

Obituary

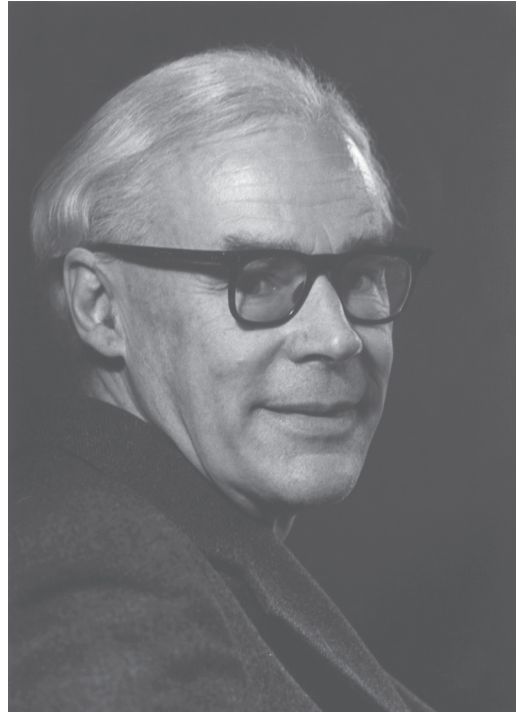
Sir Howard Colvin

15 October 1919 – 27 December 2007

Howard Montagu Colvin, Honorary Fellow of the Society since 1986, who died at the end of 2007 aged 88, more than any other individual, can take the credit for transforming architectural history in Britain from the ‘hopelessly amateurish’ state it was in up to the 1930s into a recognised academic discipline. His dictionary of architects alone will ensure his immortality, being one of that élite handful of books referred to solely by their authors’ surnames.

He was born in Sidcup in 1919, but claimed descent from one Laurence Colvin, a native of East Yell in Shetland, who, after military service as a gunner, was discharged in 1822 at Woolwich and became an innkeeper in Kent. Ultimately, Sir Howard believed the Colvins to be of Huguenot descent. At the age of eight he suffered the trauma of the death of his younger brother, Arthur, a loss from which his parents never recovered.

His interest in architecture began at school, at Trent College, near Nottingham, where a sympathetic history master allowed him to visit churches in the vicinity rather than inflict on him the ordeal of cricket. While still a schoolboy he began excavating Dale Abbey, a Premonstratensian house in Derbyshire, leading to the publication of his first historical paper at the age of 19, by which time he was studying history at University College London. Already as an undergraduate he was contemplating applying ‘the ordinary processes of historical scholarship’ to English architectural history, the then factual basis of which he dismissed as ‘hopelessly amateurish’, or as his long-standing friend and colleague, Sir John Summerson, put it, ‘the muddled vapourings, which passed



for architectural history between the wars’. He particularly had in his sights the ‘irresponsible attributionism’ on more often than not spurious stylistic grounds, practised by Sir Albert Richardson, the head of the Bartlett School of Architecture, who passed himself off as an ‘architectural Berenson’ dispensing certificates of authentication to grateful country house owners.

The Second World War did not interrupt his architectural researches as much as one would expect. After joining the RAF in 1940, he was deemed unfit to fly because of a damaged ear

drum and was sent on a course to interpret aerial photographs at Medmenham, taught by Glyn Daniel, with Stuart Piggott as a fellow student. He was subsequently posted to Malta, where his finest moment was when his suspicion that white lines on one photograph were telegraph wires proved correct, leading to the identification of the Sicilian HQ in Taormina, of the German Commander-in-Chief, Kesselring. Much of his spare time was spent in three libraries, the Royal Malta Library, founded in the 18th century by the Knights, the 19th-century Garrison Officers' Library, and the 20th-century library of the British Institute. By the time he returned to England, he had read a good proportion of the basic printed sources pertaining to English architecture, including Horace Walpole's *Letters*, Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes*, Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, and Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage and Farm Architecture*. He was posted back to Medmenham in 1943 and in the same year married Christina Butler, a fellow student at UCL. Christina, of Anglo-Irish descent, counted Maria Edgeworth among her forbears, and was a formidable scholar in her own right, working for many years on the Victoria County Histories. They had three children, Mary who died in infancy shortly after her birth in 1944, Laurence in 1945 and Hugh in 1948.

In 1946 Howard was appointed assistant history lecturer at UCL but was elected to a research fellowship at St John's College, Oxford, in 1948, where he remained until his death as Tutor in medieval history (1953–78), Librarian (1950–84) and Emeritus Fellow (1987–2007). As well as teaching the regular Oxford history syllabus, he was eventually, in the mid-1960s, able to introduce a Special Subject on English Architectural History 1660–1720, which proved popular with undergraduates and led many on to careers as architectural historians, having been initiated into the delightful mysteries of handling primary evidence, whether buildings or documents and drawings. He also supervised the postgraduate studies of many of our most

eminent architectural historians, such as Alistair Rowan and Alan Tait. The university awarded him a Readership in 1965, a rare distinction at that time.

Besides his teaching, Colvin gave freely of his time for public service for three decades, being a Commissioner for the Royal Fine Art Commission for England (1962–72); the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (1963–76); the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (1977–89); the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (1981–8), and for English Heritage (1984–9). He was also a member of the Historic Buildings Council of England (1970–84) and its successor, the Historic Buildings Advisory Committee of English Heritage (1984–9) which he chaired from 1988–9 as well as chairing its Listed Buildings Subcommittee from 1970–89; and President of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (1979–81). His contributions to committees were always much appreciated by fellow members, and his retirement in 1989 was a severe disappointment to many. He took an active role on RCAHMS, and provided coincided with the publication of five of the Argyll inventories, *Monuments of Industry* (G Hay and G Stell), the *Buildings of St Kilda* (G Stell and M Harman) as well the *Exploring Scotland's Heritage* series of guidebooks. Other significant developments include the growth of aerial photography (from 1976) to become a major survey tool for recording Scotland's archaeology and buildings; the transfer to RCHAMS of the Scottish Industrial Archaeology Survey and of the responsibility for the provision of heritage information to the Ordnance Survey. His distinguished record finally earned him a knighthood in 1995.

But it is for his scholarship that Colvin will be best remembered, numbering in all 132 publications. His first book, *The White Canons in England*, published in 1951, was on the Premonstratensian order in England (but includes a short appendix on the Scottish houses), inspired by his schoolboy researches at Dale

Abbey. It remains the definitive study. His first architectural book, *A Biographical Dictionary of English Architects 1660–1840*, followed in 1954 and went far towards achieving his ambition of putting post-Renaissance English architectural history on a firm footing. Besides an unequalled mastery of printed sources – many of which he acquired for his personal library at a time when such books were generally disregarded – he pioneered the exploration of manuscript sources in libraries and archives, both public and private, often in the company of Rupert Gunnis, who was working on a parallel dictionary of British sculptors, or Lawrence Stone, collecting material for his *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*. Both Gunnis and Stone had flashy cars and the right connections to gain entrée into the most aristocratic country houses.

The title of the second edition, published in 1978, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, demonstrates its extended chronological range back 60 years, and its geographical range to include Scotland. The move into Scotland was at the invitation of a group of Scottish architectural historians, among whom were David Walker, Kitty Cruft and Colin McWilliam, who helped him gain a mastery of Scottish archival sources, so very different from those in England. Most summers in the 1970s and 1980s included a prolonged visit to Scotland, accompanied by Christina, often staying in the houses of Alistair Rowan and Alan Tait, happy to repay in some way their debt of gratitude to their old supervisor.

The third edition (1995) made no further extensions in scope but did fuller justice to local Welsh architects than hitherto thanks to Tom Lloyd, one of the army of scholars both amateur and professional with whom he maintained a constant correspondence, including at least one long-term prisoner, who whiled away his sentence researching Thomas Archer under Howard's patient and gentle tutelage. At the 1995 launch he gave a talk about writing the dictionary, a version of which was later published in his *Essays in English Architectural History* (1999), where he

expresses his gratitude to these correspondents for sharing so much knowledge with him but stresses that he always wanted to write every entry himself to ensure consistency. He observes that 'collaborative works are notoriously difficult to bring to the point of publication', which may be an oblique reference to his other standard work, *The History of the King's Works*, of which he was general editor and part author. Covering royal building in England and Wales from the Middle Ages to 1851 the six volumes took 19 years, from 1963–82, to come out. The first two volumes remain the definitive study on the castles, palaces and religious establishments of English kings in the Middle Ages, and gained him a CBE in 1964.

Other substantial books include *Unbuilt Oxford* (1983) and *Architecture and the After-Life*, the latter a comprehensive survey of funerary architecture, partly inspired by Sir Howard's forays into Scottish cemeteries, which fascinated him, especially the full-height enclosed tomb lairs. He never regarded Scottish architecture as a provincial adjunct of English and his pioneering essay 'A Scottish origin for English Palladianism' (1974) has provided much food for thought for younger scholars but has yet to be fully digested on either side of the Border. Another essay, 'Herms, terms and Caryatids in English Architecture' (1999) recognised that the fireplaces of Careston Castle in Angus are based on engravings by Ducerceau, an insight whose implications are only now beginning to be appreciated.

He appreciated other things about Scotland: after I moved to Edinburgh in 1981, we used to meet when he was up for meetings of RCAHMS. The first time he took me for lunch in Royal Circus and recommended the lentil soup, telling me that the Scots had never forgotten the art of soup-making unlike the English (though things have improved somewhat on that score in the intervening decades). Similarly he was the first to direct me to Valvona and Crolla, confiding that he and Christina stocked up on extra virgin olive oil for the year on their summer trips to

Scotland. This was the time when most olive oil was still sold by chemists.

One subject he never published on but which interested him greatly was contemporary architecture. In 1958, he was instrumental in persuading St John's to reject an anaemic neo-Gothic scheme by Sir Edward Maufe (architect of Guildford Cathedral) for new student accommodation and to opt for an unequivocally modern design, by the Architects' Co-Partnership, based on hexagonal room plans which inevitably led to its being nicknamed the 'Beehive'. The commission sparked a revolution in the architecture of Oxford which is now filled with a good proportion of the most exciting and pleasing modern architecture in Britain. St John's showed their faith in Howard by commissioning Howard himself to design an extension to its Senior Common Room. It pays homage to one of his favourite architects, Sir John Soane, with its shallow vaults and bays, but steers well clear of pastiche. Soane was also the inspiration for his own house which he built on St John's land in north Oxford. Every detail down to the door handles was carefully considered and had not only to look good but to work. All the main rooms faced south on to a delightful garden stocked with specimen plants, especially alpine, often discovered by Christina on their foreign holidays while Howard occupied himself with buildings. The house, with its simple clean lines, is a model of restraint and good taste, a description equally applicable to himself.

He last visited Edinburgh in September 2004, when he was dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's of the draft of the fourth edition of the *Dictionary*. The visit came after a long gap. For several years he had been largely confined to Oxford after Christina contracted dementia. He looked after her at home as long as possible but eventually she had to go into residential care where she died in 2003, just short of their Diamond Wedding. This was a bitter blow and his friends and family wondered how he would cope on his own. In the event he got on with things stoically and showed

himself fully capable of looking after himself. Most days he still lunched at St John's but developed an unexpected talent for cooking and took pride in baking his own bread and cakes.

My wife and I were privileged to have him stay with us in Portobello on that last visit, and were able to swap recipes. He was a perfect house guest and had to be restrained from doing the washing up. We were concerned about the effort of getting to the National Library from our house, and offered a lift or to ring for a taxi but he insisted on taking the bus and climbed the Playfair Steps with surprising speed, having just bumped into a party of English Heritage Inspectors with their Historic Scotland counterparts, including several of his old pupils, outside the National Gallery, a serendipitous moment which I am sure those who were present will never forget. Another day, he was curious to see the new parliament and my wife and I were eager to hear his verdict on it. Never one to waste a word he pronounced it 'wilfully capricious: twenty-first century Mannerism'.

He could appear distant to those who didn't know him well but this was largely shyness, caused by his partial deafness, which made small talk difficult for him. In fact he was the kindest of men with a subtle sense of humour, the nuances of which could easily be missed if one didn't pay attention to every word. To receive an envelope or postcard bearing his tiny, neat script was always an occasion of pleasure.

Despite the increasing frailty of age, he remained active up to the end, and had all but completed correcting the proofs of the fourth edition, when he died peacefully in his own bed during the night of 27/28 December 2007. His enormous personal collection of books, prints, drawings and other architectural artefacts was sold by auction over the space of a week the following summer, minus the items which comprised the 77 separate bequests he left, the beneficiaries of which included RCHAMS and our own Society. To the former he left all his Scottish archival material, including correspondence, drawings, photographs and a

card index of Scottish country houses, while we received eight books, including the *Annals of Glasgow* (1817) and the 1856 edition of the *Directory of Gentlemen's Seats*.

Ian Campbell

I am very grateful to Richard Hewlings for allowing me to quote freely from his very full obituary in the *SAGHB Newsletter*, no. 94 (Summer 2008), to Lesley Ferguson, Head of Collections at RCHAMS, and to Simon Gilmour.