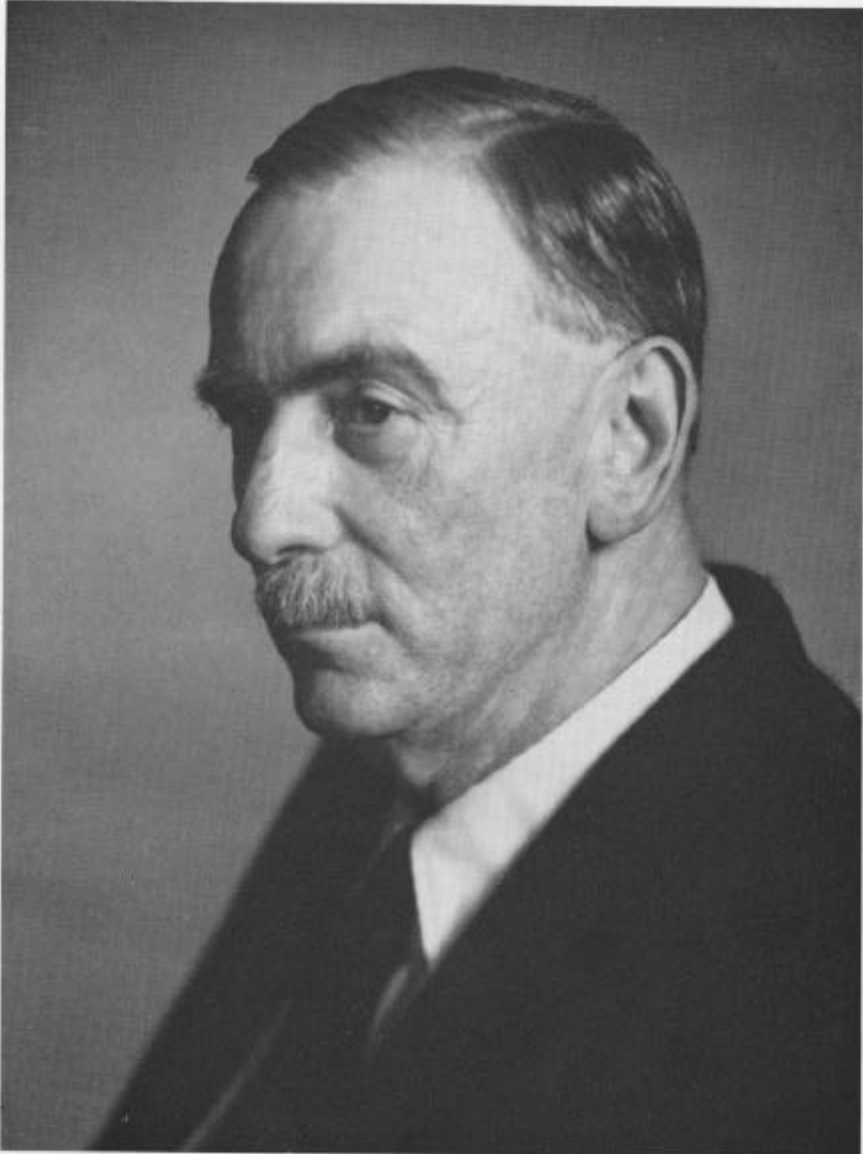


PLATE XXXIV



*Photograph by Walter Slossman*

GEOFFREY FAIRBANK WEBB, C.B.E.

## GEOFFREY FAIRBANK WEBB

1898-1970

**G**EOFFREY FAIRBANK WEBB, who died on 17 July 1970, was born in Birkenhead on 4 May 1898. His father had a good position in Booth's Steamship Company, and the family lived very comfortably. It was a slightly unusual household, for Webb was the only child of his father's second marriage, most of his stepbrothers and sisters being old enough to be his uncles and aunts. His mother died when he was about fifteen, and his father later married again, his stepmother, with whom he seems to have developed a happy relationship, being young enough to be more like an elder sister. He does not seem to have been on intimate terms with his father, but to a man with no interest in the arts he may well have been a difficult son to understand. His closest family ties as he grew up seem to have been with his eldest stepsister and her husband, who shared his tastes. He was educated at Birkenhead Grammar School, but never ceased to resent the fact that he had not been sent to a public school.

The first part of his life which palpably left a mark on the mature man was his service before the mast in the First World War from 1917 to 1919 in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. Part of his time was spent on a small craft as part of a team manning an anti-aircraft gun, during which time he was torpedoed and lost all his possessions. He also served in the Mediterranean, hanging over the side in a cradle and applying grey paint to the hulls of battleships. He always looked back on this period with great pleasure. It gave him a lifelong interest in boats, and it also proved to him his ability to get on with men of very different kinds. Throughout his life the sensitive art historian was combined with a man of simple tastes, who enjoyed an evening in a pub, and who had a fund of humorous stories, which he would recount with great delight.

The other side of his life had, inevitably, begun to develop. When he was still very young he determined that he would always spend more on books than on clothes, a practice he continued to the end of his life. And when in January 1919 he went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, he arrived in an old pair of grey flannel trousers, a blue seaman's jersey, and with all his possessions in a sailor's canvas bag. This was, in one way,

very characteristic of his career as an undergraduate. He had no interest in smart clubs and little in games. He read history, working hard and reading widely. And his chief devotion outside his work was given to the Amateur Dramatic Club. He took part in *The Duke of Gandia* and *The White Devil*, produced by the Marlowe Society, and was also much interested in a production of the *Oresteia* in Greek, with Armstrong Gibbs's music. As might be expected much time was given to discussion (throughout his life he loved argument), in which his views were naturally more mature than those of undergraduates straight from school; but he was well liked and made no enemies.

After taking his degree in 1921 he moved to London and settled in Bloomsbury, sharing a house which had mural paintings by Duncan Grant, with a friend, Angus Davidson. Both men were keenly interested in films and attempted, though without much success, to find work on the production side. His time in Bloomsbury, though short, meant much to him, above all for the impact of the thought of Roger Fry. Fry's analysis of visual appearances, indeed his whole approach to works of art, left a deep impression on him, and one which he was proud to acknowledge. The other intellectual debt on which he insisted till quite late in his life was to the writings on English medieval architecture by E. S. Prior. These he may well have known before he left Cambridge. Prior had himself been influenced by German art historians, who regarded history of art as part of the history of civilization, and long before a purely archaeological approach (in the narrowest sense) was abandoned in England, was already attempting to seek in human history, political, social, and economic, the reasons for changes of style in the arts. This viewpoint, combined with the fruits of his own wide reading in Cambridge, proved specially congenial to him.

It has proved impossible to discover exactly when and why Webb decided to become an architectural historian. It may well be that the decisive factor was the chance to edit the letters of Sir John Vanbrugh for the Nonesuch Press (*The Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, volume iv, 1928). This must have taken many months to prepare, for though access to the letters at Blenheim was refused, a surprisingly large number of letters about other houses proved available. And the Letters are accompanied by a long and revealing Introduction. At that time Vanbrugh's work was generally regarded as uncouth—an unfortunate interlude between the age of Wren and that of Palladianism, or, as the latter would have been called, 'Georgian'. (The Vanbrugh

volume in the H. A. Tipping and C. Hussey In English Homes series appeared in the same year as the Letters, so no cross-influence is likely.) Webb presented Vanbrugh as an imaginative artist of great originality, showing from his own letters his reasons for the forms he used, and indeed proving what had been regarded as unthinkable, that there was an English variant of the despised Baroque style. In this he at once showed his independence of mind; for most English architectural writers of the time refused to see English Post-Reformation architecture a part of the main Continental development, but were prepared to regard anything from the time of Inigo Jones to that of Soane as 'Late Renaissance'. In both his writings and his many lectures Webb rejected this view, and there can be no doubt that his attitude was extremely influential, and that many later historians owe more to him than they may have realized.

A good deal of his time in the late 1920s must have been given to writing and to the preparations for it. He published articles on architecture and sculpture in the Burlington Magazine Monographs on *Spanish Art* (1927) and *Georgian Art* (1929) and articles on the sculptor Hubert le Sueur appeared in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1928.

By now he had left London and returned to the neighbourhood of Cambridge, living with friends at a farm at Elsworth and getting about the country on a motor-cycle combination. His management of it may not always have been complete, for David Garnett, a close friend, records in his autobiography an incident when it was involuntarily ridden into a pond. He was also beginning an academic career. After taking his M.A. in 1929, he was employed as a Lecturer by the Cambridge Extra-Mural Department from 1929 to 1936. In 1933 he was appointed to a University Demonstratorship at the School of Architecture, from which he was promoted to a Lectureship, which he was to hold till 1948. At the same time, from 1934 to 1937 he was a Lecturer and tutor at the Courtauld Institute of Art. His success as a teacher was considerable, in spite of a lecture technique which could be a little daunting on first experience. He rarely used notes, but strode rapidly about the room talking fast but very audibly, interspersing his sentences with many asides, some of them addressed to the screen, and making swift dashes to a blackboard to sketch a plan or section, which almost always were begun too near the bottom of the board. But it was soon apparent that what he had to say was worth listening to with care, for little of it would be found in

textbooks, and his enthusiasm for his subject quickly communicated itself to his audience. Inevitably he was an inspiring, though most challenging supervisor to postgraduate students, pouring out ideas with great generosity, especially when he got an intelligent return. But he could also be most patient and helpful over the practical problems of presentation which so often arise in a complicated subject. The importance of his work as a teacher during these years was very great, and it was crowned by two three-year periods as Slade Professor at Cambridge, from 1938 to 1941 and 1946 to 1949.

His heavy lecture programme, especially when he was spending two days a week in London, teaching at the Courtauld Institute, did not leave him much time for writing. What he did publish was nearly all on the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. In 1931 he had followed his study of Vanbrugh by an important paper in the *Walpole Society*, volume xix, on 'Nicholas Hawksmoor's Mausoleum at Castle Howard', in which a number of unknown letters were published, throwing new light on the outlook of Wren's successors. There was a tantalizing article, 'The Architectural Antecedents of Sir Christopher Wren' (*R.I.B.A. Journal*, xl, May 1933), which he always referred to as 'Six Houses in Search of an Architect' (most of them are still in search of an architect). And in 1937 there was a most distinguished but unfortunately unillustrated short book, *Sir Christopher Wren*, in which the architect's relationship to Continental architecture, as well as to the English background, was carefully examined. A lesser-known work is his contribution to *Johnson's England* (Oxford, 1932), where his two chapters on architecture and landscape gardening are not yet completely out-of-date. And he was already extending his interests to the Middle Ages.

In 1934 he married Marjorie Isabel Batten, at that time also an architectural historian, though she was later to devote her interests to English eighteenth-century sculpture. They lived at Low Farm, Elsworth, a house with a most noble medieval barn; and a visit there was filled with challenging talk (and gusts of laughter); though it needed quick wits to follow adequately Webb's rapid tangential sentences. Almost always they took their guests on a tour of buildings, which was certain to result in fresh ideas springing out of Webb's mind, and exciting his listeners.

A further source of pleasure, and indeed of inspiration, which began in this decade was his association with the Warburg Institute. He was fascinated by the range of knowledge of the

staff, and the varied uses to which it was put. On the other hand, Webb's originality of outlook was to them an example of all that was best and most imaginative in English scholarship, and his sense of humour enchanted them. He quickly became on terms of friendship with Professor Wittkower, and later with Professor Saxl, and the happy relationship was sealed by his appointment to their Committee of Management, on which he was to remain with one short interval until his resignation in 1966. In 1950 he became a Foundation Trustee of the Saxl Fund. Like other English scholars who were working in London during the Second World War, he found in his week-end visits to the Institute's temporary home at Denham, refreshment and relaxation. He was much excited by the photographic exhibition 'English art and the Mediterranean', and contributed constant valuable advice.

On the outbreak of war in 1939 Webb was appointed to the Intelligence branch of the Admiralty, but by 1943 had been transferred to the historical section of the Cabinet Offices. By the end of that year he was entrusted with more active and perhaps more difficult work. The experience of the campaigns in North Africa and Italy had shown the overriding need for an organization devoted to the preservation of works of art, and a joint Anglo-American body was created, working under the name of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives branch. It was confirmed on an official basis by the appointment of Sir Leonard Woolley as Archaeological Adviser to the War Office. Soon a London branch was formed to deal with the problems which would arise after the invasion of Northern Europe, and Webb was appointed as Director of the branch. Although one reason for the establishment of the organization in the Mediterranean had been a determination to refute charges of looting levelled by the Germans against Allied forces, a wider interpretation of courses necessary to preserve the good name of the armies was soon found to be essential. Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives officers, in collaboration with the Civil Affairs branch of the expeditionary force, were expected to warn Commanding Officers of the historic and artistic value of buildings, so that as far as possible they should escape bombardment, and that troops should not be billeted in them. Later, help with temporary repairs fell within their duties, and an important task was the development of measures to recover and return stolen art treasures. In France and Germany Webb had about twenty officers, including several from the museum world,

working under his direction, and a separate section was arranged for Austria. The branch worked in the closest possible collaboration with their American colleagues. Webb's geniality and informality was agreeable to the Americans, and relations became so good that the two nationalities were interchangeable, officers being attached to the English or American forces for their qualities rather than their nationality. There is, however, little doubt that Webb's naval background and candid temperament did not altogether fit him for getting the better of the cumbersome military machine with which he was involved. That he carried the difficult job with some success is proved by the fact that he was mentioned in despatches, and awarded the French Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honour, and the Bronze Medal of Freedom, U.S.A. While still on active service he was appointed a member of the Royal Fine Arts Commission.

Upon demobilization he returned to Cambridge to complete his second period as Slade Professor, and in 1947 he delivered the Henriette Hertz Trust Lecture on Aspects of Art (*Proc. Brit. Acad.* xxxiii) taking as his subject three moments between 1660 and 1720 when English architecture and decoration were demonstrably Baroque. Twenty years earlier his analysis would have been regarded as dangerous nonsense; but it proved to be one of the most influential of his publications, his ideas being followed up by younger architectural historians.

It was presumably about this time that he was a member of the Committee at Cambridge which considered the possibility of art history becoming a part of the tripos, but unfortunately no appointment was made until after he had undertaken other work. His enthusiasm and his knowledge of the Cambridge background would have been invaluable, and it is likely that he would have been far happier if he had been able to stay in academic work. In 1948, however, just before the end of his term as Slade Professor, he was appointed Secretary to the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments (England) in succession to Sir Alfred Clapham, and this entailed a move to London. Almost immediately his wife's long and depressing illness started, which was only to end with her death in 1962. He gave her most devoted care, but perhaps only his intimate friends realized how much the anxiety and the constant calls on his free time wrought havoc in his intellectual life. It can hardly be stressed too strongly that everything he did until his own retirement should be judged against this wearing background. In his first years in London he was also harassed by

the necessity of completing a volume in the Pelican History of Art on *English Architecture of the Middle Ages*. In the end this was only achieved by regularly getting up at 5 a.m. and working on it until breakfast-time. No man under such circumstances can give of his best throughout so long a day.

Considerable reorganization had taken place in the work of the Royal Commission after the war. Under its original terms of appointment, which dated from 1908, the terminal date laid down for its Inventories was 1714, and all later monuments were excluded. Now all the eighteenth-century monuments and such buildings of the nineteenth deemed worthy of recording were included, which inevitably meant that far more work was needed for each volume. Moreover, all the work was no longer centred on the London office. Regional offices were organized in centres such as Cambridge, Bristol, York, and, subsequently, Salisbury in place of Bristol to handle the work needed for Inventories already planned. This naturally entailed an increase in personnel, and a considerable addition to the routine work of the Secretary, more, perhaps, than Webb had expected, for such work had never been entirely congenial to him. Where he came into his own was in the checking with his staff in front of the buildings the descriptions produced for the Inventory entries. The volume with which he was chiefly concerned was the City of Cambridge, where the buildings were, of course, very familiar to him; but his comments were the reverse of stale, and never failed to help the members of his staff to look at architecture with new and greater perception.

Though not within the sphere of his main interests, Webb had also the task of implementing a decision to make the Commission responsible for recording field monuments threatened with destruction by the intensive agricultural developments of the post-war years, which involved reclamation of marginal land and the levelling and deep ploughing of ancient grassland. His success in implementation has made its contribution to archaeological studies for the benefit of those who would regard Webb as one concerned with other disciplines.

His interest in medieval architecture dates at least from the 1930s, for before the war he had begun a book on Perpendicular Architecture, a subject originally suggested to him by Roger Fry. This was never finished, for with great generosity he gave his material to his pupil, Maurice Hastings, who made it the foundation of his book, not published till 1955, *St. Stephen's Chapel and its Place in the Development of the Perpendicular Style in*



England. Webb also wrote in 1951 a far too little-known pamphlet for the British Council, *Gothic Architecture in England*, which brilliantly condenses the ideas which were to be the basis of his larger book. Another small book, *Ely Cathedral* (1950), shows how penetrating his analysis of a single building could be.

The Pelican History of Art volume, *Architecture in Britain in the Middle Ages*, was finally published in 1956. In his Introduction Webb makes it clear that he is writing as an art historian, and is therefore above all concerned with the appearance of the buildings. From there he moves on to analyse at what, precisely, the builders were aiming, and to discuss regional groups of buildings from this point of view. Since the ground to be covered stretched from the seventh to the early sixteenth century much that a reader would like to find, for instance a discussion of castles and a full account of the development of the English parish church, is omitted, but what is there is of prime importance. From the Norman Conquest onwards the book owes much to Professor Jean Bony's paper, 'La technique normande du mur épais à l'époque romane' (*Bull. mon.* xcvi (1939), 153), for, by following the thick-wall technique through the Gothic period, Webb explains its enormously influential effect on both the appearance and construction of many great English churches. He also points out the special importance of such a feature as wall-arcading in England throughout the Middle Ages, in which as in many other things he refuses to regard English Gothic as a poor relation of that of France. A good deal of attention is also given to regional styles, and to the influence of one building on another, often in a different part of the country. Little of this had been said before, indeed it is the first book since Prior's *History of Gothic Art* of 1900, to attempt to look at buildings as a whole rather than as a collection of mouldings, ribs, and tracery.

The book makes considerable demands on the reader, for since much of the argument is concerned with interior space-composition a real effort is needed to visualize a building. There are nearly two hundred plates, most of them very good, and a great number of elevations and sections in line. Unfortunately, since Gothic buildings are, generally speaking, high and narrow, it is hard for even the best photographs to convey convincingly the treatment of interior space. Still, much can be gained if they are viewed with Webb's analyses.

This was Webb's last publication. He still had several working years before him, but the strain of his wife's illness was

increasingly heavy. She died, as has been said, early in 1962, and he retired from the Secretaryship of the Royal Commission later in the same year. They had always intended to leave London when he retired and move to a small house which they owned at Solva on the Pembrokeshire coast. Webb, now a very tired man, carried out the plan, finding an artist friend to share the house with him. The country which he loved, and still more the sea on which he could sail his boat, were healing influences. He enjoyed the life of the village, in which he was clearly much liked, and his stories, especially those of his time in the Navy, were much appreciated.

For some time before her death his wife had been working on a catalogue of the works of Sir Francis Chantrey. He took her material to Wales in the hope of completing it, but the absence of reference books made this impossible. He did, however, draft the Introduction, which they had frequently discussed. But, alas, on one of his rare visits to London, his suitcase, which contained the long-hand draft and other material, was stolen, and though he spoke of attempting to start it again, his own fatal illness prevented this. It is particularly distressing that this should have occurred, for he found Chantrey's lack of cant and his sense of humour very congenial; and though the catalogue can be completed by others, what is likely to have been an attractive piece of writing cannot be replaced.

Webb's personality cannot be completely gauged from his publications, distinguished though they may be. His great zest for life, the width of his interests, and the originality of his mind were, however, almost instantly apparent in conversation. He poured out ideas with abundance, charm, and humour, and with a generosity of mind which was evident to all who listened. Conversation, however, may be ephemeral, but teaching should not be; and Webb's most lasting monument may be in the teaching now being given by those who were influenced by him. In this way his enthusiasm and his essentially humane attitude to architecture are being handed on to another generation.

M. D. WHINNEY