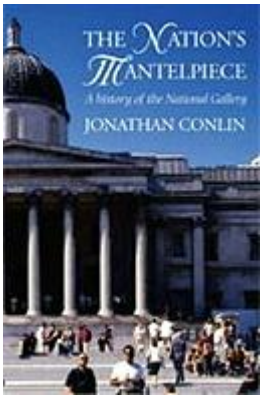
How to strike oil in Trafalgar Square

At long last, the National Gallery, one of our very finest collections, gets what it deserves - a scrupulously researched and entertaining history in Jonathan Conlin's The Nation's Mantelpiece



The Nation's Mantelpiece: A History of the National Gallery
by Jonathan Conlin Pallas

Athene £24.95, pp556

It is an odd aspect of the National Gallery that, unlike nearly all the other major national museums and galleries, it has no published history other than a little and long out-of-print booklet that was written by Charles Holmes, a former director, and Charles Collins Baker to celebrate its centenary in 1924. So whereas the British Museum has a history by Sir David Wilson, a recent director, and the Tate Gallery has a history by Frances Spalding, a scholar of 20th-century art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum has any number of histories, including an extremely readable narrative by Anthony Burton, the National Gallery has presented itself as history-less, with only two portrait busts by the front door - one of George Agar-Ellis, later Baron Dover and a founding trustee, and the other of the late Sir Paul Getty, the gallery's greatest benefactor.

Now the lacuna has been filled by Jonathan Conlin, a young and highly intelligent, if occasionally slightly sardonic, historian, who has studied all the relevant documentation, not just in the National Gallery's archives, but also in the Public Record Office and private archives, including those of Lord Crawford and Balcarres, whose father and grandfather were both trustees, and of Noel Annan, another trustee, some of whose correspondence with art historian Michael Levey was supposed to have been burned, but survives for all to read in King's College, Cambridge.

Conlin has decided, very sensibly, not to write an official history burdened by a sense of narrative duty and concentrating on the roll-call of former directors, but, instead, provides a sharp and thematic historical analysis as to how the National Gallery came into being, what political influences have shaped its development and its relationship to the rhetoric of national heritage.

Conlin's approach means that, instead of appearing as a repository of great works of art, the National Gallery is presented as a vehicle of public education. There is scarcely a page that does not have a new insight or some new information about the people involved in the gallery's history, particularly politicians and trustees, and much of it is wry and entertaining, including a completely deadpan account of how it was nearly turned into a roundabout in the late Sixties.

Occasionally, I lament the fact that Conlin provides relatively little about the process of acquisition of the works of art that lie at the core of the collection. But there is a whole chapter describing the character of the collection by looking at its changing boundaries, beginning with the shift from collecting Rubens, Poussin and Claude to more sacred art, the acquisition of Dutch paintings from Robert Peel's collection in 1871, and the disgraceful neglect of the Impressionists until Samuel Courtauld's gift of a special fund for modern acquisitions in 1924 (it is astonishing how much of the modern collection was collected between 1924 and 1926). Publisher Pallas Athene has very shrewdly packaged it with a wealth of illustrations, to make the book look as if it is more about art than it is.

Two things emerge from the National Gallery's history. The first is how haphazard has been the interest of Parliament in promoting culture. Until 1824, government had shirked the duty of funding a public art gallery, leaving it, instead, to private initiative and it was only an accidental combination of circumstances, including the interest of Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister, that led to its foundation, made possible by the repayment of a war loan to the Austrian government.

During the 1830s, there was an endlessly cheese-paring attitude to the construction of an appropriate building to house it and it was only for a brief period during the late 1850s that the National Gallery had remotely adequate funds to build the collection, thanks to an aggressive programme of acquisitions, mostly in Italy.

It is not only the current government that has promoted the arts in terms of the so-called creative industries: this was what appealed to the government in the 1830s - that the National Gallery would do wonders for Britain's design and manufactures.

The second thing that emerges from the gallery's history is the extent to which it has always been viewed as an instrument of public education. Agar-Ellis, one of the founders, had a strong sense of didactic mission, of bringing art to the poor in such a way as to improve their lives. In the 1830s, the Radicals viewed public museums as a useful alternative to pubs. As Joseph Brotherton said in promoting the 1845 Museums Act: 'It was much better to cultivate a taste for the arts at the public expense than to raise a large amount of taxation for the prevention and punishment of crime.' Indeed, one of the more brilliant (and difficult) chapters is the epilogue in which Conlin relates Neil MacGregor's belief in the National Gallery's Christian purposes to the ideas of Charles Kingsley in the late 1840s.

What one realises is that government has always viewed the National Gallery as something other than what it is: it has always been viewed instrumentally as a place to improve public taste, rather than as space for the study and contemplation of paintings.

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