



K. T. PARKER

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 ...C. Woodham-Smith, *Review of Pathology*, 1936, pp. 302 ff.

Karl Theodore Parker 1895–1992

KARL THEODORE PARKER was born in London on 2 July 1895, the younger son of Robert W. Parker, FRCS (1842–1913), a distinguished surgeon who was for many years one of the chief practitioners at the Childrens' Hospital in Shadwell, East London. When only lately qualified, Robert Parker had volunteered to join an Anglo-American medical expedition encouraged by Florence Nightingale's support, to treat casualties on both sides of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1: a small organization which removed after the war to Zürich, where it developed into the Red Cross. In this way, although he afterwards practised in England, Robert Parker became imbued with the spirit of internationalism that so greatly influenced his son Karl's career and character.¹

Karl Parker's mother, too, was a cosmopolitan—in her case by birth. She was Marie Luling, descended from a French family settled in the USA, in New Orleans, in the early 19th century; his grandmother, born in New Orleans in 1831, married a German-American, Charles Luling of New York. Their children and other relations then came back to Europe in force: one daughter to marry Karl Parker's father; another to marry a Rathbone, of the well-known shipping family of Liverpool; a third daughter, Nellie, who never married, made a home for her nephew Karl in her Chelsea flat until he married, and afterwards followed him to Oxford. A cousin, Theodore Denham Luling (born 1901), was at Eton and Magdalen, and married the distinguished novelist Sylvia Thompson; another cousin settled in Florence and married (as her second husband)

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¹ I believe that Karl may have been christened Karl Theodor (*sic*) as a mark of respect for the celebrated Elector Palatine of that name, Duke of Bavaria (d. 1799), because Robert Parker, his father, had been made a Knight of the Military Order of Merit of Bavaria in recognition of his services in treating the wounded in the Franco-Prussian war. Mr Alexander Kader, Sir Karl's grandson, kindly drew my attention to an interesting account of Robert Parker's medical activities by Valentine Swain FRCS in the periodical *Progress in Pediatric Surgery*, vol. 20. For the medical expedition in 1870–1 which Robert Parker joined as a very young surgeon, see C. Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale*, 1950, pp. 505 ff.

Marina Volpi, owner of the Villa Barbaro at Maser on the Venetian mainland, with its famous frescoes by Paolo Veronese.

Robert Parker retired from the Childrens' Hospital and left England in 1912. The whole Parker family was abroad, in Paris, Munich or Zürich, for some time before the outbreak of World War I, and they were in Zürich for the duration. Both sons were at Zürich University, where the elder, called Robert after his father, became Professor of Mineralogy. He died in Zürich in 1973. Karl had been at school at Bedford before following his family abroad; and though he took his degree at Zürich in another faculty, he began to study art when he travelled afterwards in France and Italy. Some articles which he published in the local *Archives Alsatiennes* caught the eye of Campbell Dodgson, Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, and at his suggestion Parker came to England in 1924 to work as a volunteer in the Printroom. A year later, when Henry (later Sir Henry) Hake was appointed Director of the National Portrait Gallery, Parker was the obvious choice to fill his place in the Printroom staff; and so, at the end of 1925, he became one of the particularly distinguished group of scholars there at the time, joining Campbell Dodgson, Laurence Binyon, Arthur Waley, A. M. Hind and A. E. Popham.

Parker remained in that post for nine years, from 1925 to 1934. Dodgson at first wanted him to continue the catalogue of early German woodcuts which he himself had begun; but Parker, once let loose in that rich collection, became more and more interested in the drawings rather than the prints, and in drawings of all schools, particularly those of the French 18th century. Of his own publications in that period, more will be said later; but it was in 1926, prompted by Dodgson and Popham, that he began the production of the quarterly, *Old Master Drawings*, with himself as editor, which continued publication until the outbreak of World War II. His skilful editing of this quarterly established his reputation among art-historians in Europe and the USA as a leading authority on old master drawings.²

The next landmark in his career was in 1934, when he was chosen to succeed Kenneth Clark as Keeper of the Department of Western Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, on Clark's appointment as Director of the National Gallery. Oxford was to be his last home as a museum man. From 1945 until his retirement in 1962 he was Keeper of the whole Ashmolean: a post corresponding to that of the present Director, held in rotation by the Keepers of the various departments.

² The last issue of *Old Master Drawings* is dated September 1939–March 1940; the first issue of its successor, *Master Drawings*, was published in New York in the Spring of 1963. The continuity between the two is emphasized by Parker's acceptance of the position of Honorary Chairman of the Editorial Advisory Board.

Parker's own publications reflect the variety of his interests in drawings of all schools and periods. The first, on early Swiss and Alsatian drawings, had appeared, as already indicated, before he came back to England to work in the British Museum. After his appointment as Assistant Keeper there, and after the inception of *Old Master Drawings* (to which he himself made many contributions), he produced in 1927 *Drawings of the Early German Schools* and *North Italian Drawings of the Quattrocento* in a series of books on drawings edited by himself and published by Ernest Benn; and in 1931 for the Urban-Verlag in Freiburg-in-Breisgau (but in English), *Alsatian Drawings of the XVth-XVIIth Centuries*. Also in 1931, independent of any series, he had produced for Messrs Batsford a valuable (and still standard) monograph on *The Drawings of Antoine Watteau*, which was expanded more than twenty-five years later, in collaboration with Jacques Mathey, into the complete catalogue of Watteau's drawings published in two volumes in Paris (1957–8).

In 1938 he published the first volume, comprising all schools except the Italian and the British, of the projected catalogue of the drawings in the Ashmolean. The second volume, which appeared in 1956, was devoted solely to the Italian school—a gigantic task, for the museum's collection included, in addition to a number of very important drawings acquired from early benefactors, no fewer than 270 by or attributed to Michelangelo and Raphael from the great collection of Sir Thomas Lawrence, presented to the University in 1845 by 'a Body of Subscribers'. The British drawings he left for a later volume which he did not complete, but he did not neglect the British school. Among several small booklets illustrating the wealth of the collection are two with his own graceful introductions, one a selection of drawings of all schools, the other devoted to Samuel Palmer, of whose drawings, especially of the early 'Shoreham period', he had acquired a particularly beautiful group.

Before he retired from the Ashmolean in 1962 he had also given much time to Venetian art. For the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice he selected and catalogued two exhibitions: *Disegni Veneti di Oxford* (1958, of drawings from the Ashmolean and Christ Church) and *Canaletto e Guardi* (1962, in collaboration with myself); he was also at work on an iconography of the Doges. But the most important of his publications in the post-war period were two volumes in the splendid series of catalogues of the drawings in the Royal Library at Windsor: *The Drawings of Holbein* (1945) and *The Drawings of Canaletto* (1948).

He was knighted in 1960, having been appointed CBE in 1954. In 1950 he was elected FBA and from 1962 to 1969 was a Trustee of the National Gallery. In 1972 he received an honorary degree of D.Litt. from the

University, and was also an Honorary Fellow of Oriel College, of which he had been elected a Professorial Fellow on his appointment to the Ashmolean. In 1963 he was appointed Honorary Antiquary to the Royal Academy.

Before he retired from the Ashmolean in 1962 Parker and his wife and their two daughters had left their house in Beaumont Street and gone to live at the Manor Farm at Garsington; but he did not want to spend his remaining years in the neighbourhood of Oxford, and the question arose of where they should live. One of the possibilities that he considered was to retire to Venice, where he would be near his relations at Maser and where he could continue his work on the iconography of the Doges, but this would not have been an altogether congenial exile for his wife, to whom he was devoted. In 1928 he had married Audrey, daughter of Henry Ashworth James of Herstmonceux Place in Sussex. The Jameses were a prominent family in that part of Sussex—her brother, Sir Archibald James, was a Conservative Member of Parliament—belonging to a world quite unlike that of the cosmopolitan Parkers. Lady Parker would have liked to go back to her home county to be near her own people, and her husband felt that she was entitled to make the choice. So they settled for the rest of their lives (she died in 1976) in Eastbourne, in a flat overlooking the grounds of the Duke of Devonshire's house, Compton Place.

Without the possibility of easy and continual access to libraries and museums he found it difficult to carry on his researches, and eventually presented his valuable material on the Doges to the Ashmolean in the hope that some Venetian enthusiast might some day complete it. But the flat in Saffrons Court was filled with his own treasures: drawings, prints and porcelain, as well as small sculpture and other *objets d'art*, many inherited from his aunt Nellie Luling (herself a discerning collector) but mostly acquired by him for trifling sums in the early days of his developing connoisseurship, before his museum career began. Some of his porcelain he sold at Sotheby's when the family moved to Eastbourne, and some drawings of great value bequeathed to him by the collector Henry Oppenheimer he presented immediately to the Ashmolean in Oppenheimer's memory. (To the list of Parker's publications should be added the catalogue of the Oppenheimer Collection, which he compiled for the sale at Christie's in July 1936 in accordance with the collector's wish.) Parker died in Eastbourne on 22 July 1992.

Parker was a handsome man, and retained his distinguished appearance throughout his long life, though latterly he disguised himself with a beard. In his personal relationships he was always popular: only prejudiced persons—such as the cantankerous Charles Bell, a predecessor at the

Ashmolean, who accused him quite unfairly of avoiding the first world war, when the whole Parker family was living in Zürich—had anything but good to say to him. Like his friend Popham, he was ‘humorous’ in the old sense of the word; his jokes were often obscure, depending on the sympathy and understanding of his hearer. He used to say that people like himself, who knew several languages equally well (as he knew English, French and German), could not write well in any of them; but in fact his English was good and clear, not cumbersome and long-winded like that of too many present-day art-historians. His letters, of which I have a great many, are in a large, sprawling, rather ‘unscholarly’ handwriting, and couched in a private and allusive language which an outsider would have difficulty in following: Henry Oppenheimer is generally called ‘Hen Opp’, Kenneth Clark ‘the Lord’ or ‘his Lordship’, and so on. He would imitate Oppenheimer’s Frankfurt accent in phonetic spelling and orally even to his face (I can vouch for that) without apparently giving the least offence—for they remained great friends.

Of his own staff in the museum, both Ian Robertson (died 1983), his successor as Keeper of the Department of Western Art, and John Woodward (died 1988), afterwards a very successful Keeper of Paintings in the Birmingham Art Gallery, owed much to his guidance. Oppenheimer had of course been a British subject for many years (making no attempt to change that Frankfurt accent), but from 1933 onwards Parker made many new friends among the museum men and dealers who had fled from Hitler’s Germany, and helped them to make careers in this country. He recommended Oscar Nemon, the sculptor, as the right man to make the bust of HM the Queen, Visitor of the College, that now stands behind the High Table in the Hall of Christ Church; after that success Nemon was chosen, again on Parker’s advice, to undertake the statue of Winston Churchill for the lobby of the House of Commons.³

I have left to the last any account of Parker’s acquisitions for the Ashmolean during his long term of office chiefly because I have already, in collaboration with the late Ian Robertson, published in *The Burlington Magazine* for October 1962, as a tribute to him on his retirement, a more detailed account of his achievement in this respect with illustrations of some of his more notable *coups*. But I must of course say something of it

³ A half-length figure in painted plaster, rather less than half life-size, by Nemon (1960), of Parker wearing an overcoat and his familiar battered hat, is in the students’ room of the Department of Western Art in the Ashmolean Museum.

here. Another Keeper in his place might have thought that since the Ashmolean already possessed so many great drawings from the Douce, Chambers Hall and Lawrence Collections, he would be justified in devoting his attention to other fields. But to Parker these old collectors had set an example which he was determined to follow by buying more drawings, and the best he could find. Fortunately, this was at a time when even the very best could be had for what seems in the 1990s absurdly little money. The museum's yearly purchase grant from the University was less than £2000; but with this, and some small bequests, and considerable help from the National Art-Collections Fund and from collectors who had profited by his advice, he contrived, in the twenty-eight years he spent in the museum, to increase the collection of drawings by more than 3000 items. These included fine drawings by artists who had not yet become fashionable, such as Guercino (it was no doubt Parker's interest in this great master that inspired Sir Denis Mahon to promise ultimately to the Ashmolean, and to deposit there in the meantime, his outstanding collection of drawings by him); and Mr John Gere has drawn my attention to Parker's enlightened policy of acquiring as many examples as possible of then little-studied masters such as Mattia Preti or Samuel Palmer. But his acquisitions also included indisputable examples of the greatest masters: Rogier van der Weyden, Lucas van Leyden, Dürer, Holbein, Giovanni Bellini, Filippino Lippi, Raphael and Francesco Guardi. Nor were they limited to drawings: in 1949 he bought, for less than £1000, the *Virgin and Child* with a view of Venice in the background (the so-called *Tallard Madonna*), an undoubtedly Giorgionesque work, possibly even by Giorgione; others bought during his keepership included a portrait by Bernini and an early work by Paolo Veronese, *The Holy Family with St George*. His friends F. F. Madan (son of a former Bodley's Librarian) and Grete Ring (of the Dutch firm of Cassirer) made generous gifts and, eventually, bequests, as did the family of Camille Pissarro (through the instrumentality of Ian Robertson). Nor did he neglect sculpture, some pieces of which are illustrated in *The Burlington Magazine* article to which I have already referred, notably a life-size terracotta of a *Dryad* by the renowned Coysevox, signed and dated 1709. At least to visitors to the Ashmolean it might fairly be said of Karl Parker: *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*.

JAMES BYAM SHAW

Note: Much information from Sir Karl Parker's grandson, Mr Alexander Kader;

information and suggestions from Mr John Gere; information from Mr Francis Russell; personal friendship from 1925.

Mr Byam Shaw died himself a few months before the subject of this memoir. The Academy is grateful to Mr Gere for deciphering, transcribing and editing his manuscript, and seeing it through the press.