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Stefan Collini, 25 October 2011

‘Nika’s great labour’

Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*

Chatto and Windus. 866pp. £30.00. 9780701168391

Michael Bullen, John Crook, Rodney Hubbard, and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Hampshire: Winchester and the North*

807pp. £35.00 9780300120844

Clare Hartwell, Matthew Hyde, Edward Hubbard, and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Cheshire*

755pp. £35.00 9780300170436

‘The Buildings of England’: Yale University Press

Few forms of modern poetry can be as immediately recognisable or as widely cherished. ‘ST PETER. 1867-8 by *Edwin Dolby*, built for £456. A simple Street-like job in red brick, banded in blue with Bath stone details. Hipped-roofed SE vestry with tiny stone bellecote. Stained glass: SW window, early C20. Two angels.’ The brisk knowingness of the summative judgement recruits and flatters us: ‘a simple Street-like job’ - limiting but not at all dismissive, slightly collusive, briefly alluding to one strand of Victorian architectural history. The details of price, Bath stone, and twentieth-century glass reassuringly imply wide knowledge supplemented by just enough research. And you can be sure that there are indeed precisely two angels.

It is almost a cliché to observe that Pevsner has joined that company of names that have become nouns, signalling a category of things that everybody might have one of. In this respect, ‘Pevsner’ belongs with Wisden or Kobbé, the ‘bibles’ of their respective secular cults (‘my second Bible’, according to the vicar of one church that appears in it), doing for buildings what the ODNB does for people and the OED for words. At the same time, much of its charm, and certainly much of the affection felt for it by users, is due not to its orderly accumulation of fact, but to that distinctive, recognisably Pevsnerian voice - by

turns technical, brisk, judgemental, peppery - suggesting greater kinship with, say, Fowler or Elizabeth David.

But just as 'Pevsner' now refers to something larger than the work of one man, so the achievements of Nikolaus Pevnsner went far beyond the series of architectural guides which bears his name. He became a significant figure in British cultural life between the 1940s and 1970s, not only through his writing for a wide public, but through his membership of committees and commissions (and, said some, conspiracies) that profoundly affected the appearance of British cities, the role of industrial design, and the teaching of the history of art and architecture. For a man with such a talent for addressing a wide non-specialist public in authoritative tones, he perfectly suited his moment, those decades immediately after 1945 when, through such institutions as Penguin Books and the Third Programme, a new hunger for accessible guidance about culture sought and found nourishment. It was in some ways a democratic moment, something Pevsner celebrated, yet also one in which traditional hierarchies, whether social or educational, could still command a degree of deference. And in his case this allowed for what may seem an improbable (though actually far from unique) triumph - a German professor who flourished as a public intellectual in a country not usually regarded as well disposed to either of those alien species.

Pevsner died in 1983, and it was only a few years later, Susie Harries tells us in this magnificent biography, that she set out to write his life, all unknowing that it was a project which would eventually take her over twenty years. What delayed and complicated her task, while also contributing to the vivid richness of the resulting portrait, was the discovery not only of extensive surviving correspondence, including intimate letters to his wife, Lola, but of the secret diaries or *Heftchen* that Pevsner kept from his teens onwards. Drawing liberally on this source, but also displaying exemplary thoroughness in tracking down other kinds of material, Harries is able to give us more of Pevnsner's hopes, anxieties, moods, and sartorial mishaps than we normally learn about even the best-documented public lives. This makes the book very long, and I have to confess that I found a few passages dragged, as Pevsner and his wife work in excruciating detail through some fresh emotional misunderstanding or conflict, but perhaps that's a small price to pay for the remarkable access this biography gives us to the inner life of a man sometimes accused of not having one. No less impressive are Harries' full and even-handed accounts of the various ventures, conflicts, and polemics in which Pevsner was involved. It is no small compliment to say that in its attention to detail, its eye for pattern, and its ear for the apposite phrase, this biography is worthy of its subject.

Born in Leipzig in 1902, Nikolai Pevsner was descended from Eastern European Jews. His parents had prospered in Germany and, in a word that came to have tragic or reproachful overtones, assimilated: they did not observe any of the rites of their ancestral religion, they changed their name, they became good

German bourgeois. The young Nikolaus, or 'Nika', was intellectually precocious, excelling at school and university. As early as 16 he recorded a 'dream I had been cherishing for some time: to see myself as a professor of art history'. When he was 19 he was baptised into Lutheran Christianity. As he recalled later, this did not signal the outcome of a spiritual crisis: 'The act was of course done for me to be normal German' [sic]. He began to clamber over the obstacle course that constituted the first stages of an academic career in Germany, including years as an unsalaried dogsbody. His father, we learn, 'effectively paid for the writing of Nika's thesis and would underwrite his career for at least ten more years'. During these years Pevsner married Lola, who was half-Jewish; the couple had three children between 1924 and 1932.

Pevsner's intellectual and professional formation marked him forever as a product of that strain in *Kunstgeschichte* which analysed art and architecture primarily as the expression of the spirit of an age. It was in these terms that he studied Italian Mannerist painting of the 16th and 17th centuries for his *Habilitationschrift*, and he brought the same framework to his study of the Bauhaus and Modernism, seeing the latter as the proper expression of a rational, democratic, functional society. The thoroughness of his research trip to Italy in 1928 while working on Mannerism also pre-figured his later heroic gazeteering, reporting proudly: 'Now I really know what is above every altar in every church in Florence'. His chosen mentor at this stage of his career was Wilhelm Pinder, author of *Geschichte der deutschen Kunst*, who adapted a loosely Hegelian set of categories to explore the relations between national character and *Zeitgeist* in the history of art. Even though Pinder was later tainted by collaboration with the Nazis, Pevsner never disowned his debt, even (perhaps unwisely) dedicating to him a book published in 1940.

Having obtained a post as *Privatdozent* at the University of Göttingen in 1929, Pevsner was sent to England the following year to prepare materials for lectures on English art and architecture. Again one sees signs of a later pattern, as he wrote back to his wife: 'In the daytime I have to collect all kinds of details ... generalisations are a luxury for the evenings.' Amid the privations of English cooking and plumbing, there were moments of aesthetic rapture, especially his first encounter with Durham cathedral, which he never ceased to regard as one of the world's great buildings.

By the early 1930s, Pevsner was making a name for himself as a coming man in German art history, while also living the cultivated family life of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. However, Hitler had rather different ideas about who could count as 'normal German'. In April 1933 Pevsner was, as the phrase had it, 'asked not to lecture'; in September he was dismissed from his post. He was not prepared to take up some other, more menial career (at that time still open to Jews), so in October he set out for England, in search of employment, which at that stage he assumed would be temporary.

The eventual academic or cultural success in Britain of several notable refugees from Nazism can make it seem that the transition was relatively easy and continued intellectual or literary success inevitable. Pevsner's career in the 1930s and 1940s provides a sharp corrective to any such superficial view. Well into his forties he had no regular employment and no sure way to feed his young family. These were desperate years for the Pevsners, with Nikolaus sometimes living in a dingy rented room, anxiously chasing scraps of gainful employment, while Lola scrabbled to keep a semblance of normal family life going in increasingly dire circumstances. His wife and children joined him in London at the beginning of 1936, but they were all homesick for Germany, hoping to be able to return there soon (Harries has a compassionate eye for the difficulties highly assimilated German Jews had in understanding the way things were going in the 1930s, noting that at the end of 1937, 75% of German Jews were still in Germany). It is a telling indication of the problem that relatively unpolitical people like the Pevsners had in taking the measure of events that they continued to send their children back to Germany for the traditional summer holiday, even in August 1939, with the result that their daughter was trapped there for the duration of the war, protected by relatives.

Pevsner's difficulties in establishing himself in his new country and his eventual triumphs point to a complicated story about the receptiveness or otherwise of British society at the time. Prejudice against foreigners, perhaps some anti-semitism, may have blocked his early efforts to obtain an academic post, but Art History barely existed as a discipline in Britain at that time, and anyway he was scarcely alone in having difficulty finding a job in the 1930s. Moreover, Pevsner never (to his credit) fitted in with the strain of precious, aristocracy-infatuated, country-house-sniffing connoisseurship in the English art history tradition. Yet, all that said, room was found for him, support was provided (not least by the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning), publishers and periodicals proved hospitable, and he became a prominent component of the remarkable emigré fertilisation of British intellectual and cultural life after 1933.

Two early books helped to build a reputation that eventually led to other openings. In 1936 he published *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. The sub-title indicates the somewhat polemical thrust of the book, its depiction of International Modernism as descending from the English Arts-and-Crafts tradition (at least, polemical in Britain: Pevsner considered this interpretation something of a truism among German art historians). In the following year he published his report on research he had been commissioned to undertake into the state of design in British industry, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*. One reviewer of the latter book observed that though 'written throughout with the care and precision of a scholar' it was 'animated throughout by the zeal of a second Ruskin'. This may not have been a comparison Pevsner would have cared for: he

mostly found Ruskin exasperating. But it is worth reflecting for a moment on the extent to which, then and later, Pevsner might nonetheless be thought of as ‘a second Ruskin’. In very broad terms, they shared a preoccupation with the social values expressed in art and architecture; there was some of same emphasis upon the priority of looking, really looking, and some of the same passionate irascibility against heedless developers. But Pevsner, though highly judgemental, was not quite a public moralist in the Ruskinian mould, not quite so given to reading lessons on the state of the national soul. He was, by both temperament and education, more of a scholar and less of an artist than Ruskin. He was also much more of a Modernist, though as Harries reminds us, ‘Modernism was to some extent a revolt against the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution - dirt, clutter, ugliness, and inequity - and had at its core commitment to a better society’, surely a very Ruskinian recipe. Then there was Pevsner’s enormous admiration at this point for Morris, ‘not the greatest artist of the 19th century, but the greatest man’. Pevsner is often taken as a leading example of an outsider who, through talent and effort, became an insider, but Harries also brings out his complicated fit with existing features of British culture.

It was during the war years (once released from relatively short-term internment) that Pevsner began to put together the portfolio of roles that was eventually to see him gain security and celebrity in his adopted land. He did various forms of teaching, gaining a part-time post at Birkbeck College in London (where he eventually became a professor in 1959); he wrote books as well as articles for various periodicals; and he did some broadcasting. He even tried out a proposal for a multi-volume guide to the architecture of England, county by county, but the Syndics of Cambridge University Press decided there was no future in such a series.

His main breakthrough came from Allen Lane, the ebullient founder of Penguin Books. Lane intuitively recognised Pevsner as someone with special gifts for bringing the fruits of scholarship to a broad public, and commissioned him to write *An Outline of European Architecture* (1942), a short, wide-ranging, opinionated survey that was to become the most successful of all Pevsner’s writings (Harries reports, extraordinarily, that ‘in the late 1990s, *Outline* was still selling as many copies per year at Penguin as all the *Buildings of England* series combined’). Lane also made Pevsner the editor of the new King Penguin imprint of larger illustrated books. Pevsner enjoyed the work and, perhaps more surprisingly in view of his reputation for humourless diligence, enjoyed the camaraderie of early Penguin publishing. ‘When the series reached its fiftieth volume in 1949, the team threw a party in the garden behind Pevsner’s Gower Street office; whose idea it was to import real penguins, which kept disappearing into the bushes, history does not relate. (The penguins missed the end of the party, returning prematurely to the zoo in disgrace, after one bit a fellow-guest.)’

But by that date Pevsner's life had taken its defining turn. According to the oft-told story, he and Lane were taking a post-lunch stroll in the summer of 1945 when Lane asked his companion what he would like to publish if he had a completely free hand. Pevsner promptly suggested two hugely ambitious projects, each with European models: a multi-volume history of art, and a county-by county catalogue of England's 'significant buildings'. Lane, amazingly, agreed to both, and Pevsner set to work. Harries gently suggests that the *Pelican History of Art*, the first volumes of which came out in 1953, was at best an uneven, perhaps flawed, venture, for all that it contained some notable books, but the 'Buildings of England' series enjoyed a far more favourable response (though for many years Penguin lost money on it until rescued by subsidy from the Leverhulme Trust; Lane liked to introduce Pevsner as 'my best-losing author'). For almost thirty years - he started work in 1946, the 46th and final volume was published in 1974 - it also provided Pevsner's life with a rigid and gruelling routine of preparatory research, county visits, writing-up of notes, producing text, checking facts, correcting proofs, over and over again. Harries gives an excellent account of the making of this national monument, complete with details of Lola's erratic driving, Pevsner's scarcely credible stamina and discipline, and the obstructive contributions of those owners of grand houses who did not take kindly to a German with a notebook trying to get a foot in the door ('they've come to read the meter, Ma' was one, less common, response).

The remorseless treadmill of the Buildings of England project did not prevent Pevsner from doing much other writing during these decades, or from devoting many hours to various national committees and other forms of public service. He also became a frequent, perhaps even a reasonably popular, lecturer and broadcaster. One of his more controversial performances in this role came in his 1954 Reith Lectures, which he published the following year under the Pinder-esque title *The Englishness of English Art*. Not all lovers of English art found the book's identification of traits of national character persuasive, just as not all listeners had enjoyed the experience of being lectured at on this topic in a German accent.

Two other important institutions through which Pevsner acted on the British public were 'the Archi' and 'the Vic Soc'. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the *Architectural Review* was a lively periodical, not a narrowly trade journal but a forum for the discussion of all kinds of ideas about the relationship of architecture and society. Pevsner found it a congenial home, and became its assistant editor for a while during the war: several of his most celebrated or controversial writings were first published in its pages, and he remained on its advisory board until 1970. Although Pevsner's own tastes tended to favour the chronological extremes of the medieval and the modern, he wrote appreciatively of the highlights of Victorian architecture at a time when such appreciation was not common, and he devoted some space to Victorian buildings, churches especially, in the 'Buildings of England'. So it was not altogether paradoxical that this ardent disciple of the Bauhaus should become a founding member of the Victorian Society in 1958 and then serve as its Chairman from 1964 to 1976.

In this capacity he took part in many battles, not all successful, to rescue threatened buildings from demolition ('they've saved a hundred years' reflected one admirer), and his writings contributed to the more general reevaluation of things Victorian that took place during these decades.

Pevsner, it should be remembered, was not in any straightforward sense a 'conservationist'. What mattered to him was the living whole, the relation of architectural form to human content, which could involve the harmonious integration of new and old, where neighbouring buildings nodded appreciatively to each other rather than turning their backs or making rude gestures (as he observed of Stirling's assertive History Faculty Building in Cambridge, which sat next to Casson's inventive Raised Faculty Building: 'Perhaps if Sir Hugh Casson had not been so playful, James Stirling might not have been so rude'). Moreover, although Pevsner loved and sought to protect outstanding buildings of all periods, from medieval to contemporary, he retained his early loyalty to Modernism. Or, rather, what he favoured was the idealistic, social-purpose Modernism of the movement's founders before 1939, not the debased, corporate-headquarters modernism of the 1960s and 1970s. He continued to believe in the principles of Gropius and the Bauhaus, but became uncomfortably aware in his later years that his kind of Modernism was itself becoming 'period' architecture. It is one of the peculiarities of the original *Buildings of England* volumes that they often single out the occasional bold essay in Modernism among civic or educational buildings for appreciative comment while in general having relatively little to say on secular and domestic architecture after the mid-Victorian years.

Harries puzzles a little over why Pevsner, not himself an aggressive or duplicitous man, attracted what could seem like more than his share of hostility (she perhaps doesn't allow quite enough for the sneer which can be the default response in England to anyone bearing the title 'professor'). She suggests that 'Pevsner's principal offence... may well have been his success', and recognises that he often served as 'a lightning conductor for more general spleen and discontent with modern life'. Betjeman, Pevsner's almost comically exact antithesis, is the obvious witness to call at this point: 'Art history and architectural history still seem to me to be verbiage written by uncreative people who want to make a name or a faculty for themselves with chairs and incomes attached to it ensuring dignity and a comfortable set of rooms in a college or university'. Dismissal of 'pedantry' could also be a cover for sheer anti-German prejudice, further dressed up as celebration of the virtues of 'the amateur'. 'The Herr-Professor-Doktors are writing everything down for us, sometimes throwing in a little hurried pontificating too', grumbled Betjeman, singling Pevsner out (inaccurately as well as unfairly) as 'that dull pedant from Prussia'. Auberon Waugh thought that Pevsner's 'bleary socialist eyes' simply could not appreciate the glories of English country-houses, though in reality he gives superb architectural descriptions of many of these buildings. His sin, of course, was not to indulge in chit-chat about eccentric ancestors and all the other

sentimental snobbery which overcomes some English people when confronted by the links between a few titles and a fine facade.

One of the most notorious attacks came from an ex-student, the Cambridge architectural historian David Watkin, in his *Morality and Architecture*, published in 1977. Harries carefully documents how, by means of selective quotation from some of Pevsner's more enthusiastic writings about Modernism in the 1930s, combined with unsympathetic innuendo, Watkin constructed a portrait of an almost sinister figure, an authoritarian moralist of the left who wished to subordinate all vernacular English styles to a soulless, Socialist, rationalism. 'Rancorous', waspish', and 'spiteful' were among reviewers' characterisations of the book (Watkin's allegiance to a wider, Peterhouse-based campaign to discredit all forms of 'progressive liberalism' was noted), but, as always with such unfair attacks, some mud tends to stick. Watkin's book also had its admirers, it should be said. Paul Johnson commended it to readers of the *Daily Telegraph*: 'All sensible and sensitive people know that modern architecture is bad and horrible, almost without exception. Mr Watkin explains why.' Pevsner had to put up with a lot of this kind of thing.

These attacks were vastly outweighed by the admiration and praise that Pevsner increasingly garnered (in 1969 he was knighted 'for services to art and architecture'), and by the affection felt for him by a surprisingly diverse range of people. One of the forms taken by this last response that Pevsner himself particularly appreciated was parody. '*Smogge Hall*. C18. Offices of Northmet and British Restaurant. 1-2-3 hop 1-2-3 window arrangement. Characteristic double-hollow-chamfered waterspout. Not specially nice.' This was by the *Punch* humorist Peter Clarke, who was also responsible for dubbing Pevsner 'Big Chief I-Spy'. Pevsner himself joined in the fun, one year sending Christmas cards with detailed line drawings of 'The Collegiate Church of St Aldate and St Ursula, Candleford Magna' in Bassetshire.

For all his vastly detailed scholarship, Pevsner knew, and sometimes regretted, that he had not had an orthodox academic career; he described himself as a 'General Practitioner', in contrast to the more specialised 'Consultants' in the history of art and architecture. His most notable achievement involved an improbable marriage between the austere classifying impulse of *Kunstgeschichte* and the discursive judgementalism of the architectural or topographical guide-book. A man schooled in the impersonal discipline of early-twentieth-century German scholarship ended up producing a highly idiosyncratic vade mecum with a cherished place in the glove-box or saddle-bag of countless twenty-first century church-bibbers and country-house enthusiasts. It is impossible not to admire the magnificent improbability of the original idea: that one man might visit, identify, and characterise all of what he referred to, simply but encompassingly, as 'the buildings of England'.

Despite his youthful fantasies, Pevsner did not dominate and partially re-shape a scholarly field in the way a few leading academics occasionally do. He did not, for example, have the impact on Art History as a discipline that his friend and fellow-refugee Ernst Gombrich did. Nor did he, quite, become an unofficial national treasure in the way Betjeman did. Instead, he did something the overall significance and quality of which is peculiarly hard to estimate. Some of the engaging complications of the topic arise from the *trompe l'oeil* relation between Pevsner and 'Pevsner'. He conceived the initial series and determined its working methods, its criteria for inclusion, its style, its rate of completion. He did a lot, but not all, of the work, especially not the preparatory work; he did most, but not all, of the on-the-spot inspections (all to begin with, but dividing it up with others in the later stages of the series); similarly, though he did practically all the writing to begin with (apart from some specialist sections on topics such as geology), progressively he shared this labour with co-authors. He employed assistants and secretaries, and Penguin, inevitably, had considerable input into production of the volumes. Moreover, all of this applied to the first editions only: the second editions, and still more the new series of revised volumes, have largely been the work of other hands, partly working within Pevsner's original template and simply correcting and extending, but partly going beyond it to include kinds of buildings he neglected, and, at all stages, greatly expanding the scale of the volumes. In the current revised editions, now published by Yale University Press, many of the counties are sub-divided into more than one volume, which are no longer in the handy pocket format (though some readers of the first series complained that Pevsner must have had coats with exceptionally large pockets). So 'Pevsner' has become not just a noun, but also a brand. The whole series is now, slightly awkwardly, co-titled 'The Buildings of England' but also 'Pevsner Architectural Guides'. Since 1994 the series has been supported by the Pevsner Books Trust whose purpose is to 'promote the appreciation and understanding of architecture by supporting and financing the research needed to sustain new and revised volumes of *The Buildings of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales*.'

At the end of this long biography we are left with the conviction that Pevsner himself would have been content to know that he had created something much bigger and more enduring than just the oeuvre of a single scholar, something at once impersonal yet organic, that goes on living. By way of underlining this last point, I should reveal that the description of the church of St Peter at Headley in Hampshire with which I began comes, not from the first edition, but from the splendid new revised edition (confined to the northern part of the county plus Winchester). As the Acknowledgements for this volume declare: 'In common with all the revised editions of Pevsner's work the aim has been to preserve at the very least the spirit of his style and wherever possible to preserve his descriptions and opinions.' The passage quoted certainly seems to have done that; it sounds like ur-Pevsner. But actually that passage illustrates not just the way in which the Buildings of England series has become increasingly a collective enterprise, but also the fine line separating fidelity, imitation, and pastiche. For if one turns to the original 1967 volume on

Hampshire (the whole county, plus Isle of Wight, in one handy-sized book, jointly-authored by Pevsner and David Lloyd, but with Pevsner mostly responsible for the churches), the corresponding entry is slighter and, dare one say, less immediately Pevsnerian. ‘ST PETER. 1867-8 by *Edwin Dolby*. Brick. Nave and chancel in one; no bellecote. The tender for this church amounted to £456 (GS [i.e. information supplied by Geoffrey Spain from ‘Victorian technical journals’]).’ No Bath stone, no stained glass, and, sadly, no angels. More shocking still, there’s that firm denial of the existence of a bellecote. ‘Tiny’, in the revised edition, comes to seem an apologetic explanation for this omission, perhaps a slight tugging at the master’s sleeve as he too-quickly got back in the car to move on to the dozens of buildings that still awaited him that day. Such tactful revision may be the best kind of tribute, a practical acknowledgement of the way in which Pevsner, or at least ‘Pevsner’, has entered the cultural bloodstream. As he put it in the Foreword to *Staffordshire*, the final volume of the initial series to be published, when he, with genuine humility, issued his usual invitation to readers to point out his mistakes: ‘Don’t be deceived, gentle reader, the first editions are only *ballons d’essai*; it is the second editions which count’.