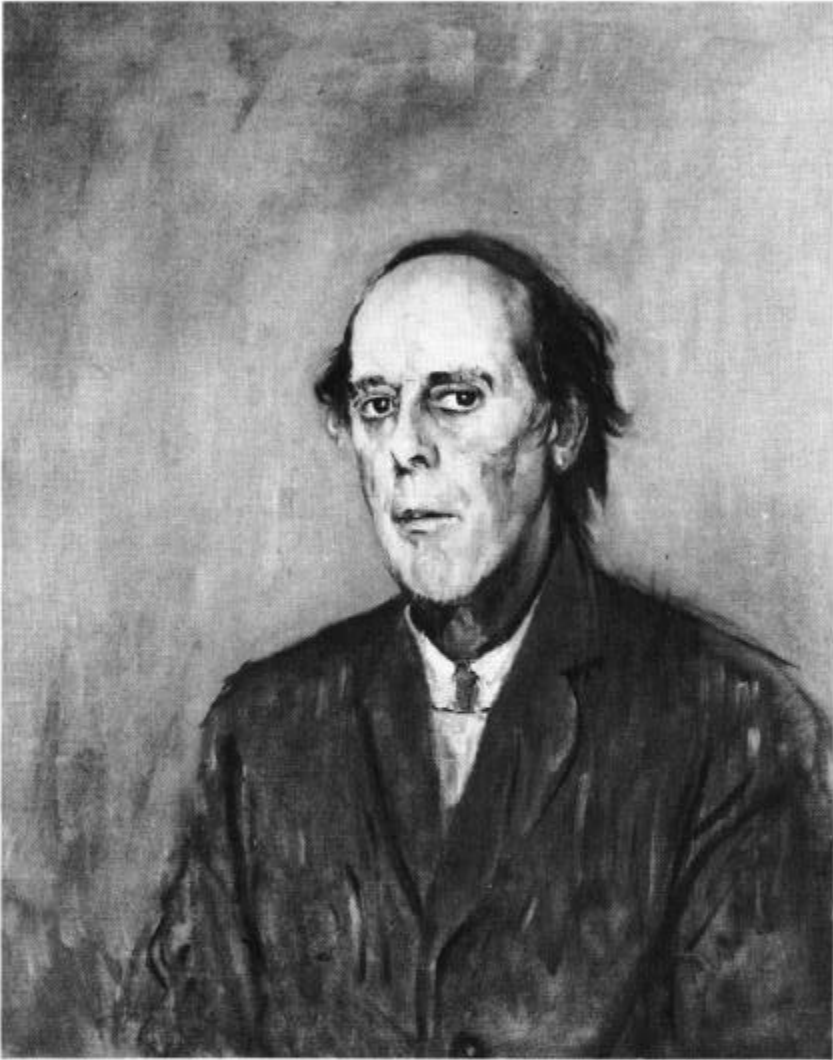


PLATE XXXIV



R. Meyrick. National Portrait Gallery

BENEDICT NICOLSON

LIONEL BENEDICT NICOLSON

1914-1978

LIONEL BENEDICT NICOLSON was born on 6 August 1914 at Knole, the great house of his maternal grandfather, the third Baron Sackville, after whom he received his first name; the name Benedict, by which he was always known, though generally in the abbreviated form of Ben, was derived from the occurrence of the word BENEDICTVS in a Latin inscription over the fireplace of the room in which he was born. His parents were the Hon. Harold, later Sir Harold, Nicolson, son of the first Baron Carnock, and the Hon. Victoria Sackville-West, a remarkable couple, the story of whose life together has been chronicled by Ben's younger brother Nigel in his *Portrait of a Marriage*, a book which, together with his father's *Letters and Diaries*, is very helpful for the understanding of Ben's background and upbringing. From these patrician origins he derived a sense of belonging which gave basic stability to a character which seemed otherwise in some ways tentative and unsure.

He was educated first at Summer Fields, Oxford, and, though he was not as classically unhappy there as some of his contemporaries at other preparatory schools, he felt that it had had a restricting effect on his development. From Summer Fields he passed to Eton, where real unhappiness awaited him. He had the misfortune of having a deeply unsympathetic housemaster and was subjected to considerable bullying. This situation was relieved by the intervention of the late Robert, afterwards Sir Robert, Birley, then an assistant master. Ben's mother met him at a house-party and appealed to him for help. He relieved the bullying by indirect action through the Eton scouts and extended to Ben a friendship which encouraged his nascent interest in the arts and which he gratefully acknowledged throughout the rest of his life.

He went up to Oxford in 1933, to Balliol, his father's college, and there he found real happiness and the foundations of his later career were laid. Those who read History at Balliol in those years, as he did, were fortunate in coming under a trio of exceptional teachers, Humphrey Sumner, Vivian Galbraith, and Kenneth Bell, and it is to them, and to Sumner in particular, who, being unmarried, was resident in college and more easily accessible to

interested students, that Ben owed not only the sound grounding in standards of exact scholarship that shows itself so clearly in his later writings, but the understanding of history and the love for it which marks him as a true historian as well as a critic and connoisseur.

After two years in college Ben moved to lodgings at No. 7 Beaumont St., which he shared, among others, with Jeremy, now Lord, Hutchinson and, with lodgers in other houses in the same street, he formed part of that group of which his great friend the late Philip Toynbee has given so memorable a picture, as it appeared to a slightly dazzled junior, in his *Friends Apart*. No. 7 was not only a centre of gossip—it was highly dangerous to ring up as they all had separate extensions of the same phone and delighted in eavesdropping—but of somewhat severe intellectual discussions, very much centring, in the Bloomsbury manner, on personal relationships.

Ben's interest in art and its history, nascent at Eton, flowered in Oxford and centred on the activities of the Oxford Florentine Club. This undergraduate society was originally conceived on rather evangelistic lines by an earnest young man in Worcester, and Ben was recruited as the Balliol College representative. It was through being recruited at the same time as the New College representative that the writer first made Ben's acquaintance. The original idea of spreading the light of culture, as regards the visual arts, as widely as possible among the undergraduate body was in conflict with the more personal and, as we should say now, élitist Bloomsbury ethic of Beaumont St. and it was not long before the Beaumont St. junta got control of the club and remodelled it in their own image. For those who survived the change it became an interesting and agreeable forum where one could listen to and meet the various speakers whom members of the club were able to recruit, such as Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Herbert Read, D. S. MacColl, R. H. Wilensky, T. W. Earp, Helmuth Ruheman, and Anthony Blunt. Apart from John, now Sir John, Pope-Hennessy, the members were very much amateurs, with Berenson's Lists as their bible for the Old Masters. In the matter of contemporary art a rather rigid Bloomsbury orthodoxy prevailed and the writer's suggestion that we should make an expedition to Burghclere to see Stanley Spencer's chapel was coldly received. In the summer of 1935 a number of members, including Ben, went over to Paris to see the splendid exhibition of Italian Art in the Petit Palais, with its revelation not only of such well-known masterpieces as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, which some of us had seen in London five

years earlier, but of such much less familiar treasures as Pontormo's great *Deposition* from the Capponi chapel in Santa Felicità.

The only career that seemed seriously open in the 1930s to an English student who wished to pursue the History of Art was in some form of museum or gallery service, and after he came down from Oxford Ben set about qualifying himself for this. Today one would expect someone in this position to go to the Courtauld Institute, but, although it had been in existence for six years, it had not at that time come to occupy the position which it has since achieved and Ben and the present writer, who found himself in the same position, were advised by those whom they consulted, notably Kenneth Clark, the late Lord Clark of Saltwood, that a period of foreign travel and study in continental museums would be more beneficial. Ben had taken the opportunity of a visit with his father to the Lindberghs in 1935 to see a number of American museums and galleries and he spent part of the summer of 1936 in Italy, where he had been before. In September of that year he was in Holland and Belgium and went thence to Berlin, where the writer joined him. We stayed with separate families, to learn the language, but met daily in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. As in the days of the Florentine Club, we were still devout disciples of Berenson and I do not remember that our detailed study in the museum went much outside the area of Italian painting covered by his Lists, or that Ben showed any special interest in those areas of the seicento which were to become central to his later studies, though I find from a letter that he had 'discovered' Domenichino in Rome in the previous August. From Berlin we went together to Dresden and Munich, whence Ben returned home for Christmas at Sissinghurst. For some reason which I cannot now recollect, a visit which we had planned to make to Altenburg, to see the early pictures listed by Berenson, did not take place.

In January 1937 Ben took up the post of Honorary Attaché at the National Gallery in London, for which he had been recommended to the Trustees by the Director, Kenneth Clark. His service in this capacity was cut short, like that of his great-grandfather as Envoy at Washington, by an indiscretion, when he prematurely told Tancred Borenius of the purchase by the Gallery of the four little pastoral scenes then tentatively ascribed to Giorgione. Later in the year he went to work at I Tatti with Bernard Berenson. In a memorable phrase, quoted by Francis Haskell in his obituary notice of Ben in the *Burlington Magazine*, Berenson said of Ben that he was like a deep well of crystal-clear water and that it was worth making the effort to draw it up. That

Ben should have, at this stage, so struck a scholar of Berenson's age and distinction is a measure of the qualities that lay under his reticent and diffident exterior.

The experience of the months in the National Gallery and then at I Tatti will have helped to train Ben towards the careful and comprehensive scholarship which underlies his later writing and will have given him, on the one hand, in the Gallery, a deeper understanding of the physical structure of works of art and, on the other, at I Tatti, of the methods of comparative scholarship on which the admired Lists had been built up. It is interesting to note that his last work, which appeared only after his death, is a volume of lists on Berensonian lines.

In 1939 Ben was appointed Deputy Surveyor of the King's Pictures, under Kenneth Clark. This gave him regular work and an office in St. James's Palace and helped him further to familiarize himself with actual works of art and the problems of their physical well-being as well as the historical and aesthetic problems involved in their study. He held this post until 1947 but was absent on war service from the end of 1939 until 1945, and much of his time at the beginning of his service was spent in seeing that the collections were safely secured from damage by enemy action and at the end in seeing them returned in good order to the royal residences, so that his contribution to the actual detailed study of these splendid works was not as extensive as it might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, his little monograph on Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals* at Buckingham Palace, issued in the *Gallery Books* series in 1946, is not only one of his earliest contributions to art-historical writing but one of his best, a lively, sensitive, and imaginative study. Subsequently he contributed a number of notes on pictures in the royal collections to the *Burlington Magazine*.

Before the war Ben had written some reviews of art books for the *New Statesman* but his first original contribution to art history was an article on Seurat's *Baignade*, then in the Tate and now in the National Gallery, which appeared in the *Burlington Magazine* for April 1941. Here we can see already the principal characteristics which distinguish his later work. By a careful analysis of the evidence of preliminary studies he shows how this great classical composition was abstracted from observed reality and he goes on to speculate on the significance for Seurat himself of what he was doing, thus relating the work to its social background. This article was the fruit of a serious study of Seurat which he had undertaken in the years before the war and, though he did not pursue his

research further, Seurat remained one of his favourite artists and a small, thoughtfully chosen exhibition of his work was organized in Ben's memory after his death by his friend David Carritt at the Artemis Gallery. By the time this article appeared Ben had already been in the army for some two years. He started in the anti-aircraft battery that was commanded by Victor Cazalet and served at Rochester, but in 1941 he was transferred to the Intelligence Corps and was sent in the following year to the Middle East, where he was able to use his gift for and training in visual analysis in the study of air photographs in Syria, Egypt, and eventually after the invasion of Italy at Bari. While stationed there in December 1944 he was severely injured when struck in the back by a passing lorry and was invalided home early in 1945, having reached the rank of Captain.

In 1946 he contributed an introduction to a volume of reproductions of paintings by Cézanne published in Paris and in the next year he was appointed editor of the *Burlington Magazine*. The *Burlington* was and is acknowledged as the leading British scholarly periodical devoted to the fine arts and his work for it was the centre of all his activity until his death, still in the editorial chair, more than thirty years later. On accepting this appointment he gave up that of Deputy Surveyor of the King's Pictures. The *Burlington* had not in the past had a reputation for strong editorship, by which one identified the periodical with the personality of the editor. Although Herbert Read had been editor from 1933 to 1939 this was only one facet of a multifarious activity and one does not think of the magazine as having been in any very striking way associated with the causes which he espoused, or of him primarily as an editor, while even the name of his predecessor, R. R. Tatlock, who was in the chair for twelve years, is now barely remembered. During the war years the paper had been kept going bravely by a senior figure in the art-historical world of London, Tancred Borenius, the same to whom Ben had communicated the news of the purchase by the National Gallery of the panels ascribed to Giorgione, but since his retirement in 1945 the editorship has been carried on by the committee, with the anticipation that Ben would take over the editorship after his demobilization. To some extent this committee editorship recognized a situation that had always existed, for the influence of the committee had always been strong, with Roger Fry hovering in the wings as an *éminence grise* during the first thirty-one years of the magazine's existence. Ben was to change all that, and once he had established himself in the editorial chair no one could think of

the *Burlington* without Ben or of Ben without the *Burlington* until the former thought was sadly forced upon us by his death.

One of the distinctive features of the *Burlington* among art-historical publications had always been the very wide field of its coverage. This reflected the fact that when it was founded there were few professional art historians in Britain and that it represented the very diverse interests of a group of people who were to a certain extent amateurs. This diverse character was well maintained under Ben's regime, though there was a tendency, in the interest of sales, to concentrate the material in individual numbers in defined areas, but the character and the presentation of the material came to reflect the more exact standards of scholarship brought to Britain in the 1930s by German and Austrian refugees from Nazi oppression. This was a necessary and proper development but some older readers were heard to complain of pedantry. Ben himself, in addition to his monthly editorials, which dealt with a remarkably wide range of topics both specialized and general, was a regular contributor to the body of the magazine with major articles, short notes, and reviews of exhibitions and of books.

His first publication in hard cover book-form came in 1950 with *The Painters of Ferrara*, a book which we may think of as his farewell to his previous Berenson-centred interest in Italian painting of the earlier Renaissance, and it is perhaps characteristic that he should have chosen for its subject a relatively off-beat and little-understood school, full of odd quirks of individuality. The book follows a strikingly Berensonian pattern, with its introductory essay and its concluding lists of works by the painters discussed, though this pattern has been adapted to the needs of what is, to some extent, a picture-book.

After the war regular visits to the Continent were resumed and the old links with I Tatti were renewed. The issue of the *Burlington* for July 1955 was dedicated to Berenson in celebration of his ninetieth birthday, which had fallen in the previous month. To this number Ben contributed the editorial which interestingly defines his attitude to the older scholar's achievement, giving qualified endorsement to the regrets which Berenson had himself expressed in his *Sketch for a Self Portrait* that he had, to so great an extent, abandoned the tasks of the interpretation of works of art for those of connoisseurship. He also contributed a fascinating article to this number on the collection formed in the first half of the nineteenth century by the Revd John Sandford, which became incorporated in the Methuen collection at Corsham. He does not record that

a picture from this collection passed through Berenson's hands on its way from Corsham to Mrs Gardner in Boston.

In April of that year Ben became engaged to one of Berenson's helpers at I Tatti, the distinguished Italian art historian Luisa Vertova, and they were married in Florence that autumn, an event fully and charmingly described by Ben's father in his diary. Ben was not by temperament cut out for the routine of married life and domestic responsibility and the marriage was dissolved in 1961, but respect and affection survived, articles by Luisa Vertova continued to appear in the *Burlington*, and she was about to pay Ben a visit at the time of his death. It was a great pleasure to Ben that their daughter Vanessa, the only child of the marriage, should have turned to the study of art history. After his marriage came to an end Ben lived alone, but with the support of a wide circle of devoted friends both in Britain and abroad. He made much use of his clubs, Brooks's and the Beefsteak, and he established with his friend Philip Toynbee a luncheon club which met once a fortnight at Bertorelli's.

As has been said, *The Painters of Ferrara* of 1950 marked to some extent a farewell to his initial preoccupation with the earlier Renaissance. This book, though it offers a scrupulous and valuable review of the state of Ferrarese studies at the time and gives a sympathetic account of some highly idiosyncratic painters, does not claim to be a work of deep independent research. In 1958 he brought out his *Heindrick Terbrugghen* and at once established his place as a major scholar and one of the leading authorities on the work of the followers of Caravaggio, particularly those from northern Europe. This field remained one of the main centres of his interest for the rest of his life and was the subject of his last and posthumous publication. The *Terbrugghen* is a scholarly monograph dealing with scrupulous care with problems of attribution and chronology. It had been foreshadowed by an article which had appeared in the *Burlington* for April 1956, 'The Rijksmuseum's "Incredulity" and Terbrugghen's Chronology'. In this article he had regretted that he had, for reasons of space, to confine himself to questions of chronology and had been unable to tackle 'the far more interesting problem of the underlying significance of change—the analysis, that is, of the shifting emotions of a human being who was also a great painter'. This task he has brilliantly fulfilled in the monograph, which is perhaps the most completely satisfying of his productions. We can trace his interest in the painter beyond the fundamental article of 1956 to his publication in the April issue of the *Burlington* in 1953 of the *Beheading of the*

Baptist from Edinburgh, then on exhibition at Burlington House after its discovery in the reserve collection of the National Gallery of Scotland by the Director, Ellis, now Sir Ellis, Waterhouse, under a misleading attribution to Feti. In 1960 he supplemented his book by an article in the November issue of the *Burlington*, 'Second Thoughts on Terbrugghen', which shows the lively and continuing nature of his interest in the artist and his openness to new ideas.

In 1968, ten years after the *Terbrugghen*, Ben's next major work appeared, *Wright of Derby, Painter of Light*. This substantial monograph, in two volumes, is his most important contribution to scholarship. The *Terbrugghen*, though a splendid piece of interpretation, with many new insights both as to chronology and attribution, lay in an area in which a good deal of preliminary work had already been done by others; in the case of the *Wright of Derby* the field was comparatively unexplored. It furnished Ben with the opportunity to exercise all his talents, so that he gives us not only a sympathetic and integrated account of Wright's artistic development but a detailed study of his patrons and of the relation of his art to the earlier phases of the industrial revolution in Britain. If we return to this book for pleasure less frequently than we do to the *Terbrugghen* it is because Wright, fine painter though he is, is not really a 'great painter' in the sense in which Ben, in the passage quoted earlier, rightly used it of the older master.

During his editorship of the *Burlington* Ben was involved in various ways in the organization of exhibitions and one, which was his brain-child and which was actually presented by the *Burlington*, deserves special mention because of the light which it throws on the width and variety of his interests. This was the exhibition 'Art into Art. Works of Art as a Source of Inspiration' held at Sotheby's in September 1971. In this exhibition the influence of particular works of art, from the Antique onwards, on the later production of major artists was fully illustrated with the help of reproductions. Here one could see Michelangelo and Rubens copying the Farnese Hercules, Reynolds, Lawrence, and Alfred Stevens drawing on Michelangelo, Rembrandt copying Mughal miniatures, and Henry Moore copying Domenico Roselli.

His last major monograph was on another northern Caravaggiesque painter, the Frenchman Georges de La Tour. This was written in collaboration with Christopher Wright, who compiled the *catalogue raisonné*. La Tour's work, which had attracted increasing attention since the 1930s, presents difficult problems both of chronology and attribution, some of which Ben had

tackled in earlier articles. These are fully and fairly dealt with in the book but again it is above all for its criticism of and insight into the significance of the works that we value it. Between the *Wright of Derby* and the *Georges de La Tour* two slighter works appeared, *The Treasures of the Foundling Hospital* in 1972 and *Courbet: the Studio of the Painter* in the following year. The former gave him an opportunity of writing sympathetically about a number of major British painters of the eighteenth century, while in the latter, which appeared in the *Art in Context* series, he was able to do, on a smaller scale, something similar to what he had done in the *Wright of Derby* and indeed foreshadowed in his article on Seurat's *Baignade* in 1941, in setting the work of art against its social and economic background.

As has already been mentioned, Ben was engaged in his last years on a book listing the works of Caravaggio and of those painted in his style by his followers on both sides of the Alps. This book, which was in the press when he died, appeared posthumously with a foreword by Anthony Blunt. In this book he rather oddly applies the Berensonian idea of the list of authentic works not, as Berenson himself had done, to the task of isolating the individuality of a particular artist and distinguishing his work from that of his followers and imitators, but to isolating the influence of one highly individual artist on the work of his contemporary and slightly later followers. By this method he was able to give us his insights over an enormously wide range of material, in regard to which, as he says in his introduction, many new attributions are proposed. In effect he has given us the foundations for years of future study and one wonders whether his decision to publish his provisional conclusions in this form was not influenced by a sense that he might not live long enough to work up much of this material himself.

The dislike of domestic routine which had helped to undermine his marriage was reflected latterly in a persistent neglect of his health and, though warned of possible dangers, he would not restrict his smoking or his drinking or learn to spare himself in his work. He continued to live as he wished to live and to devote unstinted energy to his beloved *Burlington* regardless. The end came suddenly, after a full day's work, on 22 May 1978. It is difficult to think of him as retired from the magazine and perhaps it was happy for him that he did not have to face this, but his death at such a relatively early age was a sad shock to his numerous friends both in Britain and abroad.

His work as Deputy Surveyor of the King's Pictures was

recognized by the award of the MVO in 1947 and in 1971 his achievements both as an editor and a scholar were recognized by a CBE and an Honorary Doctorate at the Royal College of Art. Election as a Fellow of the British Academy followed in 1977. In that year he completed thirty years of service as editor of the *Burlington* and this was celebrated by a party at Brooks's and by a special issue of the magazine in his honour. The editorial of this, the April number, which, so it tells us, was the first in those thirty years not to be written by Ben himself or under his direct supervision, forms a remarkable tribute from the editorial committee to the quality of his service. A further mark of their appreciation came in the following year, when they decided to extend his editorship beyond the retiring age. Unhappily this was not to be as he died before he received the official letter offering him this extension, though he knew of the intention.

Ben, as has been said, combined a superficial diffidence with a basic patrician stability; he also combined a sometimes disconcerting innocence with extreme subtlety. In manner he was slow and apt to abstraction and sometimes his responses when they came could seem ponderous—on occasion one was reminded of Edward Challoner, the 'solemn ass' of Stevenson's *Dynamiter*, but more often they were extremely illuminating. Berenson's image of the well was a happy one—he did not bubble like a spring but the crystal water was indeed worth drawing up. Occupying a central position in a field which has its full share of feuds and stresses he was extraordinarily successful in keeping the trust and friendship of all sides. He was particularly generous in his encouragement of younger scholars, whose contributions he liked to welcome to his columns.

In person he was tall but slouching, with the dark hair and high colour of his Spanish ancestry. He was generally decidedly untidy in appearance. When he told his father, in 1953, that his experience at Summer Fields had left him with a horror of rendering himself conspicuous, Sir Harold commented in his diary, 'Considering that his hair is like that of a gollywog and his clothes noticeable at the other end of Trafalgar Square this was an odd assertion.' This endearing description will recall Ben vividly to those who knew him, as will the excellent portrait painted by Rodrigo Moynihan not long before his death and the photograph by Bern Schwarz which illustrates the obituary notice by Professor Francis Haskell in the *Burlington Magazine* for July 1978.

GILES ROBERTSON