



HOWARD COLVIN

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## Howard Montagu Colvin 1919–2007

SIR HOWARD COLVIN, doyen of English architectural historians, died of a heart attack in his sleep at the age of 88 on 27 December 2007, 24 hours after completing the index to the fourth edition of his monumental *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*. He was born on 15 October 1919 in suburban Sidcup, the elder son of Montagu Colvin (1888–1938). His father—ultimately of Shetland descent—was an engineer’s buyer for Vickers and a commercial dealer in postage stamps. His mother, Winnie Randle (1888–1944), had worked as a governess with a French family; she was apparently reading *Howard’s End* at the time of her son’s birth, hence the choice of Christian name. The family home was not happy.<sup>1</sup> Young Colvin seems to have welcomed his chance of escape. In 1933 he won a scholarship to Trent College, near Nottingham. There the ethos of the place was sporting rather than academic. But the future architectural historian was inspired by one charismatic schoolmaster, Michael Morgan (1911–2003). Together they visited local churches, and travelled abroad to Rouen, Caen and Lisieux. At the age of thirteen young Colvin had already found ruins to explore—Cleeve Abbey, Somerset; Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire—as well as architectural books to buy from

<sup>1</sup>After the early death of his younger brother Arthur, Colvin’s parents rarely spoke: they communicated by means of written messages. His father died in 1938; his mother—‘tiny, nervous and bird-like’—in 1944: in the Coroner’s careful words, ‘from delayed shock following a fall from a window’. For these and other family details, see an obituary by Richard Hewlings in *Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, Newsletter*, 94 (2008), 1–4.

Woore's bookstall in Derby market.<sup>2</sup> While still a sixth-former, he conducted digs at Dale Abbey, Derbyshire; and these findings formed the basis of his first historical paper, published in the *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal* for 1938, at the age of 19.<sup>3</sup> That was the year his father died. An uncle, Sydney Colvin (a manager with Hambros Bank), paid for his remaining education, sending him—on the advice of Sir Mortimer Wheeler—to read History at University College London (UCL): preparation, perhaps, for a career in medieval archaeology.

Colvin's principal tutor at UCL was a young medievalist from the Channel Islands, John Le Patourel. Their interests coincided: topography, archaeology, church architecture and—less obviously—the technicalities of medieval administration. There were other influences too: a paper on medieval institutions taught by H. A. Cronne; a Special Subject on Anglo-Saxon archaeology taught by Mortimer Wheeler at the London Museum; and a dig at Clarendon Palace near Salisbury, begun by Tancred Borenius, and directed by John Charlton.<sup>4</sup> When UCL was partly evacuated to Aberystwyth in 1939, Colvin encountered a more distant mentor as well: a Manchester-trained medievalist, R. F. Treharne. But as a stripling lecturer, fresh from Oxford training under Goronwy Edwards, Maurice Powicke and V. H. Galbraith, it was Le Patourel who was in some ways the more obvious role model. His love of buildings, his sense of place, his reticence: 'what he left unsaid could be as significant as what he said'.<sup>5</sup> And when Le Patourel departed for Leeds in 1945, he left a vacancy into which Colvin naturally stepped immediately after the end of the war.

Colvin's wartime experience could hardly have been predicted. A First in Modern History from London University did not prevent his being drafted, in 1940, into dish-washing duties at RAF Wilmslow. From this he was rescued by the Deputy Under-Secretary for Air, Sir John Abraham:

<sup>2</sup> See Colvin's memoir of Summerson in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 90 (1995), note on p. 467. Best known among rugby players at Trent in Colvin's time was Prince Alexander Obolensky. For an account of the school in those years, see E. W. Swanton in *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 12 Nov. 1937, 359–60. In the later 1960s the school buildings formed a setting for the controversial film, *If*.

<sup>3</sup> In all he published ten articles about Dale Abbey in the *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal* between 1939 and 1944.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 11 Jan. 2008 (T. Beaumont James).

<sup>5</sup> See the memoir by J. C. Holt in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 71 (1985), 589. A number of Colvin's student essays survive. For example, on 'Elizabethan Puritanism' he wrote: 'Religious austerities may be admirable enough in the individual, and political ambition is a common characteristic of mankind, but when the two coincide in one person the result is insufferable, and when a number of such persons combine to form an organised movement, it is little short of tyrannical' (Colvin MSS, St John's College Oxford: c.1939–40).

his daughter just happened to have been a friendly secretary at UCL.<sup>6</sup> Transferred to aerial photography, Pilot Officer Colvin was now to be trained in photographic analysis at Medmenham, Bucks., under the direction of Glyn Daniel. Stuart Piggott was a fellow student, John Piper a nearby resident. Then out he went to Malta, where he worked for two years under siege conditions, interpreting aerial photographs from the depths of a bomb-proof tunnel. ‘To watch’, he later recalled ‘—as we did almost daily throughout the first half of 1942—sixty or seventy Stukas diving through the massed fire of more than one hundred [anti-aircraft] guns was to experience both the Awful and the Sublime.’<sup>7</sup> Then the siege lifted. From summer 1943 he was back again at Medmenham; in autumn 1946 he returned to Bloomsbury as an Assistant Lecturer in History.

In the 1940s the UCL History Department was dominated by the Tudor historian, J. E. (later Sir John) Neale.<sup>8</sup> He was not an easy man to please, but Colvin seems to have managed it. Crucially, he was also able to begin informal postgraduate research under Le Patourel’s former mentor, Galbraith, who had learned his trade as an Assistant Keeper at the Public Record Office (PRO) between 1921 and 1928. After teaching at Balliol and—as a visiting lecturer—at UCL, he had moved in 1937 to a chair in Edinburgh. But in 1944 he returned to London as Director of the Institute of Historical Research (IHR). In London, he lived in Woburn Square. Among his close colleagues, and closer neighbours, was Harold Edgeworth Butler, Professor of Latin and Public Orator at London University. And Professor Butler had a daughter who was Colvin’s close contemporary at UCL: Christina.

When Colvin married Christina Butler in 1943—while still a serviceman, soon after his return from Malta: they had been engaged since 1941—he married into the academic purple.<sup>9</sup> Her maternal grandfather was Professor A. F. Pollard, Neale’s predecessor at UCL, and the founder of the IHR. Her paternal grandfather had been a Fellow of Oriel and two of her aunts were Fellows of St Anne’s. Through her father she was

<sup>6</sup>Hewlings, *Society of Architectural Historians*.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted by Sir Keith Thomas, at ‘A Public Memorial Gathering’, 19 April 2008 (for a note of those attending, see *The Times*, 21 April 2008).

<sup>8</sup>See the memoir by J. Hurstfield in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 63 (1977), 403–21.

<sup>9</sup>They married in Leatherhead, Surrey, and lived first (1943–5) at Spinfield Lodge, a rented *cottage orné* near Marlow, while Christina worked at the Air Ministry nearby. In Oxford they lived at 14 Walton Street (1948–9) and 28 Museum Road (until 1968), before settling into 50 Plantation Road (from 1969). The Butlers owned a retreat at Birdlip, Glos., between 1882 and 1997 (*ex inf.* David Butler).

descended from Maria Edgeworth, and from a veritable host of distinguished Butlers. The Butler dynasty—Anglo-Irish in origin—included two Masters of Trinity, and one of Pembroke, Cambridge; two headmasters of Harrow; the first headmaster of Haileybury; a clutch of Indian administrators; and one major politician: R. A. Butler, Christina's second cousin. Nor was that the end of it. Her brother, David Butler, became a Fellow at Nuffield; her sister-in-law, Marilyn Butler, became eventually Rector of Exeter College, Oxford. When Howard and Christina themselves transferred to Oxford in 1948 few of their friends can have been surprised. Even so, it took a sequence of coincidences to bring it about. When Galbraith had first taken up his Fellowship at Balliol in 1928, it was Reginald Lane Poole whom he succeeded as Reader in Diplomatic. Now twenty years later, with his son A. L. Poole newly elected President of St John's and Galbraith newly appointed Regius Professor of Modern History, a vacancy providentially appeared. Galbraith and the younger Poole were close friends and occupied adjacent houses in the Cotswolds, not too far from the Butler family retreat at Birdlip. In the summer of 1948, on Galbraith's recommendation, Colvin was duly elected in Poole's place, with the title of Senior Research Fellow at St John's. He would stay there for the rest of his life, first as Senior Research Fellow (1948–57), then as Tutorial Fellow (1957–77) and Librarian (1950–84), then as Reader (1965–87) and Supernumerary Fellow (1978–87), and finally as Emeritus Fellow (1987–2007).

Through Galbraith, Colvin had absorbed the methodology of the Manchester School—as practised by James Tait, T. F. Tout and Maurice Powicke—particularly its reverence for medieval administrative records. It was through Galbraith that he became familiar with the archival riches of the PRO: Chancery, Exchequer, and Household. From Galbraith too came a secularist mindset, an irreverence for received opinion, and a wry sense of certainty reinforced by solitary hours at the coal face, wrestling with records in Chancery Lane. But in personality master and pupil were poles apart. Colvin never matched Galbraith's knockabout style. Even the formidable K. B. McFarlane thought the Colvinian manner dry.<sup>10</sup> Dry, certainly, were his tutorials in medieval history between 1948 and 1965. But out of this phase came a stream of research including one famous article on 'Gothic survival and Gothick revival';<sup>11</sup> and one major book,

<sup>10</sup> K. B. McFarlane, *Letters to Friends, 1940–1966*, ed. G. L. Harriss (Oxford, 1997), 224: 9 Nov. 1964.

<sup>11</sup> *Architectural Review*, 104 (1948), 91–8. Reprinted with additions in Colvin, *Essays in English Architectural History* (New Haven, CT, 1999), pp. 217–44.

*The White Canons in England* (Oxford, 1951). This later work was a documented study of the Premonstratensian order. Essentially an exercise in institutional history, it managed to exclude the order's architectural setting altogether.<sup>12</sup>

In 1948 architectural history at Oxford existed only in the agreeable form of W. A. ('Billy') Pantin of Oriel, Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology and History.<sup>13</sup> Pantin belonged to a persistent Oxford tradition dating back to the days of H. E. Salter, J. H. Parker and E. A. Freeman; ultimately it descended from Anthony Wood. But of post-medieval architectural history in the University at this time there was nothing. The Slade Lectures of 1933–6 by H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, for example, were already fading from memory.<sup>14</sup> And Parker's plea in 1877 for the establishment of Oxford studies in architectural history had been completely forgotten.<sup>15</sup> Nor was art history—apart from classical archaeology—much better represented. In fact the story of abortive attempts to establish history of art at Oxford is a long and sorry one.<sup>16</sup> In 1945, however, thanks to Powicke—Galbraith's predecessor as Regius Professor—a learned Viennese refugee named Otto Pächt had been appointed Lecturer in the History of Medieval Art. But few came to his lectures on the illuminated manuscripts of the Bodleian, and over a period of twenty years he had just two postgraduate pupils.<sup>17</sup> It would not be until 1955 that Oxford elected its first established Professor in the History of Art: Edgar Wind. That might be presumed to

<sup>12</sup> Sir Alfred Clapham had already dealt with this in *Archaeologia*, 73 (1922–3), 116–46. One related piece of research on 'Cistercian depopulation', appeared in *Archaeological News Letter*, 4, no. 9 (1952), 129–31; another, on a Cistercian house in Oxford, appeared as 'The building of St Bernard's College, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 24 (1960), 37–48. Colvin believed 'history and archaeology' need never be 'at loggerheads'; but added, '*pace* Mr. [M. W.] Beresford I still think that the historian should put his questions to the archaeologist *before* and not after the digging has begun' (Colvin MSS, St John's College, Oxford, 25 March 1952).

<sup>13</sup> See the memoir by D. Knowles in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1974), 450–51. For Pantin on Salter, see his memoir in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 40 (1954), 220–39.

<sup>14</sup> H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, *English Architecture since the Regency* (London, 1953). See also his 'Oxford Buildings Criticised', *Oxoniensia*, xvii–xviii (1952–3), 200–15. In the 1920s there had been plans for a School of Architecture at Oxford (*Oxford Magazine*, 25 Jan. 1923, 158–61, 174, 177–8; 7 June 1928, 598).

<sup>15</sup> Selborne Commission: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1881, lvi, 376–7; letter of 20 Dec. 1877.

<sup>16</sup> A tale of 'obstruction, ignorance, sheer jealousy, arrogance' (J. Boardman, in *Oxford Magazine*, 8th week, Michaelmas term, 2004, 13). One of the earliest to call for such a study was a kinsman of Christina Colvin, the Revd George Butler of Exeter College, in *Oxford Essays* (1856), 188–92.

<sup>17</sup> John Beckwith and J. J. G. Alexander, both later elected FBA. See Alexander's memoir of Pächt, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1991), 464–5. Pächt's magnum opus was a catalogue of illuminated MSS in the Bodleian (3 vols., 1966–73). He was elected FBA in 1956.

have initiated a change of direction. As Panofsky's first pupil—and Warburg's personal assistant—Wind was more than qualified to introduce the University to a totally foreign discipline: the iconographical analysis of Renaissance art.<sup>18</sup> But he was not an institutional success. His lectures filled the Playhouse; but his subject remained firmly excluded from the Schools. Wind never mastered—perhaps he never intended to master—the nuances of Oxford politics. It was not until the late 1960s, under Wind's successor, Francis Haskell, that the Oxford Modern History syllabus incorporated a Special Subject in French nineteenth-century art criticism; and it would not be until 2004—fifty years after its first established art-historical chair; 135 years after Ruskin's appointment as Slade Professor—that Oxford set up a separate Honour School in the History of Art. Meanwhile, Pächt, who had been passed over when Wind was appointed, returned to Vienna in 1963, leaving vacant the Readership to which he had been promoted just one year previously. Thanks to Wind's intervention, Colvin was promptly appointed in his place, with designated responsibility for architectural history. Up to that point the only instruction available in, for example, Baroque or Palladian Architecture had been Sir John Summerson's Slade Lectures of 1958–9.

As Reader in Architectural History (1965–87), Colvin was able at last to establish his own Special Subject: 'English Architectural History, 1660–1720'. The training of a new species of scholar had begun. At a different time, and in different hands, this newly installed discipline might well have supplied a pedagogic bridge between the conceptual framework of Continental art theory and the empirical traditions of English historiography. It was not to be. Colvin remained in strictly empirical mode. He belonged to an earlier discipline altogether: the school of William Camden and Richard Gough. That was his inheritance; and he would, as he put it, 'stick to his last'. If he ever entertained the slightest doubt about the matter, it was surely blanked out by the two mighty projects which continued to preoccupy all his thinking: the *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* and *The History of the King's Works*.

It seems that the idea of a biographical dictionary of architects first occurred to Colvin during his undergraduate years at UCL. His co-adjutor was to have been a fellow student named David Young. It must have been in Bloomsbury that they first encountered one truly transformative work: Wyatt Papworth's *Dictionary of Architecture*, published in eleven

<sup>18</sup>On Wind see B. Thomas, 'Wind, Edgar Marcel (1900–1971)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/49706/>> accessed 31 March 2010.

double-column folio volumes for the Architectural Publication Society between 1853 and 1892.<sup>19</sup> This encyclopaedic reference book incorporated, besides much topographical and technological material, many biographies of architects, together with referenced listings of their works. It was, and remains, an astonishing publication. Sir John Summerson rightly considered Papworth—one of his predecessors at the Soane Museum—‘the father of modern architectural scholarship’.<sup>20</sup> Early in the war, Colvin managed to buy a copy, at a knockdown price, from Messrs. Batsford’s stock. He was even able to continue studying it—and the pages of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural treatises—during his two years’ service in Malta. The Garrison Officers’ library at Valetta had been well stocked for the use of military engineers. It turned out to be unexpectedly welcoming. In this way the dictionary began to grow. Of course, Papworth needed much updating, to say nothing of primary documentation. Still, here was the skeleton of Colvin’s first dictionary. By the time he arrived in Oxford that skeleton had become a framework to which could be applied the disciplines he had learned at the hands of Le Patourel and Galbraith. In 1949, thanks partly to Summerson, a contract was signed with the publisher ‘Jock’ Murray. Five years later the great work first saw the light of day.

When the *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects, 1660–1840* appeared in 1954 it revolutionised the study of architectural history. For the first time historic English architecture had been subjected to the rigour of documentary analysis in biographical form. ‘In the vast concourse of architectural/historical literature in modern times,’ Summerson wrote, ‘Colvin’s *Dictionary* stands out a mile. It is not really possible for a writer on the period to put pen to paper without having Colvin within reach. It is in the highest degree improbable that Colvin’s work will ever be superseded.’<sup>21</sup> A quarter of a century later, Colvin superseded himself. In the

<sup>19</sup> Colvin recalled the genesis of his *Dictionary* in a speech at the British Academy on 29 Sept. 1995, printed in his *Essays in English Architectural History* (New Haven, CT, 1999), pp. 292–7.

<sup>20</sup> Soane Museum MSS, quoted by H. Dorey in ‘Papworth, Wyatt Angelicus van Sandau (1822–1894)’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21257/>> accessed 31 March 2010. For a summary by Arthur Cates of the progress of Papworth’s *Dictionary*—90 contributors; 18,456 articles—see vol. VIII (1892), Preface.

<sup>21</sup> Publisher’s advertisement. The book sold for 70 shillings. The second edition was priced at £30; the third at £50; the fourth at £75. Summerson hoped that Colvin would follow the *Dictionary* with a history of the architectural profession: ‘As a layman and as an historian, penetrative and zealous, he could do so with clinical accuracy, measuring arrogance and ignorance (the profession’s besetting sins through the centuries) in terms of the architect’s eternal social predicament—gentleman or lackey, artist or business man, genius or charlatan’ (*New Statesman*, 25 Sept. 1954, 369).



second edition—*A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, published in 1978, again by John Murray—he vastly expanded his empire, chronologically and topographically: back into the age of Inigo Jones; outwards into Scotland and Wales. Scotland in particular posed a major challenge. From the start he could rely in this new area on several enthusiastic supporters.<sup>22</sup> They supplied much of the logistical back up. But, as always, the research was his own. Here at last, as the preface explained, was ‘that hard foundation of ascertainable fact without which no historical edifice can safely be erected’; an operation involving a once and for all clearance of ‘the undergrowth of irresponsible attribution’. Altogether this second edition must have doubled the number of buildings listed. A thousand pages of laconic prose; upwards of one million words, close-packed in double columns; a hand-crafted index which might almost have been designed to tax the patience of a computer: no wonder its publication was followed by the award of the Wolfson Prize for History. And there was more to come. In 1995 appeared the third edition, published this time by Yale University Press, enlarged, improved, corrected, updated; a miracle of clarity and concision. Irish architects were still excluded; but this third edition incorporated definitive identifications—particularly as regards Wales—for some 2,000 additional buildings. And then in 2008 came the finale: a fourth edition, complete with a 113-page, triple-column index; the whole text finally proofread just weeks before its author’s death. The scale of the operation had been stupendous: more than sixty years of infrastructural research in archives, record offices and libraries all over the United Kingdom. Here was a model work of reference, researched and written single-handedly, without any form of public subsidy. Pre-computer, pre-typewriter even, the whole project was conducted on multitudinous slips of paper, handwritten in minuscule lettering. It is difficult to think that there will ever be anything quite like it again. Certainly there exists no similarly comprehensive and detailed account of the architects of any other country.

Meanwhile, what of *The King’s Works*? In 1951—spurred on by the sense of national renewal associated with the Festival of Britain—the British Government, or rather its Office of Works, had decided to sponsor a mammoth history of royal building, from King Alfred to Queen Victoria, based on the unique and at that time largely unexplored collection of

<sup>22</sup>In particular, Ian Dunbar, Kitty Craft, Colin McWilliam, Alistair Rowan, Alan Tait and David Walker. For the Scottish context see an obituary of Colvin by Ian Campbell, in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 138 (2008), 1–5.

governmental building accounts in the Public Record Office. Not for thirty years would this daunting project come to fruition: six massive volumes, spaciously published by HMSO; hundreds of plates and plans, thousands of pages, millions of words.<sup>23</sup> These books are not just topographical catalogues. They are not limited to architectural description. They are not primarily concerned with the economics of building, nor with its technology, nor with aesthetic judgement and the theory of design, although all those factors are inevitably involved. What they are concerned with is architecture as an expression of government. They deal with the buildings—civil and religious, military and domestic, public and private—sponsored by the British monarchy and its governmental agents. And they explain the economic, administrative and human machinery that made those buildings possible. In other words, *The History of the King's Works* is a pioneering study in architectural politics. All the great monuments of state are there: from Windsor Castle to the British Museum; from King's College Chapel, Cambridge and Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster, to Whitehall, Hampton Court, the Tower of London, Somerset House, Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. These six heroic volumes—the adjective is carefully chosen—are uniquely detailed, even in the annals of British topography. When the medieval sections appeared their editor was quickly elevated to the status of FBA (1963) and CBE (1964); a CVO (1983) naturally followed the completion of the series in 1982. Of course the programme did not proceed without acrimony: there were, after all, a dozen contributors. But, against all the odds, it was finished. *The History of the King's Works* has no equal as the record of a nation's architectural governance. Colvin was general editor, major contributor and *fons et origo* of the whole project. He personally wrote at least one-third of the total work. Even its spin-off, his edition of the *Building Accounts of Henry III* (Oxford, 1971), was appropriately massive. Without his persistence the whole thing would never have been begun. Without his expertise it could never have been written. Without his

<sup>23</sup>H. M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works* (London): Vols. I and II, *The Middle Ages* (1963; reprinted 1976), by H. M. Colvin, A. J. Taylor and R. Allen Brown; Vol. III, *1485–1660, Part I* (1975), by H. M. Colvin, D. R. Ransome and J. Summerson; Vol. IV, *1485–1660, Part II* (1982), by M. Biddle, H. M. Colvin, J. R. Hale, N. Merriman and J. Summerson; Vol. V, *1660–1782* (1972), by H. M. Colvin, J. Mordaunt Crook, K. Downes and J. Newman; Vol. VI, *1782–1851* (1973), by J. Mordaunt Crook and M. H. Port. For a summary of the whole project see J. Mordaunt Crook, 'The King's Works. A thousand years of British building', in C. Peterson (ed.), *Building Early America* (Radnor, PA, 1976), pp. 3–22. A reprinted edition of all six volumes is currently in preparation.

tenacity it would certainly never have seen the light of day. During those years his hair grew white, his pink cheeks pale. It was a performance of extraordinary endurance. When it was all over, he was heard to mutter: 'I don't think we missed much.'

All this might be thought to have been more than enough for one career. But in 1991 Colvin entered quite a different field with *Architecture and the After-Life* (New Haven, CT). Its theme was the history of funerary architecture in western Europe from the megalithic tombs of prehistory to the public cemeteries of the nineteenth century. This involved a multiple range of subjects: the psychology of patronage and the nature of belief as well as the planning of worship and the imagery of style. From the 'Treasury of Atreus' at Mycenae to the mausolea of Halicarnassus and Hadrian; from Ravenna to St Denis; from Bramante's Tempietto in Rome and the Superga near Turin to the Vasa chapel at Cracow and the *gravkor* of Charles X in Stockholm: Colvin's coverage in this volume is indeed impressive. No doubt it lacks the dense documentation of his writing on English architecture. But its disparate collection of secondary material is handled with anthropological skill.

Such far-flung studies by no means ended Colvin's involvement with topics closer to hand. Articles were now less frequent. But he was still breaking new ground, notably on the buildings of Oxford: *Unbuilt Oxford* (New Haven, CT, 1983), *Canterbury Quadrangle* (Oxford, 1988), and *All Souls* (Oxford; based on the Chichele Lectures of 1986, co-authored in 1989). Finally he produced three fitting tributes to one particular friend and mentor: new editions of Summerson's *Inigo Jones* (New Haven, CT, 2000) and *Georgian London* (New Haven, CT, 2001), as well as an obituary of their author for the British Academy's *Proceedings*.<sup>24</sup> These, however, were lesser works. Towards the end—a shadow of himself; hunched, shrunken, beady-eyed—he remained totally focused on the completion of his *Dictionary*.

How did he manage so much? Colvin tended to work alone, but he liked to travel in company. As allies between the late 1940s and the late 1970s, he had three particular companions: Rupert Gunnis, Lawrence Stone and John Harris. With the first two, he acted as navigator; but with the last of these he took on the role of chauffeur. Unusually among architectural historians, he could drive and drive well: he actually knew how a

<sup>24</sup> *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 90 (1995), 467–95. For a full Colvin bibliography, see J. Newman (ed.), *Architectural History*, 27 (1984); and Colvin, *Essays in English Architectural History*, pp. 298–302.

motorcar worked. Gunnis was the classic dilettante: rich, eccentric, exuberant. His *Dictionary of British Sculptors, 1660–1851* (London, 1953; 1968) was in some ways a parallel enterprise to Colvin's *Dictionary*, though lacking the scope and rigour of its counterpart.<sup>25</sup> Stone was very different: an Oxford social historian, impulsive, hyperactive, already on the brink of transatlantic fame, delving in those early years into aristocratic landholding and medieval English sculpture.<sup>26</sup> Harris was different again, and even more strikingly *sui generis*: a self-taught topographical scholar, based at the RIBA, who single-handedly transformed the study of English architectural drawings.<sup>27</sup> After Stone's departure for America in 1963 and Gunnis's death in 1965, Harris became collaborator in chief. Later on, in the 1980s and 1990s, Colvin travelled Europe more extensively, most often with one younger colleague from St John's, the modern political historian Ross McKibbin.<sup>28</sup> All four responded in different ways to Colvin's quirky sense of the absurd; each softened his tendency towards an inaccessible, ivory-tower existence.

Outside that ivory tower, Colvin's career in public service was by no means negligible. He spent fourteen years on the Historic Buildings Council for England (1970–84); thirteen years on the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England (1963–76) and twelve years on its Scottish counterpart (1977–89); as well as seven years on the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (1981–8) and ten years on the Royal Fine Art Commission (1962–72). And when the Historic Buildings Council was remodelled in 1984 as the English Heritage Advisory Committee, he stayed on until retirement age in 1989. The award of a Knighthood in 1995 was by no means an excessive prize for so many years of scholarship and public service. Among conservationists—never an easy breed—he generally managed to remain cool and undogmatic. He preferred to join the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (President, 1979–81), rather than belong to specific preservation groups. Even so, he was occasionally drawn into polemical battles. Calke Abbey,

<sup>25</sup>T. Knox, 'Gunnis, Rupert Forbes (1899–1965)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/74649/>> accessed 31 March 2010.

<sup>26</sup>C. S. L. Davies, 'Stone, Lawrence (1919–1999)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/72453/>> accessed 31 March 2010; Colvin MSS, St John's College, Oxford: Framlingham Tombs.

<sup>27</sup>See his idiosyncratic memoirs, *No Voice from the Hall* (London, 1998), and *Echoing Voices* (London, 2002).

<sup>28</sup>McKibbin, address at a 'Funeral Meeting for family, College and close friends only', 8 Jan. 2008.

Derbyshire, was one notable victory.<sup>29</sup> Thanks to his efforts, house and contents were 'saved for the nation'. Unconsciously almost, he became a public figure. In fact, with the expansion of public interest in historic buildings and landscapes, with the growth of a national and even international environmental conscience, he could hardly avoid assuming a pivotal role. Without his exacting standards, the burgeoning heritage industry would have lacked much of its momentum; it would certainly have lost a good deal of its intellectual validity.

There was also a very practical side to much of this committee work. Oxford colleges, for example, have throughout history acted as patrons of building. At St John's, Colvin took responsibility for all matters relating to fabric and decoration. His taste was decisive when Michael Powers of the Architects' Co-Partnership was chosen for the convincingly modern 'bee-hive building' (1958–61); and again when Sir Richard MacCormac was commissioned to design the equally convincing postmodern Garden Quadrangle (1991–4). In 1980 he himself designed the Sadler Room, a new senior common room, modestly conceived but detailed with more than a hint of Soane.<sup>30</sup> Such a practical talent may well have surprised one or two of his colleagues. But it was not the first time he had acted as an architect. In 1969, at 50 Plantation Road, Oxford, he designed for himself a compact, two-storey town house ingeniously planned around his private library of 10,000 books. Here accommodation was not so much spartan as plainly practical. The sitting room, for instance, had neither chimney piece nor television; it was dominated by shelves from floor to ceiling, and these in turn were designed to double as parallel book-stacks.<sup>31</sup> Each room was small: neither Howard nor Christina stood much over five feet tall. But every wall, every surface, reflected aspects of their own taste: water-colours by John Piper; engravings by Eric Gill; lustre ware by Passenger

<sup>29</sup>H. M. Colvin, *Calke Abbey, Derbyshire* (London, 1985).

<sup>30</sup>For Colvin's views on modern design, see K. Powell, in *Architect's Journal*, 2 Nov. 1995.

<sup>31</sup>For photos, see R. Hewlings, 'A scholar's lair', *Country Life*, 22 Oct. 2008, 60–3. Probate amounted to £2,204,212 net. There were 75 specific legacies to friends (mostly drawings or books). Otherwise the entire estate went to immediate family, apart from a total of £2,500 to eight named preservation or architectural societies. Colvin's papers were mostly divided between St John's College, Oxford and the RIBA Drawings Collection (Victoria and Albert Museum). They are currently uncatalogued. Drawings, sculpture, furniture etc. were mostly sold at Mallams of Oxford (25 June 2008); and again by Abbott and Holder (list 391, October 2008); books at Bloomsbury Auctions (25 Sept. 2008) and again by Hugh Pagan Ltd (catalogue lx, Nov. 2008). The long lease of 50 Plantation Road (still owned by St John's) was disposed of on 28 Aug. 2008 for £1,250,000. See also J. Saumarez Smith, in *The Book Collector*, Spring, 2009.

or de Morgan; sculptural fragments from churches or country houses; etchings by Piranesi and Axel Haig.

For a man who began as an administrative historian, Colvin had a curious distaste for the practice of administration. He didn't go as far as Galbraith—'I loathe ADMINISTRATION with every fibre of my being'<sup>32</sup>—but he did steer clear of academic committees. This disengagement from university politics was not without consequences. He would never see an established lectureship, still less a chair, in architectural history at Oxford. 'When he retired in 1987', Sir Keith Thomas recalled, '[St John's] made him an Emeritus Fellow. [But] the Oxford History Faculty marked the occasion by abolishing his Readership.'<sup>33</sup> In many ways that was not unexpected. All along, his instinct was for research rather than teaching. When he declined formal invitations to speak—there were many such refusals—he always excused himself as 'a working historian'. And there were no half measures. He did mellow with age. But in his earlier years as a tutor he could certainly be chilly; as a lecturer austere; as a reviewer Olympian; as an examiner merciless. Still, his learning was seldom pedantic. In one celebrated dispute with R. B. Pugh, editor of the *Victoria County History*, he came down firmly on the side of pragmatism: he believed footnotes were a means to an end, not a formulaic process.<sup>34</sup> In private—he actually had a life outside the library—he did know how to relax. He delighted in a little gentle gardening with Christina; he enjoyed driving in the Cotswolds with his sons, Lawrence and Hugh, when they were young; and he actually revelled in certain aspects of domesticity. Even as a widower in his eighties, he could still bake his own bread. He never travelled without the *Good Food Guide*. There was a softer side to so much scholarship. His smile could melt the heart even of the Inspectress of Sir John Soane's Museum.

Sometimes it seems almost as if Colvin invented architectural history. That is not quite true. His role lay in the creation of the subject as a university discipline. He lacked Summerson's eloquence; he lacked Pevsner's extraordinary range and entrepreneurial skill. But without

<sup>32</sup>Galbraith to Sir Charles Clay, quoted in R. W. Southern's memoir 'Vivian Hunter Galbraith (1889–1976)', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 64 (1978), 422.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas, Memorial Address, 19 April 2008.

<sup>34</sup>See C. R. J. Currie 'Pugh, Ralph Bernard (1910–1982)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/73257/>> accessed 31 March 2010. This dispute had one useful result: Colvin's model history of Deddington, Oxon, appeared as a separate publication in 1963. For this edition of one thousand copies he received 25 guineas. (Colvin MSS, St John's College, Oxford: Deddington).

Colvin, architectural history in Britain would never have achieved academic credibility. Before he began work in the 1940s, much of what passed for design attribution was based on little more than legend. His labours put paid to all that. As an academic subject, architectural history relates to the history of architecture in much the same way as economic history relates to the history of economics. The term itself—‘architectural history’—first became current in the 1850s, thanks to the work of Robert Willis of Cambridge. In 1875, in an obituary of Willis, E. A. Freeman noted that his analyses of buildings depended on their mastery of ‘two sources of knowledge, each of which is imperfect without the other ... Here was the written record; there were the stones of which the record spoke. Each in his hand explained the other.’<sup>35</sup> In other words, architectural history rested on a twin evidential base: structure and text combined. Archaeology was to be unravelled by the testimony of words and signals: memoranda and designs; building accounts, drawings, correspondence. Add to those elements the conceptual framework of art-historical theory—fusing archaeology and documentation; fabric, text, context and sub-text—and the intellectual rationale of the subject is complete.<sup>36</sup> Colvin never aspired to total explanation. For him, documentation was more than enough for a single lifetime. But he did sense the totality of the enterprise on which he was embarked. He might have smiled at Pugin’s sonorous dictum: ‘the history of architecture is the history of the world’.<sup>37</sup> He would not have disdained its global implications.

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<sup>35</sup> Freeman’s obituary of Willis (*Saturday Review*, 39 (1875), 341.

<sup>36</sup> J. Mordaunt Crook, ‘Architecture and history’, *Architectural History*, 27 (1984), 555–78 (Inaugural Lecture, Bedford College, University of London, 12 May 1983).

<sup>37</sup> A. W. Pugin, *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture* (London, 1843), p. 4.