

## HOW THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY WAS SAVED

*Paul H. Scott*

In 1991 and 1992 there was an intermittent debate in the Scottish press about the news that the Trustees of the National Galleries were considering plans for a new National Gallery of Scottish Art on the grounds that their collections had outgrown their exhibition space. At first, discussion focussed on the general concept. Was it desirable for the major part of the Scottish collection in the National Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art to be removed from their international context and isolated in a separate building? This would mean a violent break from the established idea of the National Gallery that it should aim at showing the development of the Scottish school against a background of examples from other important schools. Scottish painting has always been intimately related to the painting of the rest of Europe, with constant influences in both directions. It would therefore be very difficult to find any artistic or academic justification for its isolation. This was the general conclusion reached in the debate in the press between artists and art historians. In Duncan Macmillan's telling phrase, a National Gallery without the Scottish collection would be a National Gallery of nowhere.

The objection to isolation could to some extent be met if the new Gallery was within a few minutes walk or bus ride. Glasgow, however, launched a determined bid to secure the new Gallery and for many months the Trustees seemed deliberately to encourage a guessing game, Edinburgh or Glasgow, as though that were the only issue. From then onwards much of the press and

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### *Scottish Affairs*

media focused on that one simple point, to the general confusion of the public.

In the course of 1992 a rumour started to circulate that the new plans would involve the closure of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. I heard the rumours but, like many people, I found them impossible to believe. The SNPG is, in the words of the late Marquess of Bute, 'one of Scotland's major cultural institutions'. It is distinct from an art gallery because its purpose is to 'illustrate Scottish history'. The focus of interest is on the subjects of the portraits, not on the painters. It was gifted to the Scottish people for this purpose by a former proprietor of **The Scotsman** over a hundred years ago. Since then it has become not only one of the most successful galleries of its kind in the world, but an expression of Scottish identity. As subsequent events were to show, it also enjoys the deep affection and respect of a great many people in all parts of Scotland. Apart from all of that, the building (which is a masterpiece of the Gothic revival) was in the final phase of a restoration which had spread over 10 years and cost more than £10 million. The space available for portraits was about to double because of the transfer of the Museum of Antiquities to the new Museum of Scotland in Chambers Street. In view of all these circumstances, could any sane person seriously propose that the SNPG should be closed and its collections included in a gallery which had a completely different purpose?

This happy state of innocence was shattered in January 1993. Nigel McIsaac wrote to me (and to the Saltire Society and the Scottish Arts Club) to draw attention to an article by Timothy Clifford, the Director of the National Galleries. This was in the Winter, 1992, issue of **The Art Quarterly** of the National Art Collection Fund. One sentence in it was clear confirmation that the rumours were right after all: 'We do, however, have to remember that it is intended that the Scottish Gallery of Art and History subsumes all existing material in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery'.

We discussed this alarming development in the Advisory Council for the Arts in Scotland (AdCAS) early in January. They approved a letter which I sent on 12 January 1992 to Angus Grossart, the Chairman of the Trustees, with copies to the press. This pointed out that SNPG had been a personal gift to the nation for a specific purpose and questioned whether any one had the right to dispose of its assets for any other purpose. Such an action would be 'an act of cultural barbarism' and 'would destroy one of the most valuable and interesting of our Scottish institutions'. We asked for an assurance that 'whatever steps are taken over a gallery of Scottish art, the SNPG will be

*How the Scottish National Portrait Gallery was Saved*

maintained intact'. This letter was prominently reported in **The Scotsman**, **The Herald**, and **Scotland on Sunday**.

Since no assurance was forthcoming, AdCas arranged a joint protest in April 1993 against the proposal with the support of the Saltire Society, the Cockburn Association, the Scottish History Society, the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, the Heritage Society of Scotland and the Scottish Centre of International PEN. The Scottish Arts Club made a strong protest on similar lines. This was again widely reported, but it was evidently still difficult for people to believe that there was a real prospect that the Portrait Gallery would be closed. A correspondent wrote to me at the time: 'I have tried to persuade myself that the proposal is a kind of bad dream that will fade away and be forgotten'.

The dream was encouraged for a few months longer by a stubborn silence on the part of the Trustees, although such powerful voices as Duncan Macmillan, Basil Skinner, Duncan Hall and Geoffry Barrow affirmed their support for the Portrait Gallery. At an AdCAS Conference in October 1993 Colin Bell said that in his experience the great majority who had any interest in artistic matters in Scotland were utterly opposed to any suggestion that the SNPG might be absorbed in a Gallery of Scottish Art or in any other way impaired or diminished. On 21 October I wrote again to Angus Grossart to draw his attention to these views and to ask once more for an assurance that the SNPG was safe in the hands of the Trustees. He acknowledged this very politely on the 29th, a month before the Trustees at last made an announcement on the 30th November, St Andrew's Day. This was to the effect that the Trustees had decided to establish a National Gallery of Scottish Art in a new building in Kelvingrove Park in Glasgow and would for this purpose close the Portrait Gallery and transfer its contents to the new site.

The Trustees had evidently accepted the argument of the Glasgow lobby. As inducements, Glasgow had offered to provide some of their own pictures on permanent loan to a gallery in Glasgow but not in Edinburgh and suggested that they might be able to obtain funding from European sources. The Glasgow lobby argued that Glasgow as a major centre of population deserved a share of the national collection and that a new gallery there would have more visitors. The second of these arguments needs more research. The Trustees seem to have accepted visitor statistics to the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery as evidence, but, since that building serves several purposes, we need to know how many of these visitors look at the pictures. A fine exhibition of the best of Scottish paintings in the McLellan Gallery in

### *Scottish Affairs*

Glasgow last year had only 23,000 visitors in 3 months, in spite of a supporting television series presented by Billy Connolly. A similar exhibition in Edinburgh in 1990, with no such television support, had 158,000 visitors in the same period of time.

The campaign by a Glasgow lobby did not mean that Glasgow opinion as a whole was in favour of the proposals of the Trustees. Many influential Glasgow voices, such as Alasdair Gray, Elspeth King, and Michael Donnelly, spoke out against the closure of the Portrait Gallery and the idea of a Gallery of Scottish Art. Others were opposed to any new building in Kelvingrove Park. The lobby was led by some leading politicians in the District Council and their Director of Galleries and they were supported by the press and media in Glasgow. They frankly admitted that they were concerned with the prestige and prosperity of Glasgow and not with the aesthetic objections to the proposals themselves. A dialogue of the deaf became inevitable.

Few events in recent Scottish history have produced such a passionate reaction. The Glasgow lobby saw it with satisfaction as another successful bid, like the National Orchestra or Opera or Ballet companies, the Garden Festival and the City of Culture, to snatch a prize from Edinburgh. The headline in **The Herald** was 'Pessimism turns to picture of joy' and beneath it Keith Bruce said that the success was 'all the sweeter because victory over Edinburgh's bid was so unexpected'. **The Scotsman** congratulated Glasgow on 'good marketing, native cunning and sheer bravado' (a barbed congratulation, perhaps); but said it was 'the wrong decision, taken for the wrong reasons...(it) runs against all the rationale which governs the great collections of other capital cities'.

Apart from the Glasgow lobby, the fury and indignation (and these words are not too strong) aroused by the Trustees' announcement had almost nothing to do with simplistic east-west rivalry. The main issue, after as before the announcement, was the threat to the Portrait Gallery. It has always had a warm place in my affections and I was dismayed by the idea that it might be closed. I had not realised that so many people felt in exactly the same way. Perhaps it is because it is such an embodiment of the Scottish identity that an attack on it is an attack on our identity itself. Letters of protest dominated the correspondence columns of **The Scotsman** for weeks and the Saltire Society received more letters on this subject than on any other in its entire history. People of all kinds joined in this protest, including two Conservative Ministers, Malcolm Rifkind and Lord Douglas Hamilton, and such prominent people as the Countess of Rosebery (a former Trustee of the National Galleries), Ludovic Kennedy and Sir Steven Runciman.

### *How the Scottish National Portrait Gallery was Saved*

In response, I called a meeting in the Saltire Society of the organisations who had joined in the original AdCAS protest. We formed a 'Save the Portrait Gallery' Committee, although we knew that the wider issue of the well-being of the National Galleries as a whole was at stake. Basil Skinner (a former Assistant Keeper of the SNPG), Duncan Macmillan (the leading authority on the history of Scottish Art), Lady Rosebery, and Shand Hutchison (the President of the Scottish Arts Club) have been members of the Committee from the beginning. We decided to call a public meeting on the 18th January 1994 to discuss the whole issue and invited the trustees to take part. They declined to appear, but Timothy Clifford and Julian Spalding (Director of the Glasgow Museums and Galleries) agreed to present the case for the proposals. Basil Skinner, Duncan Macmillan, George Rosie, Alasdair Gray and Lord Perth (who was to open a debate in the House of Lords in the following week) were also to speak, and I was to take the chair.

At first, we had supposed that the Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh University would be large enough to hold the meeting, but as the evidence of the level of public concern grew, we gratefully accepted the offer of the Governors of the Edinburgh College of Art of a large lecture theatre with arrangements to transmit the proceedings to any overflow in the corridors and central hall. In fact, well over a thousand people came on a cold and wet winter evening. They were probably the most remarkable crowd ever to assemble for a demonstration in Edinburgh. They were remarkable both for their diversity - earls and law lords rubbed shoulders with civil servants, businessmen, painters, students and people of all descriptions - but also for their demeanour. They listened politely to Clifford and Spalding, but their firm determination to preserve the Portrait Gallery was never in doubt. Eric Robinson of Scottish Arts Lobby Voice (SALVO) was the only speaker from the floor who suggested that it was a question of east-west rivalry and the meeting bristled with disapproval. The atmosphere was electric. You felt that no one could resist such a formidable expression of public resolve. A resolution was passed unanimously calling on the Secretary of State to reject the proposals and on the Trustees either to re-open the question on the basis of public consultation or to resign.

After the public meeting I wrote on 24th January on behalf of the Saltire Committee to the Secretary of State for Scotland and to the Trustees to say that the discussions both in the press and at the meeting suggested that there would be general approval for a solution on the following lines:

- The Scottish National Portrait Gallery would remain in its present site and might expand into the part of the Findlay building at present

### *Scottish Affairs*

occupied by the Antiquities, the York building and the Scottish Equitable building. This would enable it to develop its role as an historical archive by including more pictures recording aspects of Scottish life and topography.

- The National Gallery of Scotland and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art would continue to follow the policy of exhibiting the 'full range and diversity of the Scottish School' (to quote one of the pamphlets published on 30th November) along with outstanding examples of the schools of other countries.
- The National Galleries would explore means of circulating parts of the collections to municipal and other galleries throughout Scotland.
- A new Gallery of Art, Architecture and Design would be established in the old Sheriff Court in Glasgow. This would concentrate on the Glasgow School, but would include examples from other parts of Scotland and from other countries. This would help to solve the problem of the large proportion of the Glasgow collection which is at present in storage.
- The restoration of the Royal Scottish Academy building is now urgent and must therefore have priority. The future use of this building is vital to the whole question. The rights of the RSA in this matter should be confirmed.

In the debate in the House of Lords on 26th January 1994 most of the speakers defended the Portrait Gallery. Lord Fraser replied for the Government. He confirmed (as we had argued from the start) that the proposals of the Trustees required the approval of the Secretary of State for Scotland and that a change in the use of the Portrait Gallery would require the agreement of both Houses of Parliament. This statement was, of course, a direct repudiation of the Trustees' announcement of 30th November which was couched in language which suggested a final and binding decision.

On 9th February the Trustees issued a statement which seemed to be an attempt to save face and at the same time admit defeat over the Portrait Gallery: 'The trustees remain committed to the policy of building a National Gallery of Scottish Art in Glasgow. They are now conducting a further detailed appraisal to consider how, consistent with that objective, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery can be maintained within its present building'. This statement was, in fact, self-contradictory because the proposal of 30th

### *How the Scottish National Portrait Gallery was Saved*

November depended on the closure of the Portrait Gallery both as a source of pictures and of the running costs for the new gallery. In one of the four pamphlets which the Trustees issued at the same time, they said that the SNPG 'is envisaged as the engine of the new National Gallery'. They could not have both.

The original proposals of the Trustees had now been wounded beyond all hope of recovery. It remained for Ian Lang to deliver the coup de grace. This he did with surgical precision on 9th May. Having regard to the views of 'the art professionals, the wider art community and the general public

he was not prepared to support the proposals of the Trustees for a gallery of Scottish art and history or to approve the transfer of the collection from the SNPG building. On the other hand, he was prepared to fund a new £1.4m. picture store in Edinburgh and give priority to expenditure on the RSA and SNPG buildings. He would be prepared to look at a proposal for a new gallery, provided that 'wide and open consultations by the Trustees' showed that the proposal 'commands broad public support'.

Ian Lang had therefore publicly rejected the proposals of the Trustees (appointed by himself) and broadly accepted the arguments of the public protest articulated and expressed by the Saltire Committee. This is a rare concession by a Government which is notorious for its indifference to public pressure. Why did they act differently in this case? In the first place, the proposals of the Trustees were ill-conceived and it was tactically unwise of them to present them as a *fait accompli*. They had miscalculated the attitude of the public to the Portrait Gallery. The strength of the opposition was overwhelming not only because it was so effectively argued but because it was supported both by the leading authorities on the subject and by prominent supporters (and even members) of the government itself. Even so, I think that a blow has been struck for the principle of open government and against the secretive power of a nominated quango. We pressed for consultation from the start and now the quango has been openly instructed to undertake it.

As I write, the Trustees have said that they are about to make new proposals, but this time in the form of options for 'wide and open consultation'.

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