OLIVER NICHOLAS MILLAR

Oliver Nicholas Millar
1923–2007

Sir Oliver Millar devoted his career to serving as the first full-time curator of the approximately seven thousand pictures belonging to the Royal Collection, one of the greatest assemblies still in private hands.[1] Over the span of forty-one years in office, he achieved a remarkable double achievement of curation and scholarship, which has placed the Royal Collection virtually on a par with the best run museums in the country. As the editor of *The Burlington Magazine* wrote on the occasion of his retirement: 'What he has achieved at the Royal Collection will stand as a monument to a most distinguished Surveyorship.' At the same time Millar was also a celebrated scholar with an international reputation, who was for many years the doyen of Van Dyck studies.

He was born at Standon, Ware, Hertfordshire, on 26 April 1923, the elder son of Gerald Arthur Millar (1895–1975), publisher, writer and cousin of Daphne du Maurier, and of his wife Ruth (1900–71). He was educated at Rugby. Although his lifelong interest in royal iconography, illustrated by his growing collection of postcards of kings and queens, had already begun at his preparatory school, he was, as Sir John Guinness, a later pupil at the school, wrote:

> partly inspired by a master at Rugby and housemaster of Kilbracken House called Harold Jennings, a.k.a., Squid Jennings. He taught history to 15/16 year olds and also classics. He was very keen on the lives and quirks of individual

[1] The British Academy is exceedingly grateful to Sir Christopher White for agreeing to take over responsibility for writing this Memoir because the original memorialist was unable to complete the task.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XVI, 67–82. © The British Academy 2017.
Posted 14 November 2017.

> historical figures and had no time for economic history, e.g. the history of the cloth trade in fifteenth-century England. If he was talking about the reign of James I, he would pin up on his blackboard reproductions of portraits of the main people involved from his immense collection of photographs, reproductions and engravings of historical portraits.[2]

Millar suffered from a heart condition, which precluded him from war service during the Second World War. This disability led to the later rejection of his application to the National Portrait Gallery by the bigoted director of the time, who would not accept the idea of appointing someone who, unlike him, had not fought in the war. (It was the gallery's loss, since given his interests, he would have made an outstanding curator.[3]) He went as a student to the Courtauld Institute of Art, London University, when the Institute was establishing itself as the leading centre of art history in the country under Professors Anthony Blunt and Johannes Wilde, two distinguished scholars as different in character as it is possible to imagine. Fellow students were such figures as Professor John White and Dr Anita Brookner. He was awarded an Academic Diploma. He was very much a protégé of Anthony Blunt, with whom he went on to have a very harmonious professional relationship. (He was surprised and shocked by the revelations in 1979, but remained a friend and occasional visitor to Blunt who was then living in purdah.) Although not a member of the staff, he remained very much a presence at the Courtauld, giving lectures when required. His enthusiasm for what interested him was infectious, above all for portrait painting in England in the seventeenth century. Van Dyck needed no boosting, but the present writer can remember to his surprise being kept awake and absorbed during a lecture delivered on a hot summer's afternoon on later English seventeenth-century portrait painters. At about the same time there was an annual summer outing for staff and students to Althorp. Millar emerged from a room at one point declaiming excitedly to all those willing to listen, 'There is almost a good Hudson in there', when, it has to be admitted, even a good Thomas Hudson would be unlikely to quicken the pulse of most people.

There was a more personal matter to retain his interest in the Institute, since among the undergraduates he lectured was his future wife, Delia Mary Dawnay (1931–2004). The Courtauld being the small world it was

[2] Email to the present writer, 30 May 2016.

[3] Later he had the satisfaction of serving as a trustee of the gallery for many years (1972–95), but even this was not without its moment of drama. When his favoured candidate for the directorship was passed over, he resigned, but rescinded his decision just before his resignation was accepted at the next meeting of the trustees.

in those days, it was something of a public courtship. It was mischievously rumoured that Millar waited before proposing until it was learnt that she got a first, which she duly did. Unintentionally their engagement introduced a note of humanity into that austere temple of higher learning, when shortly afterwards he, on arriving at Home House, the then elegant home of the Institute, leaped up while she ran down Robert Adam's semicircular staircase: they hurtled into in one another's arms on the landing. The whole incident was witnessed by, among others, the somewhat bemused Professor Blunt and Dr Whinney. The marriage took place at the Queen's Chapel, Marlborough Gate, London, on 21 January 1954. Thereafter Delia deserved a first for being the perfect spouse, loving, encouraging and sharing in every aspect of his life. As her contribution to scholarship in the royal cause, she produced a very impressive two-volume catalogue of *The Victorian Watercolours and Drawings in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen* (London, 1995) in which he took great pride and for which she received a CVO. She sadly died from cancer before him in 2004, having happily seen an advanced copy of the Van Dyck catalogue (see below), in which she had helped so tirelessly; his part is dedicated to her. Among the set of photographs of contemporary British art historians made by their eldest daughter, Lucy Dickens, there is a very telling image of her parents (reproduced here); he, in shirtsleeves, is seated commandingly at a table with his papers spread out in considerable disarray before him, while she stands, mentally on tiptoe, at the end of the table, ever ready to jump in with assistance.[4] No Pamina was ever closer to her Tamino than Delia was to Oliver.

At first they lived in a grace and favour apartment in Friary Court, St James's Palace, but when a pram appeared at the door—they had three daughters followed by a son—they exchanged city life for suburban country life. They bought a house in the attractive village of Penn, in Buckinghamshire, which was to become one of the most expensive places to live in Britain. From there, dressed like a country gentleman in well-tailored tweeds and invariably wearing a Newbury hat and a silk scarf tied loosely around his neck—'doggy' was how Brigid Brophy described him—Millar travelled into London on the Chiltern line to Marylebone, that elegant, bijou station almost exclusively reserved for those who live in the shires. Tall and thin, with a slight stoop, he cut a distinguished figure as he hastened through the streets of St James's.

[4] A set is in the National Portrait Gallery, London, accessible on online: http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait-list.php?search=sp&sText=Oliver Millar (accessed 9 December 2016).

He began his career as a member of the Royal Household in 1947, when, as the first full-time employee in the history of the Surveyorship, he was appointed Assistant Surveyor of the King's Pictures by Anthony Blunt. He became Deputy Surveyor in 1949 and, on Blunt's retirement in 1972, he was appointed Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, and finally in 1987, a year before he retired, he was appointed, justly in view of all he had achieved, the first Director of the Royal Collection. During these years he advanced from being appointed MVO in 1953, to CVO in 1963, to KCVO in 1973, and finally in 1988 on the day of his retirement, just before his farewell party at Buckingham Palace, he was made GCVO. Shortly after his retirement he wrote an essay entitled 'Caring for the Queen's pictures: surveyors past and present', which in view of its autobiographical references and inferences can be regarded as his 'last will and testament'.[5]

Previous Surveyors, working part time and with other demanding jobs to occupy them, did not achieve much presence within the Royal Household. As Assistant Surveyor, a post created for Millar since Benedict Nicolson was still nominally Deputy Surveyor, he faced the challenge to establish what in today's jargon would be called a power base, from which he could operate with accepted authority. Starting from scratch, with his status no higher than that of a midshipman on a battleship, it took time, determination and diplomacy. For most of his career his office was limited to two narrow rooms off the State Apartments in St James's Palace, one of which was filched from the Examiners of Plays and both of which barely contained the numerous inventories of the collection. Content to work on his own, he spent his days there in happy isolation apart from the presence of a devoted part-time assistant, Mrs Gilbert Cousland.

Of all the previous holders of his office going back in time to Abraham van der Doort in 1625, the one he admired most was the artist Richard Redgrave (1804–1888) for his 'devotion to painting, dedication to the welfare of the pictures in his charge, and professionalism in matters of conservation and display, when allied to his modesty, integrity and—perhaps most of all—his capacity for unrelenting hard work'.[6] Millar might well have been describing himself.

[5] *The Queen's Pictures: Royal Collectors through the Centuries*, exhibition catalogue by Christopher Lloyd, National Gallery, London, 1991, pp. 14–27, from which numerous quotations below are taken.

[6] O. Millar, 'Redgrave and the Royal Collection', in S. Casteras and R. Parkinson (eds.), *Richard Redgrave 1804–1888* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1988), pp. 86–7.

At that stage he came under the aegis of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. As he wrote, it was 'eccentric that the administration of a great collection should have been to a large extent in the hands of a succession of charming retired Lieutenant-Colonels of the (generally 1st) Foot Guards' who 'were delightful to work with'. One of them was the Comptroller of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, with whom he played golf on Sunday mornings, an engagement which could have done Millar's budget no harm. As a result of his attention to their professional relationship, he could modestly note that 'By the end of our long association he may have come to realise that it is not impossible for an art historian at least to try to be a competent administrator and even to master the rudiments of financial management.' Millar, unlike Blunt who never fitted happily into the social side of the role, was the perfect discreet courtier, at ease in royal company, but never obsequious and, occasionally, capable of quietly noticing some inadequacies in his 'employer', as he liked to call her.

After many years of building up and consolidating his department, 'the formal break with our old colleagues [which] was overdue' came about at last in 1987 as a result of a report commissioned by the Queen on the organisation of the Royal Household from the consultancy firm, Peat Marwick. This, acknowledging the achievements of the Surveyor of Pictures, recommended the creation of a new Royal Collection Department, a sixth Department of the Royal Household, which should be administered independently from the Lord Chamberlain's Office. This brought the vast collection of paintings, drawings, works of art, library, well over 200,000 objects in total, under a single directorship, which, as has been said, was inaugurated by Millar. At the same time more spacious quarters, shared with Works of Art, were provided in Stable Yard House.

Although as Surveyor he was responsible for a group of pictures which any museum director in the world might be proud to have in his charge, he did not have the latter's absolute control over his collection, but was the servant of a monarch and her household, who had to be tactfully consulted and ultimately obeyed over questions of where pictures hung. As he said, 'A surveyor has no prescriptive right to be consulted when rooms are redecorated at Buckingham Palace or Windsor', or on what was lent out to outside exhibitions. The royal family may not be connoisseurs, but they have their favourite pictures and do not like them to be removed, even temporarily, from their private rooms. The Queen, for example, speaks possessively of her favourite picture in the whole collection, Rembrandt's *Shipbuilder and his Wife*, or of Gerard ter Borch's *The Letter*, which hangs in her private dining room and was, as she likes to relate, always admired

for its silk dresses by her couturier Norman Hartnell on his professional visits to Buckingham Palace. An understandable reluctance to lend had to be overcome by diplomacy and by persuasion that the purpose of the exhibition was serious. Nearer to home were the loans to the new gallery created, with much input from Millar, at Buckingham Palace in 1962, which allowed, among other things, the temporary display of pictures from that palace not normally seen by the public. (A greatly enlarged gallery was opened in 2002.)

At a lower level tact and firmness—'a flask of healing oil is as important a part of a Surveyor's kit as his torch and measure'—was required when dealing with the superintendents and housekeepers of the royal palaces, who often tended to think that they had the right to deal with the pictures as they saw fit. 'I vividly remember going into the Picture Gallery [at Buckingham Palace] one summer afternoon to discover that *all* the pictures had been taken down on instructions from the Superintendent who, a few years earlier, stuck adhesive labels to the *surfaces* of the pictures so that they would be readily identified in the event of fire.'

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Millar's love of pictures under his control was his concern for their conservation. When he arrived he found no overall awareness of the need for care among the staff. Terrible things had happened: 'Even in modern times a Superintendent did not scruple to slice a large piece off the top of a group by Zoffany or to reduce a fine pair of large Winterhalters so that they would fit better into a room at Balmoral,' or when 'the Superintendent at Windsor, early in Queen Victoria's reign, cut down Gainsborough's lovely full-length group of the three eldest princesses'. Now when pictures were reduced in size, the unseen part of the canvas was folded over to be protected for posterity.

And then there were the daily hazards of palace life to be constantly guarded against. The painting by Wootton hanging above the equerry's tea-time kettle boiling away undetected; the large Rubens, placed over a serving table with, before its recent cleaning, its darkened surface reflecting the traces of menus of past times; or the three paintings by Stubbs which were left hanging exposed on the walls when painters were at work in the room.

As Millar claimed, 'Nothing in the history of the Surveyorship has been more beneficial to the pictures than the establishment of the studio at St James's Palace. Proper standards of conservation and maintenance of the pictures can be established.' And since then most of this work is now carried out at a greatly enlarged conservation studio, with a full-time staff, in Windsor Great Park, where care is up to museum standards.

Millar oversaw the beginning of a general programme of cleaning and restoration, which had never happened in the past. And his care for the collection was extended to considerable research so as to provide frames suitable both for the picture itself and where it hung. 'We were always anxious, for example, to remove as many as possible of the unattractive frames, made by William Thomas, in which Prince Albert reframed all the (predominantly Dutch and Flemish) pictures in the Picture Gallery at Buckingham Palace.'

Millar ends the account of his and his predecessors' career on a lyrical note. 'A Surveyor', as he says elsewhere 'the best job in the world':

> will learn to appreciate the shrewdness of the advice once given by a very wise colleague: it doesn't matter how much you enjoy your job, what *does* matter are the footsteps you leave for a successor to tread in. And to work on the royal pictures and their past does lead you along some delightful tracks: from the footpath beside the Dee, where you try to get the blood going after an April's day's work in Balmoral, through many other enchanted spots to the sunlit rooms and passages of Osborne, where, posing as a convalescent, you can work by the hour in the shadow of Prince Albert. It is wise to avoid distractions and outside commitments, to scorn delights and live laborious days with the pictures themselves; and when, in theory, you retire, to look forward, as Redgrave did in *his* retirement, to visits from friends who told him 'something about his beloved pictures in the royal palaces'.[7]

Alas, as many a retiree has found, such conversations can lead to painful discoveries, such as, for example, when one learns that the carefully designed arrangement of the fourteen views of Venice by Canaletto, the *Prospectus Magni Canalis*, displayed in the Long Corridor at Windsor Castle, is now dispersed, having been 'criticized as hung by one with the instincts of a stamp collector'.

Millar had devoted so much of his life and achieved so much in developing the care and study of the collection that he found it difficult to hand over happily to his successor, to whom he unquestionably gave a hard time. Whereas Millar had pencilled in for the latter many hours to be spent, as he himself had done, at the Public Record Office transcribing documents—various areas to be covered are specifically suggested—Christopher Lloyd saw it of more consequence in these changing times to spend time making the collection more widely known by lecturing throughout the world on what was in his care.

No less impressive than his curatorial successes was the degree of scholarship Millar introduced into the study of the collection. In the past

[7] Lloyd, *The Queen's Pictures*, p. 27.

there had been a number of inadequate catalogues, devoted to the holdings in the different palaces. Blunt, however, started a more substantial programme of cataloguing the pictures, following what was already under way with the drawings at Windsor Castle, but little had actually been achieved until Millar took over the responsibility for carrying out the work.

It was characteristic of Millar, as a scholar of detail, that he began his research on the Royal Collection by the laborious editing of the MS catalogue of pictures drawn up during the reign of Charles I by Abraham van der Doort, the first Surveyor of the Royal Collection.[8] 'I cannot exaggerate the pleasure, or the wealth of insights gained, in simply copying out Van der Doort's manuscripts', but many art historians, especially in view of the illegibility of the latter's handwriting, would be more likely to agree with Millar's *arrière-pensée* that 'it is exhausting work'. (Millar's later handwriting was hardly more legible than Van der Doort's and earned him the polite but firm request from one of the Queen's private secretaries: 'Could you please use a typewriter.'[9]) Van der Doort's manuscripts were vital in establishing much about the early years of the collection, such as authorship, provenance and where the pictures were displayed. Some years later Millar followed this archival work up with the publication of the inventories and valuations of the goods belonging to the royal family which were sold at the time of the Commonwealth, which were of no less importance in the cataloguing of the collection.[10]

There had been a number of summary catalogues of the pictures, divided by residence rather than by school, but none reached the standard expected in the second half of the last century. He began with *The Tudor, Stuart and Early Georgian Pictures in the Collection of H.M. The Queen* (London, 1963), in which the hero was Van Dyck, whose presence in the British School, it has to be said, was somewhat questionable. It covered a period about which he could claim prime authority, with the minor figures being treated as thoroughly as the more important artists. This was followed by *The Later Georgian Pictures in the Collection of H.M. The Queen* (London, 1969), of which the stars were Gainsborough and Lawrence. He gave a richly descriptive account of the artistic as well as court life of the times. He completed his cataloguing of the British School

[8] O. Millar, 'Abraham van der Doort's catalogue of the collection of Charles I', *Walpole Society*, 37 (1960), 1–243.

[9] Recorded by C. Lloyd, 'Millar, Sir Oliver Nicholas (1923–2007)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/98814 (accessed 9 December 2016).

[10] O. Millar, 'The inventories and valuations of the King's goods 1649–1651', *Walpole Society*, 43 (1972), 1–443.

with the largest section of all, *The Victorian Pictures in the Collection of H.M. The Queen* (Cambridge, 1992); it was a period in which he felt less assured, but the result maintained the high standard of the previous volumes. The most substantial part of the collection was the Queen's collection of portraits, often of a mediocre quality, but the collection was enlivened by likenesses of her favourite animals, above all of dogs, and the multi-figured pictures of numerous royal ceremonies so enjoyed by the Queen, which have been meticulously catalogued by Millar.

Over almost thirty years he catalogued in all 2,336 paintings. As well as the intellectual task this posed a physical challenge, since Millar firmly believed that every picture must be carefully examined in the original, both back and front. This work, far from being carried out under ideal museum conditions in laboratories, had to be undertaken *in situ*; many pictures were hidden away in attics, distant corridors and storerooms, and had to be lifted off the walls and then replaced, more often than not by him alone. Sometimes the work was carried out in arctic conditions, with pleas to a housekeeper to keep on a little heating heartlessly ignored. His status as guardian of the Queen's pictures did not 'cut much ice' with the hardened and no doubt philistine Resident Factor at Balmoral.

He had a great feeling for the quality and character of a painting. The collection of British pictures, and those deemed to come into the category as by foreign artists working in England, is predominantly made up of portraits, for the art of which Millar had an innate understanding, a quality particularly apparent in his introductions to the catalogues. Given the enormous range between the very good and very bad in the works he had to cover, he always maintained a keen eye for the quality of a painting, at one moment writing that Benjamin West's 'figures appear to be modelled in cardboard', or, scraping the barrel, castigating John Pettie's portrait of Bonnie Prince Charlie, as an image 'more at home on a tin of Edinburgh rock in Princes Street', while, at the other end of the scale, praising the state portrait by Gainsborough of Queen Charlotte for showing 'incomparable sensibility and skill, with tenderness, a latent gaiety and a magic sense of poetry', or lauding Lawrence for having created 'one of the most dazzling sets of portraits in the ancient tradition of the *Hommes Illustres*', which now hang in Waterloo Chamber at Windsor Castle.

Although his catalogue entries are not to be faulted where the provision of basic information about a picture is concerned, paying particular attention, for example, to the existence of copies, they tend to be undernourished in providing the kind of general discussion about a picture now

favoured in most catalogues. Although to some extent he made up for this in his long introductory essays, he was sometimes cavalier in giving sources for items of fascinating information, which could, given the extent of his knowledge, be difficult to track down. When remonstrated with, he did not show much sign of repentance.

To catalogue the pictures from the continental schools, outside scholars were commissioned to undertake the work. For these Millar acted as an inspired *cicerone*, and, when they submitted their results, they found him a demanding but appreciative editor. On inspection tours they were led by him, invariably with a torch in one hand and a tape measure in the other, at a smart pace through the royal palaces from basement to attic. Progress was usually accompanied by quick-fire conversation relating to anything from the painting in question to general topics of the day. There was no lingering in the corridors or encouragement to look at other treasures on the way to one's goal. At the end of a morning, say at Buckingham Palace, the cataloguer would, greatly stimulated but somewhat breathless, be deposited at the Privy Purse Door, leaving Millar free to go off and enjoy a pre-luncheon gin and tonic with other senior members of the Royal Household.

As the Royal Collection exhibition programme gradually built up speed, Millar was increasingly called upon to contribute essays to the catalogues, which at the time, by convention, remained unsigned. And to round out his overall study of the collection, he produced a comprehensive, fluently written history of the collection from the Tudor times to the present day in *The Queen's Pictures* (London, 1977), published on the occasion of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. His concise style allowed him to include a vast amount of information and pithy comment. He had a firm grasp of history and was not tempted by virtue of his position to see monarchs of the past through royalty-tinted glasses: Charles I, 'as a ruler, obstinate, devious and self-deluding'; Queen Anne, 'the dullest and meanest of the Stuarts'; Frederick, Prince of Wales, 'an irritating irresponsible scatterbrain'; George IV, 'a self-indulgent and neurotic wastrel'. But when it was deserved, and this of course was the point of the book, he was eloquent in his praise for their achievements as patrons and collectors. The stars of the collection are unquestionably Charles I and George IV, but he showed great sympathy for George III.

What was remarkable was that his work for the Royal Collection amounted to only one part of his scholarly output, which was wide in what it covered of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British art. His approach to works of art was traditional connoisseurship, concentrating

on the object itself, and not studied, as in the so-called new art history, in a wider sociological or theoretical context.

Early in his career he collaborated with Margaret Whinney, under whom he had studied during his Courtauld days, in publishing *English Art, 1625–1714* (Oxford, 1957), in which he wrote with great fluency on the painting of the period, including a very good chapter on the miniature. The only other survey he ever undertook was the memorable exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, entitled *The Age of Charles I: Painting in England, 1620–1649* (London, 1972), which brought together a rich display of paintings, drawings, sculpture, engraving, miniatures and medals created during that epic period of British patronage and collecting. Arranged by carefully chosen themes, it was an example of a truly successful didactic exhibition, which offered an illuminating conspectus of its subject.

Basically he was by temperament happier writing about an individual artist. In 1951 he arranged and catalogued an exhibition at the Tate Gallery entitled *William Dobson 1611–1646* (London, 1951). It was the first of two other shows devoted to a previously underrated artist who immediately followed Van Dyck but in his own individual way. He wrote about Rubens only once but to good purpose in the Charlton Lecture on Art, published as *Rubens: the Whitehall Ceiling* (Oxford, 1958), elucidating for the first time that marvellous composite oil-sketch, now in the Tate Gallery, London, which adumbrated the designs for no less than seven of the nine scenes which make up the decoration of the ceiling of the Banqueting House in Whitehall. This attracted a compliment from one of the sternest of Rubens scholars, Julius Held, who wrote that 'every student of the complex of questions connected with it will forever more be in debt to his [Millar's] studies'.[11]

In 1978 he arranged a pioneering exhibition of the paintings and drawings of Sir Peter Lely, at the National Portrait Gallery. The catalogue provided an up-to-date account of the artist's life and work that was to be the subject of a complete catalogue, never completed, which was to occupy Millar's last years.[12]

Moving into the eighteenth century, he wrote at the beginning of his scholarly career a short book about Gainsborough, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London, 1949), 'the best and most beguiling of English painters', as he

[11] J. Held, 'Rubens' Glynde Sketch and the installation of the Whitehall Ceiling', *The Burlington Magazine*, 112 (1970), 274.

[12] The catalogue is being completed by Diana Dethloff, who was helping Millar before his death.

was later to call him, and who must surely have ranked as number two in his pantheon of painters. This was followed by a well-informed study of *Zoffany and his Tribuna* (London, 1967), a picture in the Royal Collection brimming over with portraits of British on the Grand Tour and the works of art which they were admiring, which called for the precise identification of the kind which was Millar's forte. Because there was so much relevant information about the picture, this was in fact an excursus of his catalogue entry to be published shortly afterwards in *The Later Georgian Pictures in the Collection of H.M. The Queen*.

But unquestionably, where painting was concerned, the love of his life was the work of Sir Anthony van Dyck, and most particularly his portraits of English sitters. Over the course of fifty years he acquired a profound knowledge and, even more importantly, a deep sympathy with and understanding of the artist which, from 1967, was warmed daily by the sight of Van Dyck's fine portrait of *Princess Mary, Princess Royal, and later Princess of Orange* hanging on his own walls.[13] If he never wrote the substantive monograph on the artist, for which his admirers always hoped, he nevertheless made a major contribution to the subject.

He first became publicly involved in the artist in 1953, when he was responsible for choosing the thirty-seven works by Van Dyck that were a major part of the great exhibition of Flemish art held at the Royal Academy. Serious scholarship began with the first volume of the Royal Collection, which contains no less than twenty-six paintings by the artist, many of superb quality. But he gave freer rein to his feelings about the artist in the memorable exhibition of *Van Dyck in England* at the National Portrait Gallery, London (1982), which brought together sixty-five paintings as well as a group of drawings. Millar's love and understanding of the artist is revealed in the catalogue. The introduction is a masterly account of the artist's entire life and the entries contain some of the most eloquent words he wrote about the pictures themselves. As an example of his empathy, one can cite his evocation of the portrait of Lady Ann Carr, Countess of Bedford, in the collection of The Lord Egremont, at Petworth:

> in every way one of Van Dyck's most magical portraits: the subtle sense of movement in the figure as the sitter moves imperceptibly forward is enhanced by the momentarily frozen movement in the hands, by the flutter of the scarf, 'A Lawne about the shoulders thrown', the stirring of the curtain and the trembling

[13] After his death the picture was accepted under the Acceptance in Lieu scheme and appropriately allotted to the Historic Royal Palaces, and displayed, beside the sitter's father, Charles I, at Hampton Court Palace, where it is now suggested it originally hung.

> of the rose-bush. The handling of the face and hair is exceedingly delicate and fresh, and the slight asymmetry in the sitter's eyes adds to the sense of a living sitter facing the painter. The rose at her breast and the single pearl lying over her womb probably indicate that the Countess is pregnant.[14]

The culmination of his work on Van Dyck came with his contribution to the *catalogue raisonné* of the artist's paintings, which brought him together with three other scholars.[15] It has to be admitted that this major project had a long and painful birth. One scholar, apart from being very dilatory in finishing, worked, to Millar's understandable disgust, only from photographs. For him it was an article of faith that judgements of connoisseurship had to be made on the basis of studying the original painting. But no less pertinent to the difficulties was the fact that, where Van Dyck was concerned, Millar was, as he was the first to admit, 'a cat that walked by himself'. At one point he was fired from the project by his fellow authors and had to be coaxed back. His part in the magnum opus, in which he was responsible for the work executed in England, included the largest number of works in any section of the volume and, moreover, as far as connoisseurship was concerned, it was, given the numerous authentic repetitions, variants and copies by other artists, the most difficult part of the *oeuvre* to study. His entries continued the approach of the exhibition catalogue, with numerous inspired perceptive characterisations of individual works, while the introductory essay gave a consummate overview of the last decade of the artist's life.

A notably hard-working man of great energy, he was a warm and loyal friend, generally courteous to anyone with whom he had dealings; he was always generous with knowledge and help to the young. But he was a more complex character than his usual friendliness and geniality might lead one to suppose, so that it was disconcerting, without warning, to come up suddenly against a severely critical vein in his character. He could be impulsive in his reaction to events and he sometimes regretted what he had said or done, and was fulsome with apologies. His standards were high and he had a clear idea how something should be carried out. If there was any variance, the other party could expect to be told in no uncertain if not brutal terms where they were failing. If you submitted something

[14] National Portrait Gallery, *Van Dyck in England*, no. 41. Were it not for its length, I would have quoted his masterly analysis (no. 11) of *Charles I on Horseback with M. St Antoine*, a picture, still in the Royal Collection, which he knew so well and which had hung in St James's Palace.

[15] S. J. Barnes, N. de Poorter, O. Millar and H. Vey, *Van Dyck, a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2004).

you had written to him, the experience was undoubtedly beneficial to the accuracy of your MS but his criticisms were likely to be delivered with a sharp application of the schoolmaster's rod, particularly when it related to a subject dear to his heart. The present writer once had the temerity, or perhaps the foolishness, to ask him to read something he had written about Van Dyck and was seared by his response, although Millar did have the grace to say a few nice words when the booklet was published. Clearly he felt some guilt over his possessiveness about Van Dyck, since following the publication of *Van Dyck, a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings* he wrote a curious, exculpatory letter to *The Burlington Magazine*, expressing indebtedness to some fourteen scholars and conservators, whom he had failed to acknowledge adequately if at all in the book itself.[16] In his very last published work, a review of a book about *echt* Millar territory, Charles I's collection, he relentlessly dissected with a scalpel what, to him, were 'its errors, its repetitions, its prejudice, its tiresome analyses of motives, its overstretched interpretation of events, its flights of imagination and inverted scenarios'.[17] Let it not be said that Sir Oliver departed this world with his critical faculties diminished.

Millar was an interesting mixture of grandeur and attractive simplicity. It is a moot point whether he was a snob. He certainly was partial to people living in historic houses with pictures hanging on their walls, but that could be regarded as an expression of professional curiosity. His children recall being taken out on a weekend afternoon to call unannounced at some substantial house in the vicinity. The surprise of the owners at their unexpected and unknown visitor was soon deflected by Millar's charm and by the fact that he knew very much more about their house than they did. This aspect of his character was amusingly parodied by Sir Michael Levey: '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

[16] O. Millar, 'The Van Dyck Catalogue', *The Burlington Magazine*, 146 (2004), 553.

[17] O. Millar, 'Jerry Brotton, *The Sale of the Late King's Goods: Charles I and his Art Collection*', *The Court Historian*, 12 (2007), 71–80. The *coup de grâce* was Millar's denial of the author's acknowledgement of having received help from the former. I am indebted to Simon Jervis for bringing this review to my attention.

Trossachs. "Just those people who have Balmoral" I feel like murmuring at the umpteenth enquiry.'[18]

His numerous non-professional interests and pastimes were clearly defined and gave substance to any social conversation you had with him. Dickens and Trollope were among his cherished authors, but *Emma* was his favourite book. In music Mozart was the most loved of composers; while he lived in London, he could hardly have missed a single concert given by the London Mozart Players. As he revealed on *Desert Island Discs*, he also liked a sprightly military tune of the kind he must have frequently heard through his office window.[19] He was a competent draughtsman, who greatly enjoyed sketching and designed his own Christmas cards. His early letters were often illustrated with what he had just seen when travelling. He loved gardening, and all the aspects of nature with which he was surrounded; he was a dab hand at identifying a bird on the wing or on canvas. In sport, golf, as has already been mentioned, was much enjoyed. He was a member of the MCC and his passion for the game was illustrated by the annual match at Penn, which he set up and took with great seriousness, when he led his own local eleven onto the pitch against a visiting team, made up largely of art dealers and captained by his old friend, Evelyn Joll, a Director of Agnews. And in later life, his grandchildren gave him much pleasure. His was a very English life. Lunching with him was to engage in an exhilaratingly brisk *tour d'horizon* of many of these topics, not forgetting the world of art history and the foibles of colleagues, which he treated with detached amusement but never malice.

On the morning of 10 May 2007 he went to Christie's to inspect a painting by Sir Peter Lely, often thought, but not by Millar, to be identifiable with 'Madam [Nell] Gwynn's picture naked with a Cupid', painted for Charles II. Afterwards, on his way to lunch at the National Gallery with two former colleagues, he collapsed and died from a heart attack, just near the bench in the garden in St James's Square where he had often enjoyed a sandwich lunch with his wife.

He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1970. He was a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery (1972–95), the National Art Collection

[18] Letter to the present writer, 16 October 1984.

[19] Broadcast on 4 June 1977. His favourite was the Countess and Susanna's duet ('Sull aria') from Act 3 of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Music also played: excerpts from Haydn's Symphony no. 100 (Military); Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 21; Purcell's *Indian Queen*; Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*; Britten's *Little Sweep* and a song by him; and *Lilliburlero* played by the Regimental Band of the Coldstream Guards.

Fund (1986–98) and National Heritage Memorial Fund (1988–92), as well as serving on the boards of a number of other organisations connected with the arts.

CHRISTOPHER WHITE
Fellow of the Academy

Note. Sources drawn upon for this memoir include: K. Rose, *Kings, Queens and Courtiers: Intimate Portraits of the Royal House of Windsor from its Foundation to the Present Day* (London, 1985), p. 210; 'Editorial', *The Burlington Magazine*, 130 (1988), 507–8; Obituaries in *The Times* (12 May 2007), the *Daily Telegraph* (14 May 2007), *The Independent* (16 May 2007, by Christopher White), the *Guardian* (17 May 2007, by Tom Corby), *The Burlington Magazine*, 119 (2007), 554–5 (by Michael Levey) and Christopher Lloyd's in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (see note 9). I am grateful for help from Lucy Dickens, Professor Brian Allen, Professor Christopher Brown, Sir John Guinness, Simon Jervis and Christopher Lloyd.