *Painting in XVIII Century Venice* (London, 1959), described in the preface to the third revised edition (New Haven and London, 1994) as a 'book [which] originated in an enthusiasm, though one not uncritical, for a period of painting in Venice which had never been written about extensively in English'; the city was to remain his spiritual home and one he could evoke most magically. This was followed by a clever exercise in cantering stylishly and perceptively through the centuries, *A Concise History of Painting. From Giotto to Cézanne* (London, 1962), to be expanded in theme to *A History of Western Art* (London, 1968).

For the Penguin series on 'Style and Civilisation', he wrote *Early Renaissance* (Harmondsworth, 1967), and its sequel, *High Renaissance* (Harmondsworth, 1975). The former justly won the Hawthornden Prize, the first work of non-fiction to do so. Dealing with that elusive, much written-about subject, he perhaps produced his most distinguished study of the art and culture of an individual period. He crossed the frontiers of Europe with an astonishing grace and understanding. Following on from his appreciation of Florentine art and culture encapsulated within, he later wrote a monograph on the city, *Florence, a Portrait* (London, 1996), which was part-history, part-guide, part-appreciation and expanded on his love for the city.

For the much respected Pelican History of Art, he collaborated with Wend Graf Kalnein to produce *Art and Architecture of the Eighteenth Century in France* (Harmondsworth, 1972), in which Levey was responsible for the chapters on art. The latter was revised and considerably expanded under his sole authorship in *Painting and Sculpture in France 1700–1789* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1993). It not only demonstrated a sensuous understanding of painting—he had written one of his most perceptive articles on Watteau⁴⁷—but, less expectedly, a wonderful sensitivity

⁴⁷ 'The real theme of Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera*', *Burlington Magazine*, CIII (1961), pp. 180–5, in which he demonstrated that the party was leaving rather than setting out for the island.

towards the sculpture of the period. It must rank among his best achievements in art historical writing.

The lectures given as Slade Professor in Art at Cambridge and the Wrightsman Lectures delivered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York were published as *Rococo to Revolution. Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting* (London, 1966) and *Painting at Court* (New York, 1971) respectively. Both retained something of the flavour of the spoken word, which had been delivered with a touch of eloquent theatricality. As Slade Professor in Art at Oxford in 1994/5, he delivered a series of lectures on sixteenth-century Florentine painting, but unfortunately these were never published.

In the field of monographs on individual artists, his first was *Dürer* (London, 1964), which, although short, gave a good account of both the artist's personality and his art. *Giambattista Tiepolo. His Life and Art* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1986) which won the Banister Fletcher Prize for 1987, was a masterly interpretation of probably his favourite artist. *Sir Thomas Lawrence* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2005), his last publication, was devoted to an artist and man whom he had greatly admired over many years. It was a study developed from the memorable exhibition which he had arranged and catalogued at the National Portrait Gallery, London in 1979.

In the 1960s Cyril Connolly somewhat portentously published a list of what he regarded as the fifty greatest works in the English language.⁴⁸ While the chattering classes chattered about the selection, Levey, Brophy and a friend, Charles Osborne, countered, over the course of a Christmas holiday, with the writing of *Fifty Works of English Literature We Could Do Without* (London, 1967). These included such time-honoured icons as *Hamlet*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *The Warden* and *Jane Eyre*. It was, of course, a *jeu d'esprit*, but to the humourless and conventional it gave offence, as has already been mentioned earlier in this memoir.

A long-time urge to write fiction was finally gratified in the 1980s, when he could 'have a shot at being the creator, not the interpreter'.⁴⁹ *Tempting Fate* (London, 1982) was followed by *An Affair on the Appian Way* (London, 1984), and finally by *Men at Work* (London, 1989), but

⁴⁸ 'In appropriate mood of nostalgia [on reading a biography of Connolly] I recalled strolls in the Parks on Sundays at Oxford where we used to argue for and against Connolly—which might have pleased him. I know I felt vehemently, but can't remember in which direction'; letter to the present writer, 1 July 1998.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 31 Dec. 1986.

they did not attract the success he might have hoped for, and no further novels by him were published.

In this brief survey of his 'literary remains' one can conclude with the two instances in which he played the role of editor. *The Soul of the Eye: An Anthology of Painters and Painting* (London, 1990) was, with a title taken from Ruskin, a delightful and revealing testimony to the width of his reading; his choices were drawn from the time of Alberti in the fifteenth century to the present day. In his introduction, he spoke of 'plucking of some flowers for pleasure rather than the assembling of a botanical text-book. It is definitely not a selection of art-historical writing.' Having been a contributor to and great supporter of the magazine, it was highly appropriate that he should have been invited to select and introduce *The Burlington Magazine a Centenary Anthology* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2003).⁵⁰

At his death he was engaged in writing a biography of Ellen Terry, which met both his great interest in the history of the theatre and his fascination with a magnetic personality who had long intrigued him.

CHRISTOPHER WHITE

Fellow of the Academy

Note. In writing this memoir I have greatly benefited from discussions with Kate Levey, Neil MacGregor, Christopher Brown and Nicholas Penny. I am most grateful to all of them, as I am to Lord Rothschild for allowing me to quote from his farewell speech to Levey and to Elspeth Hector for providing me with information.

⁵⁰ For an amusing account of Levey's relationship with the magazine, see R. Shone, 'Michael Levey (1927–2008)', *Burlington Magazine*, CLI, 2009, pp. 319–20. Since this memoir was written, a brief account of Levey's directorship has been published in C. Saumarez Smith, *The National Gallery. A Short History*, London, 2009, pp. 146–52.