



*From a drawing by David Bell
by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum*

ARTHUR EWART POPHAM, C.B.

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1889-1970

ARTHUR EWART POPHAM ('Hugh', as his family and friends called him) was born at Plymouth on 22 March 1889, the only son of Arthur Frederick Popham and Florence Radford. His parents were cousins, and both families were connected with a draper's business, Popham and Radford, that had existed in Plymouth for several generations. But near relations on both sides had adopted other professions. One of his mother's brothers, Sir George Radford, was a Member of Parliament in the Liberal interest and a Senator of London University, and another, Sir Charles, was Mayor of Plymouth. His aunt Ada Radford married in 1897 the well-known sociologist Graham Wallas, and is described by Alfred Zimmern in his notice of Wallas in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as 'herself an authoress' and 'a member of a family well known in the public life of that area'. His father, after studying for some time as an architect (and designing a house for his family on Dartmoor), entered the bookbinding department of the Doves Press. He had one sister, Doris, who for many years practised as a physiotherapist.

The family spent much time abroad when Popham and his sister were children—a year in Switzerland, at Neuchâtel, in 1893, and six months in Rome from October 1897 to March 1898. It is evident that his father was much interested in literature and art, and had a considerable influence on his son in this respect. A diary kept by the little boy in Rome at the age of eight, which still exists, is a revealing document. It is written in a form of lettering quite unlike the copy-book style then practised in schools in this country, suggesting that he had already been shown and taught to admire the lettering of early Celtic manuscripts; and the names of the Roman churches that he visited daily with his father are wildly misspelt, but phonetically, so that if one reads them aloud it is quite clear what they are. Evidently he did not derive his facts directly from a guide-book, but from his father's lips; and he shows in what he wrote not only an extraordinary interest, for a boy of that age, in what he saw, but also—in describing, for instance, the Pope's visit to St. Peter's at Christmas—something of the spirit of irreverent criticism that characterized his conversation

throughout his life, which I suppose was inspired by his free-thinking parentage.

On their return to England the family lived first at Sandgate—in a house next to that of H. G. Wells, with whom they were on very friendly terms—and afterwards moved to Dulwich. At thirteen, Hugh Popham went to school at Dulwich College, and from there to University College, London. But both his parents had died by 1908, and George Radford, who made himself responsible for the education of his nephew and niece, wished him to go to Cambridge; so to King's College, Cambridge, he went, where he took a degree in Classics in 1911. Some account of him and his friends there will be found in David Garnett's *The Golden Echo* of 1953 (which, said Popham, would have been better entitled *The Golden Ego*); and photographs of many of his contemporaries, male and female, including one of Popham himself punting on the Backs, are reproduced in a book on Rupert Brooke, published by Michael Hastings in 1967.

At the end of 1911, when he was in Germany, he made the decision to apply for the post of Assistant (as it was then called) in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, and wrote to his tutor at King's, J. T. Sheppard, for a reference—he had quarrelled with the Provost, he said, and felt he had better not apply to him. The application was successful, and he was appointed in July 1912. Campbell Dodgson had just succeeded Sir Sidney Colvin as Keeper of the department; other members of the senior staff at the time were Laurence Binyon and Arthur Waley (for in those days the Oriental prints and drawings were still part of the same department), and Arthur Hind.

But immediately on the outbreak of war in 1914 he volunteered for service. Like Rupert Brooke (whom he knew, but only slightly, for Brooke was some years his senior at King's), he was caught by an enthusiasm that was perhaps hardly in accordance with the ideas of some of his Cambridge and 'Bloomsbury' friends—he said to me once he supposed 'he had rather let them down'. He enlisted in the Artists' Rifles; but later, when he grew tired (as he put it) of guarding the Tower of London against spies, he transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service. He was commissioned, and as Flight Sub-Lieutenant obtained his flying certificate from the Royal Aero Club on 17 June 1916. From then onwards to the end of the war (when he was a Captain in the newly formed Royal Flying Corps) he spent his time in the kind of hazardous service that appealed to

him, flying a seaplane (which could come down only on water, whatever the conditions might be), mostly in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. He was awarded the French Croix de Guerre.

By his first marriage, in 1912, to Brynhild, daughter of Sydney Olivier (then Governor of Jamaica, and afterwards, as Lord Olivier, Secretary for India), Popham had three children, two sons and a daughter who is now the wife of Professor Quentin Bell. That marriage came to an end, and in 1926 he was married again, to Rosalind, daughter of the celebrated sculptor, Sir Hamo Thornycroft, R.A. On her father's side she had an equally eminent grandfather, the Victorian sculptor, Thomas Thornycroft, and a distinguished first cousin in Siegfried Sassoon; and her mother, Agatha Cox, was a sister of Lady Olivier, so that she was also a first cousin of Popham's first wife. She shared his tastes and his friendships, and from that time until his death, forty-four years later, his life at home was a completely happy one.

In the meantime he was continuing at the museum the official catalogue of Dutch and Flemish drawings, of which Hind had already completed four volumes. His assignment consisted of the Netherlandish drawings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and though this volume did not appear until 1932, he was able to use his material for an hors-d'œuvre, a short general book on the subject, *Drawings of the Early Flemish School*, published by Batsford in 1926 in a series edited by K. T. (now Sir Karl) Parker. Parker had joined the department as a volunteer in 1925, and on the departure of H. M. Hake to the National Portrait Gallery in 1926 had become a regular member of the staff; and in that year was founded, with Parker as editor, the quarterly *Old Master Drawings*—a landmark in the history of the study of drawings, which lasted through fourteen volumes until the beginning of the second World War. To this Popham (who was himself, from 1925, Honorary Secretary of the Vasari Society for the reproduction of drawings) contributed frequently. Those years marked the beginning of a great increase of interest in the drawings of the old masters, which has continued to the present time, and for which Parker and Popham were largely responsible.

Popham became Deputy Keeper of the department when Hind succeeded to the Keepership in 1933. By this time his Volume V of the catalogue of Netherlandish drawings was published, and he had transferred his chief interest from the

Netherlandish to the Italian schools. The impetus was given, no doubt (as his obituary notice in *The Times* suggested), by his work on the committee of the great Italian Art exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1930, and his revised catalogue, published the next year, of the drawings there exhibited; and the encouragement came during the second World War, when he was in charge of the collections removed to the caves of Aberystwyth, from his association there with Johannes Wilde and Philip Pouncey—the latter still an Assistant Keeper at the National Gallery, but afterwards his colleague at the British Museum. Immediately after the war, in 1946, he published *The Drawings of Leonardo*; and in 1949 (with Wilde) the invaluable *Italian Drawings of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle*. When he returned to the British Museum in 1945 he had succeeded Hind as Keeper; and before his retirement he published (with Pouncey) the first of an exemplary series of newly designed catalogues of the museum collection, *Italian Drawings of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, in 1952; and in the following year, on his own account, *The Drawings of Parmigianino*, in a series published by Faber and Faber, again under the editorship of Parker, who was now Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford.

On his retirement in 1953 he was appointed a Companion of the Bath, and was elected an Honorary Fellow of his old college at Cambridge, King's. He had much to occupy him now that he was free of administrative duties. He had contrived during his Keepership, in spite of severe restriction of funds, to make some very notable acquisitions for his department at the British Museum—a drawing by Leonardo, a Raphael, and a Hieronymus Bosch, to name only three great *coups*, besides many drawings by lesser artists and a fine quantity of prints from Prince Liechtenstein's collection; and he was now enabled to continue his interest in acquiring material for a public collection by an invitation from the Trustees of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, to act as their adviser, after the death of Paul Oppé, for purchases in this country. To him, then, naturally enough, was entrusted the task of cataloguing (with Miss Kathleen Fenwick) the European drawings (other than British) in that collection. For this purpose he made his first and only visit to Canada and the United States, and the catalogue was published in 1965. But by this time his interest was directed particularly to the school of Parma. Already in 1957 he had produced what will remain the definitive work on Correggio's

drawings, which was subsidized by the British Academy. He had continued to work at the British Museum by invitation of the Trustees and the new Keeper, Edward Croft-Murray, at another volume in the museum series, *Drawings of the School of Parma, Sixteenth Century*, which was published in 1967: and almost to the last he was engaged in correcting the final proofs and checking the indexes of what will be perhaps his most memorable work, his great three-volume corpus of Parmigianino's drawings, based on lectures read in his absence to the Fellows of the Pierpont Morgan Library, and published in exemplary form for that institution (of which he was an Honorary Fellow) by the Yale University Press. He did not live to see the finished product; the first copy arrived in England a week or two after his death on 8 December 1970.

That, in little more than outline, is the story of his life and work. It remains for me to attempt some appreciation of the character of his scholarship, and of his personality. He was an art-historian of a peculiarly English type. Like Campbell Dodgson, his first chief, he was educated not in art-history as it was then taught in other countries, but in the classics; there was no organized academic teaching of art-history when he was an undergraduate, and when he had obtained his degree, and his appointment to the British Museum, he had to develop his natural interest in art simply by direct research in the collection entrusted to his charge and in the other great museums in Europe—though in those days, it must be remembered, there were fewer opportunities for a newly-joined member of the museum staff to work abroad, and with continental colleagues, than there are now. He had in fact to teach himself, to learn by his own observation: but this at least had the advantage of directing his closest attention to the works themselves, which he would study without the preconceived ideas that might have been inculcated by the generalizations of a professor of art-history. In the British Museum there was a great wealth of material to his hand; and in those days it was one of the first tasks of a member of the department to familiarize himself with all that was contained in the Printroom—drawings, prints, albums of prints and drawings, and such books and periodicals as were available. It was, I dare say, in some respects a better introduction to the profession than many a three-year course of lectures, essay-writing, and examinations in the modern fashion. As a result of this experience, gathered in the hard way, Popham was always more interested in deciding the authorship of

a particular work of art than in formulating a theory of the artist's place in his environment, or making wider deductions as to the trends of style that may have affected him, or that he himself initiated. In this sense he was perhaps not so much an art-historian, as the academics understand the term, as a connoisseur and expert cataloguer, a researcher and 'detective' in the field of art. He made the same point himself, sympathetically, in writing his obituary notice of Dodgson in Volume XXXVI of the *Proceedings of the British Academy*; and in this respect, certainly, Dodgson and Popham were much alike.

In another respect, however, he was a true historian of an equally practical and valuable sort: he was deeply interested in the history of the collection of drawings from the time of Vasari onwards, and no one, with the possible exception of Frits Lugt, has contributed more to this fascinating subject. It was perhaps his catalogue of the earlier Italian drawings at Windsor, when the Royal collection, as well as that of the British Museum, was under his care at Aberystwyth during the war, that led his interest more particularly in this direction—a catalogue in which Johannes Wilde produced the entries relating to Michelangelo and his school, but for which Popham was otherwise responsible, though he received (and generously acknowledged) much help from Philip Pouncey and other colleagues in this country; a catalogue that must have been perhaps the most difficult assignment of his career, since it involved research into so many drawings of the later sixteenth century, a period of art then far less widely explored than it has been since, at a time when the great continental museums were not accessible, and foreign correspondence on the subject was hardly possible. This was essentially a collection of old master drawings formed from various sources in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as such had a special historical interest of its own. Only a few such old collections remained intact in England; and these became increasingly the object of Popham's attention. No one knew as well as he the great treasures of Chatsworth, the drawings collected mainly by the 2nd Duke of Devonshire who died in 1729; and from Chatsworth he selected and catalogued two exhibitions, one at the Arts Council in London in 1949, and another for a tour of the principal museums of the United States in 1962. Of other eighteenth-century collections, he catalogued a selection of the Earl of Leicester's at Holkham for the Arts Council exhibition of 1948; and the whole of the collection of John Skippe (1742–1812), while it was still in the

possession of his descendant, Mrs. Rayner-Wood—a manuscript catalogue only to be used, alas, for the disposal of the drawings by auction in 1958. He often explored the large and little-known collection at Christ Church, Oxford, bequeathed to the college in 1765 by General John Guise; and I am myself deeply indebted to him for constant help, in recent years, since I began the task of cataloguing there. All the famous collectors of drawings and all the writers on that subject in the past—Vasari, Sir Peter Lely, Padre Resta, the Richardsons, Sir Thomas Lawrence—he knew intimately, as though they had been his contemporaries. Of Resta's vast accumulation, so much of which found its way to England at the beginning of the eighteenth century (enriching particularly the collections now at Chatsworth and at Christ Church), he wrote a brilliant account in *Old Master Drawings* (vol. XI, June 1936), which remains a model of lucid exposition for younger generations of scholars; and earlier in the same quarterly, in 1928 (vol. II), he had drawn attention to the old Cottonian Collection which is now in the museum at Plymouth. Much of his learning on the whole subject of collecting in England was condensed into his introductory remarks and catalogue entries for the Drawings section of the Royal Academy Exhibition, *Italian Art and Britain*, in 1960; and he contributed a long essay on the Parmigianino drawings in the collection of one of the early Italian amateurs, the Cavaliere Baiardo, to *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art* presented to Sir Anthony Blunt in 1967.

A particularly valuable feature of his method was the use he made of old reproductive prints; and his last work, the corpus of Parmigianino's drawings, is immensely enhanced by the inclusion of numerous illustrations of etchings made by early-seventeenth-century engravers for the Earl of Arundel, of drawings presumably once in the Earl's collection and now lost. He had a very wide knowledge of prints in general, and as Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings he never neglected the one for the other; his constant aim was to follow Dodgson's example in acquiring for the museum any print that was not already represented there. He recognized that for a great metropolitan collection such a policy, even so far as reproductive prints were concerned, was both practicable and right, at least within certain limits of date; since the material offered an inestimable advantage, quite apart from the artistic merits of the prints themselves, to students of drawing and painting as well. I have already referred to the acquisition, soon

after he became Keeper, of a great number of prints from the Liechtenstein collection: these amounted to several thousands, nearly all in fine impressions, mostly reproductive engravings of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, which he secured at prices that were at the time hardly more than the cost of so many photographs, and involved an outlay that was only a small fraction of what it would be today. He published, too, in the *Print Collectors' Quarterly* between 1921 and 1935, several articles, with catalogues, on the rarer original print-makers of all dates and all schools—the French mannerist Jean Duvet, the Netherlanders Dirk Vellert, Frans Crabbe, and Marcus Gheeraerts the elder, and even our own J. S. Cotman. The variety of his knowledge was in the best tradition of his department, and was further revealed in a comprehensive *Handbook to the Drawings and Watercolours*, which appeared just before the last war, in 1939.

Popham was an unwilling lecturer, and in such lectures as he gave his matter was always better than his delivery: he appeared shy of his audience, and was too scrupulous to suppress his doubts; and those are not characteristics of the most successful lecturers. He was never dogmatic, and to an inexperienced audience his manner might suggest a lack of confidence in his own opinions. I think he was glad that he was able to excuse himself, on grounds of age and health, from crossing the Atlantic to deliver in person those masterly lectures on Parmigianino's drawings, commissioned by the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, that formed the basis of his last work, and that they were to be read on his behalf by Mr. F. B. Adams, jun., then the Director of that famous foundation. His style of writing, on the other hand, was fluent and clear, as might be expected of his classical education, and he avoided entirely that sort of aesthetic and philosophical verbosity which used to bedevil so much of the art-history published in Germany and Austria, and now obtrudes also in the work of some of the younger Italian and American writers. Of the great continental art-historians of recent times, it was I think Max J. Friedländer, with his comparatively straightforward but vivid style, who appealed to him most; and it was surely the factual punctiliousness of Johannes Wilde's rare publications that encouraged him to seek his collaboration in some of his most important undertakings, at Windsor and in the British Museum. But his own style of writing had a special flavour; and though his method was in many respects, as I have suggested, like that of his old chief, Campbell Dodgson, there was a spice of humour

in all his work, even in his most learned and serious catalogue entries, of which Dodgson was incapable.

For he was, in a sort of Elizabethan sense, a humorous man: the humour that tinged his writing and his conversation had something of the sceptical irony of a Shakespearian character, and he had a droll way of putting things. Writing of the celebrated Milanese dilettante, Padre Sebastiano Resta, in whom he detected something of the charlatan, he quotes an early account of his life as follows: ‘ “*non tam morum integritate quam vitae probitate claruit*”, the reader will be glad to know’. But I hesitate to underline the occasional quip for fear of destroying its peculiar flavour by removing it from the learned context. I know of only one published work of his that is frankly set in a less than serious key: *Elephantographia*, a discourse on the iconography of the elephant in European art—including more particularly the adventures of Hanno, the animal that belonged to Pope Leo X—which appeared in *Life and Letters* in September 1930.

Popham was tall and distinguished-looking, with a thin, sensitive face and a figure that remained youthful to the end of his life—he never walked like an old man. Increasing deafness, which gave him an habitual air of melancholy, made him seem austere to casual acquaintances, but he was always courteous to strangers; and to his many friends, and to children, he was kind and helpful and often genial. I must say something of his other interests. He was an expert carpenter and cabinet-maker. Once, having bought an incomplete set of Georgian chairs for his dining-room on the river-front at Twickenham, he made the missing chair entirely with his own hands; he made all sorts of improvements to the equally delightful house in Canonbury Place, Islington, where he lived at the end of his life; and I am myself constantly reminded, when I sit at my grandfather's desk, that Popham repaired it for me some years ago as a Christmas present, matching the mahogany and patiently joining the many pieces that were broken away, so perfectly that I cannot now tell where it was damaged. He had a fine collection of books on art, including many early editions of the principal sources, in the original bindings, which he carefully nursed. I have suggested that he must have been interested in early manuscripts when he was a small boy, and it was through this interest, by copying pages from medieval missals and choir-books, that he developed the exquisitely clear, minute handwriting that will be remembered by all who corresponded with him; in this he filled

his notebooks, which were in themselves works of art; and indeed, until lately, when (characteristically) he decided that he had better teach himself to type, he wrote all his innumerable catalogue entries by hand.

Those who thought him austere may be surprised to learn that he liked to play all sorts of games. He was, I believe, an expert diver when he was at Cambridge; he sailed his own boat at Twickenham; we used to play squash-rackets together, once a week up to the last war, after the museum was shut for the night, in a court on the roof of Liverpool Street Station; lawn tennis too, and billiards at the Athenaeum until the Ladies' Annexe deprived us of the billiard-room. He played with a sort of gay abandon that did not detract from his desire to win. 'Now, this will surprise you', he would say, as he addressed the billiard balls for some quite impossible stroke, which as often as not sent one of them crashing from the table. And this gay mood was not uncommon in suitable company. I have a memory of him sitting in the front row of the Giant Racer, with his wife and mine and myself, and a lot of little boys with their mothers behind him, at the Battersea Park Fun Fair in 1951; clutching his Homburg hat but otherwise as unconcerned as one would expect of an experienced aviator, as the car hovered on the brink of an alarming descent. I hope that the readers of this memoir will not take me to task for introducing such apparently trivial recollections into an obituary of a very dear friend. I do so only because the picture of a dedicated and universally respected scholar would otherwise be incomplete.

JAMES BYAM SHAW

Authorities: *The Times*, 9 December, 1970 (John Gere); *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. cxiii, 1971, p. 97; information from Mrs. A. E. Popham; personal knowledge, 1925-70.