



TOM BOASE

*Bassano Ltd*

## Thomas Sherrer Ross Boase 1898–1974

TOM BOASE, as he was familiarly known to his wide circle of friends, was born on 31 August 1898. His father, Charles Millet Boase, ran a bleaching mill, of which he was also part owner, on the outskirts of Dundee. In an autobiographical memoir, written after his retirement, Boase describes the small community of the mill and its employees, who all knew each other. The outside world was represented by the flax imported from Riga and the jute which came from Calcutta. In an age where entertainment was still largely provided from within the family, Tom Boase's mother, Anne Malcolm Ross, read the plays of Shakespeare aloud to him and his sister. She also played the piano to them. The phonograph brought a wider acquaintance with both classical and popular music ('Good-bye Dolly Gray'), and there were occasional concerts in Dundee, so that as a boy he heard Paderewski, Tetrizzini, and Pachmann. A lifelong interest in the theatre was kindled already at the age of seven with performances in Dundee of *The Merchant of Venice* and of *Romeo and Juliet*. His mother's father owned a collection of paintings, and Medici prints were received as Christmas presents.

Reading was the main leisure activity of a boy who was never able to share his father's passion for sports and games. The books he read, both classics and yellow backs, came from the lending library in Edinburgh, and were supplemented by the monthly magazines. Books evidently provided a lens for the observation of life. He comments of Gilead P. Beck in *The Golden Butterfly* (by Sir Walter Besant, published in 1876), that as 'one of the nicest men in fiction' he 'formed my first conception of an American'. Later, when President of Magdalen, he and James

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Griffiths, Fellow and afterwards also President, instituted Thanksgiving Dinners for the Rhodes and Fulbright Scholars and other homesick American students in the college, a custom which still continues. He also comments on the way in which the novels of Mrs Humphry Ward formed a bridge across the age gap. They were, he says, 'almost fiercely debated' in the Boase household.

From the age of nine he attended a local preparatory School from which he returned at weekends, and in 1912 he was sent south to Rugby School. He writes of the school's emphasis on sports in which he was a reluctant participant, but also of certain masters who were evidently fine teachers, 'Tiger' Hastings in History, and Bob Whitelaw in Classics. When the sixth-form master, H. H. Symonds, preaching at a memorial service for old boys recently fallen in the Great War, observed that they would have provided impetus and vision for the Labour Party, several of the congregation got up and left. The boys were admiring of his courage, though they had little interest in politics. The war, which by now was clearly going to last longer than the six months originally predicted, had removed, Boase says, any ability on their part to think about a future in which they did not expect to take part.

Boase left Rugby having obtained an exhibition at Magdalen College, Oxford. He had also won the Gold Medal for an historical essay on a set subject, which that year was Lorenzo de' Medici. The essay was typed out by his mother. In January 1917 he joined a cadet battalion housed in Wadham College, Oxford, and he was commissioned into the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in the same year. In his memoir Boase writes very movingly of his experiences in the trenches and in particular of the events which led to the death of a friend of the same age. This was as a result of a shell hitting a farmhouse which had been captured, lost and recaptured from the enemy. Boase was awarded the MC for his part in this action. In March 1918 he was sent on leave while his regiment was stationed at St Quentin and he comments that he might otherwise not have survived to see, at Cambrai, the Armistice. In the trenches, too, he read widely, Dante in Italian and Anatole France in French, and he also recalls his emotion on his first visit to Amiens Cathedral.

The war over, the return to Oxford was not without its difficulties. It was not just that studies had been interrupted; they seemed humdrum and anticlimactic. His history tutor at Magdalen, Lionel Smith, had succeeded in interesting him in Crusading history in his first year, but had then left the College, disgusted with Senior Common Room

intrigues. Boase fell victim to the Spanish 'flu epidemic which resulted in an ulceration of his right eye, a recurring health problem for him. Then his father, stricken with cancer, died the very day on which his son took his viva for his Final degree in the Schools. Boase's placement in the Second Class must have been considered an aberration, for he was immediately appointed in 1922 to teach History at Hertford College.

He remained a highly successful college tutor for the next fifteen years. One of his most famous pupils was Evelyn Waugh, and the legend grew up that he could recall hearing on the other side of the door the nervous freshman muttering the Ave Maria before a tutorial, although this was in fact unlikely since Waugh only became a Catholic several years later. The interwar years saw the publication of his first two books, both historical biographies, *Boniface VIII*, published in 1933, and still useful as the only serious English language book on its subject, and *St Francis* published in 1936 with a new edition issued in 1968 with lithographs by Arthur Boyd. During these years, though he comments on certain financial problems following his father's death, he was also able to travel widely to attend theatre and see art in Europe, especially in Germany and Italy.

His next step was a surprising career change. Already in 1917 he had met the famous Balliol tutor, 'Sligger' Urquhart, and become part of the circle which frequented both his college rooms in Oxford and his chalet in Switzerland. Boase's charm is frequently referred to and though his memoir is mainly, as he says, a record of his response to the arts, avoiding the personal and references to friends which he felt might seem like name dropping, he was evidently what would now be called a good networker. Among his friends were some important personalities in the art world, including Kenneth Clark and David Balniel (later Lord Crawford), who organised the landmark exhibition on Italian art at Burlington House in 1930. It is not clear how Boase knew Lord Lee of Fareham, but perhaps through them. Lee and Samuel Courtauld had provided the inspiration and the funds behind the founding of the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1932, and when the first Director, W. G. Constable, resigned in 1937, Lee evidently decided that Boase should be his successor. 'Broken by his persistence I agreed to let my name go forward.'<sup>1</sup> As Director he held a chair at London University.

<sup>1</sup> See the Editorial by Herbert Read, *Burlington Magazine*, 71 (1937), 107–8, and letters by Lord Lee of Fareham, *ibid.*, 189, W. G. Constable, D. Talbot Rice, and E. K. Waterhouse, 237–8, and Sir Robert Witt, 289–90.

In 1933 the Warburg Institute had moved from Hamburg to London under the Direction of Fritz Saxl. Boase makes the interesting comment that it was largely due to Saxl that the Courtauld Institute so rapidly established itself. The two institutes were and have remained linked in the publication of a journal, to which Boase was to contribute thirteen articles, but otherwise have remained separate. Refugee scholars were certainly crucial to the development of academic art history in Britain, and Saxl both knew all the important German academic art historians and was active at this time in trying to procure employment for those who had been able to escape from Nazi Germany. The Courtauld permanent staff in 1937 was still small, in addition to the Director comprising a Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology, later transferred to the School of Oriental and African Studies, a Reader, and three part-time lecturers, in Western, Byzantine and Indian art. Most of the teaching of the students, who numbered about twenty-five, was done by guest lecturers, who included Kenneth Clark, T. D. Kendrick, Geoffrey Webb and A. E. Popham. During the War they were replaced or supplemented by Johannes Wilde, Otto Demus, and Peter Brieger among others. George Zarnecki joined the staff in 1945. In the event Boase was to have too short a tenure to effect much change at the Institute, though he worked before the war on the course syllabuses which had been one of the bones of contention in the controversies leading to Constable's resignation. His achievement was more in consolidating the Institute's status and reputation. The appointments in 1947 of Wilde as Reader and of Christopher Hohler, a former pupil at Hertford College, as lecturer, though made by his successor, Anthony Blunt, were no doubt initiated by Boase.

In 1939 at the outbreak of war Boase was posted to Bletchley Park where he was engaged on RAF intelligence. Early in 1940 he was sent to Egypt, first to Heliopolis, later to 'Grey Pillars', the Air Force Headquarters in Cairo. He comments that for those in Cairo at this time Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* 'can never seem overstated'. He returned to England at the end of 1941 on a 'plane in which he was able to converse with Field-Marshal Lord Wavell, and remained at Bletchley until the autumn of 1943 when he was appointed Chief Representative of the British Council Middle East. The ship in which he sailed to Egypt, part of the first convoy through the Mediterranean after the Italian landings, was hit by an aerial torpedo. 'I had some knowledge at the time of the German air force so was not altogether

surprised.<sup>2</sup> On the ship that rescued them he met the actress Peggy Ashcroft who was to become a lifelong friend.

Boase's interest in the Crusades has been mentioned and he had lectured in the Oxford History School on the *Gesta Francorum*. He had already travelled in the Near East before the war and his earliest art historical article, 'The arts in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem', was published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, volume 2 for 1938–9. His new post with the British Council enabled him to travel widely and he continued his interest in books written after the war, *Castles and Churches of the Crusader Kingdom*, 1967, *Kingdoms and Strongholds of the Crusades*, 1971, and *The Cilician Kingdom of Armenia*, 1978, as well as in his contribution to the *History of the Crusades*, by Ken Setton. He wrote most of volume IV, *Art and Architecture in the Crusader States*, edited by H. W. Hazard. His characteristically prompt contribution had been submitted in manuscript in 1950, had to be revised in 1969, and was only finally published in 1977! Though making use of earlier continental scholarship, chiefly French and mostly on architecture, Boase's studies were important not only in introducing the subject to English readers but in introducing new material, particularly in sculpture and manuscript illumination, which in turn necessitated new perceptions as to the mix of European and local cultures. The value of his researches has been emphasised by Jaroslav Folda, who completed the posthumous 1977 book which he described as the 'first general survey of crusader monuments throughout the Levant'.<sup>3</sup> It is probably in this area of art historical enquiry that Boase's contributions can be seen as most original in themselves and also influential for the future.

Back in London in 1946 other members of the Courtauld staff were also returning, the formidable librarian, Rhoda Welsford, Margaret Whinney, and Anthony Blunt who had been appointed Reader in May 1939 and who now shared with him the flat at the top of 20 Portman Square. The lease on this house, designed by Robert Adam, together with a capital endowment had been the gift of Samuel Courtauld to the Institute.

In late 1946 Sir Henry Tizard vacated the Presidency of Magdalen College in order to become chairman of the Defence Research Policy

<sup>2</sup> W. C. Crocker, *Far From Humdrum* (1967), gives an account in which Boase figures as 'the Professor'.

<sup>3</sup> See Jaroslav Folda, *ibid.*, and his more recent lengthy historiographical discussion of Boase's contribution to crusader art historical studies in *The Art of the Crusaders in the Holy Land 1098–1187* (New York, 1995), esp. pp. 12–4.

Committee. Boase describes in the memoir a visit to T. D. Weldon, fellow of the college, a contemporary and close friend from Oxford days, during which they discussed Tizzard's decision and Boase asked if Weldon would be a candidate. In the event it was Boase who was elected as Tizzard's successor the following year, remaining President for twenty-one years. Samuel Courtauld had remarked that it was 'surely an old man's job', but Boase writes in the memoir that with fifty fellows, four hundred undergraduates, the attached Magdalen College School, the ancient buildings, and the Choir, 'every day had its crisis'.<sup>4</sup> He remarks in relation to the influence of the poet Robert Bridges on the Oxford of his youth that his own friendship with Edward Bridges, the poet's son and a prominent civil servant, taught him the skills of handling men and committees. He was also a fluent public speaker, entertaining or sympathetic as the occasion required.

The many responsibilities of running the college were not so apparent to the undergraduates, and we were more aware of a man who made time to entertain each of us to lunch or dinner during the year and in addition to take many of us to concerts or the theatre. This personal interest, which included solicitous enquiries in cases of illness and congratulation on success in academic or sporting matters, was rather exceptional at the time. It was much appreciated, though it was noted that he had his favourites, as he himself admits: 'Though I knew them all, I knew some much better than others.'

The energy and commitment which enabled him to do all this while at the same time serving on numerous public committees and continuing to produce his scholarly work was remarkable. He had already been Treasurer of the Oxford University Dramatic Society in the 1930s. His interest in the theatre remained always a major part of his life and much of his memoir is taken up with accounts of plays and players. After the Second World War he served as Governor of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (1952–74), and Trustee of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (1949–74). He was also a Trustee of the National Gallery (1947–53, chairman 1951–3), and of the British Museum (1950–69). He was a member of the Advisory Council of the Victoria and Albert Museum (1947–70), of the Council for the Royal Albert Hall, and of the British School at Rome, President of the British Archaeological Association (1969–72), and a Governor of Rugby School. These are only some of

<sup>4</sup> For some insight into the life of the College in these years see K. B. McFarlane, *Letters to Friends 1940–66*, ed. with introduction by G. Harriss (Oxford, 1997).

the most prominent of the causes and institutions he served. Another important aspect of his life was his Christian religious faith to which the memoir devotes an appendix. Before the war he was involved with Leslie Hunter and Harry Willink in the Church assembly in debates over the allocation of church funds.<sup>5</sup> He was also concerned with the plight of Christians in Nazi Germany.<sup>6</sup> As President of Magdalen he was a regular attender at Chapel services and supporter of the Choir, from 1957 under the direction of Bernard Rose.

In 1946 Geoffrey Cumberledge at Oxford University Press had asked him to edit the *Oxford History of English Art* projected in eleven volumes. His volume, *English Art 1100–1216*, was published in 1953, having been delivered as Waynflete Lectures in Oxford in Hilary term, 1950. A byproduct was a short monograph, *The York Psalter*, published in a series on illuminated manuscripts by Faber and Faber, 1962, and two picture-books on Romanesque and Gothic illuminated manuscripts for the Bodleian Library. His publications have sometimes been condescendingly referred to as being those of an historian and not an art historian. This has its irony as recent trends have been towards a contextual history of art emphasizing the patronage and reception of art works. Boase himself was well aware that his bias was towards historical documentation rather than style criticism and the volumes of the Oxford History were significantly divided by regnal dates, not stylistic terms such as 'Romanesque'. He also freely admits that he never had the opportunity for 'continuous research into limited and largely unpublished material'. His twelfth-century book relies heavily on the scholarship of others as he acknowledges, A. W. Clapham for the architecture, George Zarnecki for the sculpture, and Francis Wormald and Otto Pächt for manuscript illumination. It fulfilled its purpose as an up-to-date and balanced survey. Other medieval volumes were undertaken by Peter Brieger, by then in Canada, and by Joan Evans whose was the first volume in the series to be published, in 1949, with a long preface by Boase on the aims of the series.<sup>7</sup> Later he contributed to

<sup>5</sup> An appendix to the memoir includes a discussion of his religious faith. See also the Memorial Address by the Revd A. W. Adams, Dean of Divinity, Fellow 1949 to 1975, kept with the Boase Papers.

<sup>6</sup> He visited Germany several times before the war, and comments on the accuracy of Richard Hughes' novel *The Fox in the Attic*. He was decorated with the Grosses Verdienstkreuz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in 1958.

<sup>7</sup> The Boase papers at Magdalen contain files of correspondence on these volumes. They are mainly concerned with practical matters of publication and illustration.

the volume *The Flowering of the Middle Ages*, edited by Joan Evans, 1966, an essay on 'Death in the Middle Ages'. This was published separately as a book in 1972.

Boase also wrote the nineteenth-century volume, *English Art 1800–1870*, published in 1959. This was, much more than the earlier volume, a pioneering piece of research, for these were the early days of the re-evaluation of Victorian architecture and art. The Victorian Society had been recently formed to protect masterpieces which were being heedlessly torn down by developers, and the pre-Raphaelite painters' work was still mocked as sentimental in many quarters. Once again there were links to his Hertford College days, when he had lectured on the Industrial Revolution. The book was completed in a surprisingly short time, and was, like the earlier volume, a thorough and judicious survey. It incorporated his own original research as published in papers in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, for example those on the decoration of Westminster Palace, 1954, and on shipwrecks in English Romantic pictures, 1959.<sup>8</sup> Later articles included one on biblical illustration in nineteenth-century art, 1966, and another on 'An Oxford College [Magdalen] and the Gothic revival'. He was able to combine his interest in theatre in papers on 'Illustrations of Shakespeare's plays in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', 1947, and 'The Medici in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama', 1964. He devoted a great deal of work to the completion of Hans A. Hammelmann's dictionary, *Book illustrators in eighteenth-century England*, 1975.

Meanwhile within the College there were controversial issues in the restoration of the stonework, the laying out of the formal rose garden designed by Miss Sylvia Crowe on the opposite side of the High Street ('Boase's Roses'), and especially the erection of the rather nondescript Waynflete Building on the other side of Magdalen Bridge. In 1958 Boase served the University as Vice-Chancellor receiving Presidents Bulganin and Khrushchev of the USSR at a moment of slight thaw in the Cold War. He was not in good health during his term, however, as his eye trouble recurred and his right eye had to be removed. He had travelled to Canada and the United States in 1953 and to Australia in 1955, seeking out *Magdalenses* everywhere. In Australia he encountered the work of prominent contemporary painters, Nolan, Drysdale, Boyd,

<sup>8</sup> A patronising and quite unjust review in the *Observer* by Geoffrey Grigson recognised none of this and must have hurt Boase as he refers to it in his memoir, typically recording a sympathetic remark made to him by an undergraduate in the college.

and Dobell. Arthur Boyd contributed seventeen lithographs for a reissue of his book on St Francis in 1968, and Boase wrote the text for Boyd's *Nebuchadnezzar* published in 1972. In the memoir he describes William Dobell as 'one of the greatest of contemporary portrait painters'. It is a pity that his own portrait, presented to the College by former Rhodes Scholars in 1953, was painted not by Dobell but by the Royal Academician Anthony Devas. It is, however, a good likeness and shows him in a characteristic attitude. His only other contribution as far as contemporary art was concerned was a short essay for a book published in 1968 on the then rather prominent but now largely forgotten British sculptor David Wynne.

From all this it can be seen how constantly active he was, and it is not very surprising that Boase does not seem to have lectured regularly in Oxford while President, though his twelfth-century book, as mentioned above, was originally delivered as lectures in 1950. Art history was still not an examined subject in the University for most of his tenure, and it may be that his loyalty to the Courtauld Institute prevented any real commitment on his part to changing that.<sup>9</sup>

Boase retired from Magdalen in 1968 on his seventieth birthday, which happened to be the day of the year, 31 August, fixed by College Statute as the term of a Presidency. A fund in his honour was generously subscribed by past undergraduates. He was asked to give the Mellon Lectures in the National Gallery in Washington in 1972, which he did in spite of an operation for cancer the preceding year. The lectures on Giorgio Vasari were to prove his last book, which was published posthumously in 1979. He lived in retirement in Wimbledon with his sister and died on 14 April 1974. He had been elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1961 and was the recipient of honorary degrees from the universities of Oxford, St Andrews, Durham, Reading, and Melbourne. His will made provision for bequests from his library and art collection. From the latter the Salford Street scene by L. S. Lowry which used to hang in the dining room of the Presidential Lodgings was bequeathed with other oils to Dame Peggy Ashcroft, while a series of watercolours and drawings went to the Courtauld Institute. A selection of books from his library and the residue of the art collection, which

<sup>9</sup> The only graduate student supervised by him known to me was Larry Ayres, now Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who completed a B.Litt. on the twelfth-century Winchester Bible in 1966. Otto Pächt was teaching in the History School at Oxford from 1945–63, but not for examination credit. See J. J. G. Alexander, *PBA*, 80 (1993), 453–72. Edgar Wind was appointed first Professor of History of Art at Oxford in 1955.

included a Guercino drawing given to him by Sir Robert Witt, went to Magdalen. The art collection was mainly of British works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including sheets by Towne, Flaxman, Holman Hunt, Burne-Jones, Landseer, and Ruskin. A pecuniary legacy to fund a history prize at Hertford College was a final typical example of his generous support of the interests of undergraduates.

JONATHAN J. G. ALEXANDER

*Fellow of the Academy*

*Note.* This obituary depends heavily on Boase's memoir, preserved in the archives at Magdalen College, from which the direct quotations are all taken. I thank the College Archivist, Dr Robin Darwall-Smith, for allowing me to see this and the other files of Boase's papers preserved there. In addition to my own recollections of Magdalen during the period I was in Oxford, 1956–71, I have especially benefited from conversation with John Stoye, Fellow from 1948 to 1984. He is the author of the entry on Boase in the *Dictionary of National Biography 1971–80* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 68–9, and was kind enough to pass on correspondence he had with some of Boase's contemporaries and friends. I should also like to thank Michael Kauffmann for consulting the archives of the Courtauld Institute for me. An obituary of Boase written by George Zarnecki, Deputy Director of the Courtauld Institute 1961 to 1974, appeared in the *Burlington Magazine*, 117 (1975), 809. For reading a draft of the present obituary and making comments and corrections I am most grateful to Robin Darwall-Smith, Jolyon Hall, John Stoye, and George Zarnecki.