



Sir Joseph Burke

SIR JOSEPH BURKE

1913 - 1992

Sir Joseph Terence Burke KBE 1980, OBE 1946, Hon DLitt (Monash And Melbourne), Foundation Professor of Fine Arts in the University of Melbourne from 1947 to 1979, died on Wednesday, 5 March 1992, at the age of 78. Born in 1913 at Ealing, England, he graduated in English Language and Literature at King's College, University of London, undertaking postgraduate studies, first at the Courtauld Institute of Art and later at Yale University, gaining MAs from both London and Yale. It was at Yale that he wrote his thesis on the early career of Benjamin West.

Returning to London he became a lecturer for the University of Cambridge Board of Extra-Mural Studies, attached to the National Portrait Gallery, London. In 1938 he became an Assistant Keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and was seconded on 3 September 1939 to the Home Office and Home Security, where he served during the Second World War as secretary to successive Lord Presidents of the Council. During 1945-6 he was Private Secretary to Prime Minister, Rt Hon C.R. Attlee.

In 1946 Burke accepted an invitation to become the first Herald Professor of Fine Arts in the University of Melbourne. It had been established with the aid of a generous grant from the *Herald and Weekly Times* 'for teaching the understanding and appreciation of the fine arts and the application of their principles and practice to the life of the community'.

The new post provided him with the opportunity to engage in a lifetime of creative work in the promotion and development of a wider appreciation and understanding of the visual arts in the University of Melbourne and the community at large. This he achieved with style and panache in a variety of ways: by means of close personal contact with many prominent Australian artists, notably Russell Drysdale, Noel Counihan, John Brack and Fred Williams—it was Burke who drew Sir Kenneth Clark's attention to the quality of Sir Sidney Nolan's work—and by means of the sundry advisory roles, which he adorned with tact, a fund of good humour and grace, on the many boards, committees and trusts on which he served during the thirty-two years in which he occupied the Melbourne Chair of Fine Arts. Among them may be mentioned his Trusteeship of the National Gallery of Victoria (1952-56), and membership of the Felton Bequest Committee of that Gallery

(1956-86), his memorable Deanship of the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne (1950-54), and his long years of service on the Board of the Melbourne University Press (1955-78). He also served on councils and committees of the National Australian Society for Education Through Art, the Australian Council for Industrial Design, The National Trust of Australia, the Art Teachers' Association of Victoria, the Print Council of Australia, the Society of Collectors, the Victorian Arts Centre Building Committee and the Australian Parliament House Construction Committee.

Burke played a significant part in the establishment of the Australian Humanities Research Council (1956), and delivered the last Annual Lecture of the Council, entitled 'The Iconography of the Enlightenment in English Art', in 1969, prior to the Council's transformation into the Australian Academy of the Humanities. That lecture reveals the depth and range of his scholarship. From 1971 to 1974 he served as the second President of the Academy.

This list of his achievements does not reveal Joe Burke's kindness, generosity, sublime forgetfulness, and proneness to the occasional tantrum. I met him a few hours after he first arrived in the country. Showing him around the Art Gallery of New South Wales that morning I began apologising for the poor quality of so many of the nineteenth-century paintings that dominated the walls. 'Please don't worry about that,' he said. 'I'm an art historian. We like the bad ones as much as the good ones.' Such disarming irony was characteristic. He asked me to name the ugliest building in Sydney. I cited the Queen Victoria Market Building. Now it is one of Sydney's proudest monuments. Burke's defence of art history from the moment he arrived in the country doubtless played its part in the change of taste that led ultimately to the preservation of the building.

At the time he was already collecting material for one of his early public lectures. It was called 'Ghastly Good Taste' and given on many occasions to help publicise his role as the new incumbent of the Herald Chair. One of his prime examples of Ghastly Good Taste was Melbourne's Flinders Street Station. Until one evening a tiny white-haired lady came up to him after the lecture, thanked him warmly, then added a gentle rebuke: 'I can't bring myself, Professor, to believe that the Flinders Street Station is quite as ghastly as you say because I remember how much pleasure my dear father gained while he was designing it'. Joe never gave that lecture again. Today Flinders Street Station, like Sydney's Queen Victoria Market, is classified as a part of Australia's architectural heritage. It was the history of art—and that

was but one of Burke's briefs for Australia—not the fickle hubris of Taste that affected such changes.

Sir Joseph Burke was a man of humane culture possessed of an enviable range of learning focussed upon the art and literature of eighteenth-century England. In 1943 he published his Charlton lecture *Hogarth and Reynolds: a Contrast in English Art Theory*; in 1955 his definitive edition of Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*; in 1968 *Hogarth: The Complete Engravings* (with Colin Caldwell, his close friend); in 1976 his *English Art 1714-1800* (in the Oxford History of English Art series, edited by T.S.R. Boase), a work distinguished by its authority and elegance. Doubtless he would have published much more had he remained in some English art museum or university. Instead Burke gave himself unreservedly to the promotion of the visual arts in Australia and those values, derived from the Enlightenment, for which he stood. That Melbourne took him to its heart and accepted him is not altogether surprising. From the time of Sir Redmond Barry (that other Anglo-Celtic immigrant) the city has sought (though often hard pressed in their pursuit) to ground its culture upon the values of the Enlightenment. Burke was a modest man and gave much of his time to the service of others.

Bernard Smith