

OBITUARY

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner 1902-1983

The death of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner on 18th August 1983 deprived this country of the man who did more than any other to reveal the great richness of English historic architecture. And this despite the fact that he was German by birth and devoted much of his polemical energy to defending the very Modern Movement which was to do such damage to our ancient towns in the two decades after the War.

Pevsner was born on 30th January 1902 in Leipzig, the son of Hugo Pevsner. He married, as he came of age, in 1923, his bride being Karola (known as Lola) Kurlbaum who bore him two sons and a daughter and passed away in 1963. From St. Thomas's School, Leipzig the young Nikolaus passed successively through four great German universities, those of his home town, Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt. Armed with a doctorate, he became Assistant Keeper at the Dresden Gallery in 1924 where he was to stay for four years. Whilst there he prepared his first book, on the Baroque architecture of Leipzig. For someone with an interest in the Baroque, Dresden offered a heady brew. He found its Frauenkirche of 1722-43 "irresistible" and was to describe its destruction as one of the worst architectural losses of the Second World War. From Dresden he went to Gottingen again for four years. By 1933-34 however life in Germany for anyone who, like Pevsner was Jewish, intellectual and cosmopolitan was becoming intolerable. He had already visited England in 1930 and he now made it his permanent home. The months spent in trying to extract his wife and children must have been agonizing ones but they were eventually able to join him. Whereas other refugees like Walter Gropius, whom Pevsner was to champion to within a whisker of idolatry, found England inhospitable and swiftly passed on to America, this young German did receive a warmer reception. At the Courtauld Institute, largely staffed by other expatriate Germans, he gave classes in Italian. However it was at Birmingham that his career was able to grow. He was there offered a research post by Professor Sargant Florence which resulted in his 1937 book "An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England". Birmingham, so important in the history of the Arts and Crafts Movement as well as being the heartland of English manufacturing endeavour was a very appropriate setting for Pevsner's research. The Enquiry followed on swiftly from his "Pioneers of the Modern Movement, from William Morris to Gropius" published in 1936, a short book but one of considerable importance not just because of its crusading nature but because it sought to show that modern, functional, "honest" design had as one of its main progenitors, the self same man, William Morris, who founded the conservation movement and placed such store

by the high quality of craftsmanship. Both books of course showed Pevsner as the historian seeking to draw lessons from the past for the enlightenment of his own generation. Not for him the fastness of an ivory tower. Indeed Birmingham offered him the chance to exchange the power of the pen for that of a chequebook for there he met the late Sir Gordon Russell who was pioneering the design of modern but graceful furniture in the self same Cotswolds whither C.R. Ashbee and other giants of the Arts and Crafts Movement had migrated from Birmingham. Pevsner became a furniture buyer for Sir Gordon and it is hard to resist speculation on how his then very unpolished command of the English language and what must have seemed rather Teutonic earnestness went down with the furniture makers.

The early years in England could only have been a period of considerable uncertainty. The temptation to leave his adopted country in the face of the threatened German invasion, created a dilemma from which there was no easy answer. Once war was declared it seemed at one point that the English Government would make up its mind for him. As a German, he was interned on the outbreak of war in a camp at Huyton, a suburb of Liverpool. Sir James Richards relates in his autobiography "Memoirs of an Unjust Fella" (Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1980) that Pevsner was about to be shipped to Australia when he was able to step in and rescue him. However the indignity but relative safety of a camp was succeeded by the real dangers of life in London where he worked as a fire watcher at Birkbeck College, then housed in Breams Building off Chancery Lane. When Richards entered into war service in 1942 Pevsner succeeded him at "The Architectural Review" which he edited almost single-handed until the end of the War, being immune as an alien from enlistment. The journalistic demands posed by deadlines compounded by the shortages and uncertainties of war obviously did not dampen either his optimism or his legendary energy. For in these years he also wrote his magisterial "Outline of European Architecture" of 1943, a good deal of it actually written during fire watching duties. Richards was not the only momentous friendship forged in these difficult years. Sir James had recommended Pevsner as a suitable author of the "Outline" to (Sir) Allen Lane, the founder and proprietor of Penguin Books. Such was the esteem in which Lane held Pevsner that he appointed him editor of the King Penguin Series in 1941 in succession to Elizabeth Senior, who was killed in an air raid. J.E. Morpurgo in his biography of Lane, "King Penguin" of 1979 (Hutchinson) claims that Pevsner aroused in this generally dominating man "a sense of awe" allowing him to fulfil a longstanding wish to be a creative patron in the field of architecture, a profession which he had always claimed in his

youth that he wished to pursue. As well as writing the "Outline" Pevsner was thus engaged editing books as various as Leonard Woolley's "Ur: The First Phase", selections from Ackermann's "Oxford" and "Cambridge" and various works on natural history. No wonder that Sir Nikolaus was to refer to himself as "a general practitioner", so polymathic was his range. With the close of the War academic respectability was secured by the Slade Professorship of Fine Arts at Cambridge in 1949 and a Fellowship at St. John's College in 1950. But again the ivory towers did not appeal. Indeed the association with Allen Lane was to be lifelong and from it came the enterprise which will make the name of Pevsner immortal.

This is the "Buildings of England" series under which Pevsner, generally at the rate of two counties a year, visited and recorded 30,000 buildings and had, up to the time of his death, produced 48 volumes, the first one appearing in 1951. The idea for this one man Royal Commission came to him in part through the example of Herr Dehio who had embarked on a similar enterprise in parts of Germany between 1905 and 1912 although obvious similarities in kind are overwhelmed by differences in degree. Logistical difficulties were posed by the fact that he needed a chauffeur, a service performed in the early years by his wife and secretary who were praised in the Middlesex volume (1951) for having mastered "an obstreperous vintage 1932 car". There were financial hiccups too; indeed the series might have failed altogether but for the generosity of the Leverhulme Trust. Fears about his longevity also prompted the search for co-authors who wrote, or helped to write, eleven of the later volumes. Now established as a permanent part of Penguin Books the series is being expanded into Scotland, Ulster and Wales, one volume for each country (Lothian, N.W. Ulster and Powys) having been published so far (as the Pevsner notes have become an archive of considerable value they are being placed on microfiche by Penguins, the originals going to the National Monuments Record). Even whilst engaged on the Buildings of England enterprise, Pevsner also took on the editorship of the 35 volume Pelican History of Art (concurrently from 1953). How did he find the time?

Sir Nikolaus's role as a conservationist grew very largely from the "Buildings of England". He was one of the founders of the Victorian Society in 1958 and his tolerance of Victorian design grew the more he saw of it. He could still castigate 19th century buildings as "wilful" or "naughty" but when he came across masterpieces like Bodley's great church at Pendlebury or Edmund Scott's St. Bartholomew's at Brighton praise could be unstinting (although his interventions in Town Planning were not exclusively conservationist: he was prepared to speak on behalf of

Erno Goldfinger's plan to redevelop the southern section of Bloomsbury Square). As a member of the Royal Fine Arts Commission and the National Council of Art and Design he was also asked to pass judgment on purely modern buildings. (He was one of the very few non-architects to be awarded the Royal Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects.)

Pevsner's last years were rather overshadowed by controversy provoked by the important work of an ex-pupil, Dr. David Watkin, entitled "Morality and Architecture", the whole of Part Three of which was devoted to a rather relentless debunking of the philosophical bases of Pevsner's perspective. Summarized simply, Pevsner shared the views of many German historians especially Hegel that particular periods are best explained by reference to the *zeitgeist* or "spirit of the age". Indeed he believed that a genius was not the artist who transcended the *zeitgeist* but the one who chose to express it in its most powerful form. This collectivist view inevitably meant that he downgraded the importance of the individual and it is telling in this respect that his huge range of books did not include one biography (unless one includes a book on Wren in Italian). Where others might regard Neo-Georgian architecture of the 1930's, for example, as merely old-fashioned he regarded it as dangerously reactionary even deviant and he did state in the first issue of the "Pioneers of Modern Design" that the style of the Modern Movement should be "totalitarian". For him the most praiseworthy buildings were those which were the most "dateless". The strongly determinist and intolerant views of his early works certainly invited reproval, exacerbated as they could be by crudities of generalization and a certain humourlessness.

Nevertheless the image of Pevsner as the indefatigable scholar and polemicist, up at 5, to bed at 11, must be rounded by remembrance of his deep humanity. He could be very witty (there is a lovely irony in his dubbing of Philip Johnson after his conversion away from modern architecture as Philip II) and it was delightful and genuine modesty which led him to express surprise when students clapped him as he came on to the stage to deliver his Slade lectures. Turning to the audience he gave a small bow and declared "But I haven't said anything yet!". When he did speak, the lecture would bristle with facts and insights delivered without notes in a beguilingly accented English, at once soft spoken and definite.

We must await Stephen Games' biography of Sir Nikolaus for a fully rounded picture but all those who knew him will each have favourite vignettes, and all will agree on his unrivalled greatness.