



MARTIN DAVIES

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1908–1975

MMARTIN DAVIES was born on 22 March 1908 in his parents' house in Cheyne Walk. He was the younger of the two sons of Ernest Davies, whose father had been the incumbent of Chelsea Old Church, and of Elizabeth Eleanor Taylor, whose father had been Rector of Settrington and a Canon of York. His mother was a niece of Jane and Anne Taylor, whose poems still delight us—and one of which, 'Dear me, what signifies a pin?' seems almost to presage the nature of Martin's own inquiring mind. His father, who had started as a boy as a clerk in the Stock Exchange, felt that he had made enough money to retire at the age of forty, and did so early in 1914. But the war overtook his plans for peaceful retirement, and he engaged in voluntary work, at first with refugees, and then with passport control. His abilities led him to be taken on to the establishment in 1920, and he retired at sixty in 1933 (with a C.B.E.) as Chief Inspector of Aliens at the Home Office. This civil service family background may have had some impact on Martin's own temperament, for he never found any difficulty over what many museum colleagues have felt as a restrictive attitude to the expression of strong feelings. At a very early age Martin must have decided to keep any such feelings entirely to himself. Oddly enough this did not in any way reduce his value as a human being.

He followed his brother Oliver (who has pursued classical studies with distinction) to Rugby, but was never happy there and was mistakenly directed into at first taking mathematics at Cambridge, where he went up to King's—but after a year he changed over to modern languages.

The history of art, which was then barely recognized in England as a serious subject, was less unfamiliar to the Davies household than to most. One of his mother's first cousins, Sir Lionel Cust (who had died in 1929) had actually made a profession of it and died Director of the National Portrait Gallery, and another, the somewhat eccentric Robert H. Hobart Cust, had made useful contributions to art historical literature. Martin travelled with his parents in Italy, France, and Spain, and developed a liking for pictures—in addition to what was

always a ruling passion for French Gothic architecture: and it was his father's brother, Randall Davies, who was one of the few serious collectors of early British drawings, who arranged for him to go to the National Gallery in 1932 as what was then called an 'attaché'. This was a voluntary job, but, about a year later an official vacancy was created for an assistant—they only became 'assistant keeperships' somewhat later—and Martin was appointed. He was to remain uninterruptedly in the service of the National Gallery for forty years, until his retirement in 1973.

The staff of the National Gallery was then composed of six people (including Martin). I had been the first junior assistant ever to be appointed (in 1930) and Martin was the second. Our duties were never at all closely defined, and, as does not happen today, everyone was constantly expected to deputize for everyone else. But it was understood that our main task, when we were not doing the accounts or answering the director's or the keeper's letters, was to 'revise' the catalogue. I cannot remember that anyone ever gave us the slightest guidance or suggestion about how this should be done, and it was left to our own devices to work out how we should proceed. I remember that Seymour de Ricci's *Description raisonnée des Peintures du Louvre*, of which only the volume dealing with the Italian and Spanish Schools ever appeared (1913), was more or less our model to begin with; and we had not gone very far beyond that ideal when I abandoned the National Gallery late in 1933. The development of the National Gallery Catalogues into a new kind of weapon of scholarship from these very modest beginnings was entirely Martin's own. He began his exploration with the Early Netherlandish and with the French Schools, and it should be remembered that he had to teach himself to become an art historian during these first years at the National Gallery. He had a logical and sifting mind, and it was the deplorably sloppy and slipshod character of much of the reading matter that he had to work through in pursuing his work as the compiler of the catalogues that led him to what was sometimes an almost laughably extreme scepticism—and caused him, after he had become Librarian at the National Gallery, sometimes to exclude books whose acquisition would really have been quite useful!

It would be inaccurate to pretend that he was at all happy under Clark's directorship—but his work was not seriously interfered with. At one time the director actually attempted to

get rid of him, but he was fortunately thwarted by the civil service. But the impact of the war changed all that. The director was translated to other fields of energy and the pictures were evacuated to the Manod Quarry in North Wales. Martin was the official who was more or less in sole charge, and a considerable number of the warding staff and the whole of the National Gallery's remarkable library were evacuated to Manod Quarry as well. This was an arrangement which old-fashioned persons would have described as a 'special providence'.

During those years when most British art historians were engaged in ephemeral activities involved in the 'war effort', Martin's task and duty were concerned solely with what he was temperamentally best fitted for—the conservation, study, and planning for what is certainly one of the greatest collections of pictures in the world. It was during these years that he and the collection may be said almost to have merged into a single personality. This may to some extent have attenuated his contact with the outside world, but it had always been in his nature to prefer some barrier to what he would have felt was too intimate a contact with others. At Manod Quarry he was himself alone in the happy position of the dons at the end of *Zuleika Dobson*, when all the undergraduates had drowned themselves. He could devote himself uninterruptedly to the study and cataloguing of the National Gallery pictures: and this he did. It was during these years that he developed his *persona* as 'the compiler'—a term by which he often describes himself in the published catalogues. This *persona* has very much a literary style of its own. It was carefully devised to convey the maximum amount of factual information and to leave the least possible ground for misunderstanding: and it was equally concerned with making plain just what was not known for certain—even if this was asserted to be true in most of the available literature. It is a style admirably suited to its specific aims and carefully devised for the compiler's purposes—but it cannot readily be adapted to less concentrated discourse, and Martin's prose style in his occasional learned articles tends to be odd, and, in his single monograph, on Roger van der Weyden (1972), it is downright bizarre.

It is these volumes of the National Gallery Catalogues, which began to come out after the war (and which have been periodically revised) which weighed most in Martin Davies's election (in 1966) as a Fellow of the British Academy. They are: *Early Netherlandish School* (1945: revised 1955, and again in 1968);

French School (1946: revised 1957); *British School* (1946: revised 1959); *The Earlier Italian Schools* (1951: revised 1961). Not only are these the most substantial achievement in the detailed cataloguing of a remarkable variety of schools in a great collection by a single scholar—in the present age of specialization the range of research involved is quite astonishing: they have established models for later volumes by the National Gallery's now much enlarged staff, on the later Italian, Dutch, Flemish, and Spanish Schools, so that the National Gallery in London is now the best catalogued of all the great public picture galleries in the world; and they have profoundly affected the tradition of seriously cataloguing public picture collections throughout the world. They set new standards in scholarship, and in candour (in the matter both of attributions and condition); and they also set a good example in that, in the pursuit of a healthy scepticism, they are sometimes, and quite legitimately, funny. They are not, of course, without occasional imperfections of method—the entry on the *Madonna of the Rocks*, for instance, is altogether too cumbersome: and the application of the full Davies method to third-rate pictures in terrible condition—as sometimes happens in the latest catalogue to which he contributed, the entries for the Italian pictures in the Catalogue of Worcester, Massachusetts (1974)—can achieve a high level of absurdity. But they have initiated one of the great revolutions in the curatorial treatment of public collections in our time.

The official National Gallery Catalogues are examples of the achievement of a single scholar. The method lends itself to expansion in the hands of a team of scientific experts and Davies himself played a large part in demonstrating this in the three volumes of the *Corpus de la peinture des Anciens Pays-Bas meridionaux au quinzième siècle* concerned with the London National Gallery for which he was responsible in 1953, 1954, and 1970.

Davies was appointed Deputy Keeper in 1947 and Keeper in 1960, and it was not until then that his remarkable gift as an administrator was brought into play. He was in fact a natural administrator and enjoyed exercising his talent within the curious framework of civil service procedure. In 1963 he was also an extremely efficient chairman of the General Committee of the Reform Club, which was the nearest he allowed to himself as a home in his later years.

By a miracle of good sense—since he had always cultivated

a very low profile and avoided the cynosures of the art world—he was appointed Director of the National Gallery in 1968, at the age of sixty, and he was able to end his public career at the head of the great institution that he had served so well. He was knighted in 1972 and retired in 1973. From the point of view of the National Gallery he was the most distinguished and valuable official and Director since the time of Sir Charles Eastlake, with whose spirit (though not with whose public *persona*) he had much in common. An admirable account of his personality at the National Gallery is given by his successor, Mr. Michael Levey, in the *Burlington Magazine* for November 1975, pp. 729–31.

His period of retirement was very brief. He left the Gallery in October 1973, and the lung cancer of which he died made itself felt the following year. He was still making plans for the future when he went into hospital and died on 7 March 1975.

His personality was delightful to those who were his friends and his colleagues, and his unobtrusive kindness extended to everyone for whom he was in any way responsible. Although he avoided it, he inspired affection, and his devotion to the National Gallery was crowned by his making it his residuary legatee, 'the income to be used to buy books, manuscripts, and photographs for the library, picture frames, furniture, furnishings, fittings or sculpture, and grants for staff to travel to widen their knowledge of the history of art'—all the things for which he knew that public funds would always be insufficient.

During his too few years as Director, he was instrumental in acquiring, among other splendid pictures, two works of quite superlative importance, Titian's *Death of Actaeon*, and that astonishing discovery, Roger van der Weyden's *S. Ivo(?)*, which looks like a medieval representation of Martin himself.

Note: I am indebted to Professor Oliver Davies of the Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg, for family information: and also to a pamphlet published by the National Gallery to commemorate an evening meeting held on 15 April 1975, which was rather a joyous occasion in honour of Martin Davies. This also has a bibliography of his published work.

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