

MASTER OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

NIKOLAUS PEVNER:

THE LIFE

by Susie Harries
(Chatto, £30)

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THERE are simply no other writers on art or architecture whose names have the same ring. One of the chapters in Susie Harries's monumental and very readable book is called, simply, *Is it in Pevsner?* – a question that I have probably asked every week of my career as an architecture writer. The 46 volumes of the *Buildings of England* series were Nikolaus Pevsner's great achievement, and it is one of the greatest works of art history anywhere in the world, still today the essential guide to Britain's buildings and synonymous with the discipline of architectural history.

Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983) was a German Jewish art historian from Leipzig who rose to the very top of the British establishment, popularising architectural history as a writer and broadcaster, receiving a CBE for his troubles. He has also been blamed by subsequent generations of architecture writers for skewing the whole topic towards his own reading of things, such as the popularity of his works.

The early chapters of the Harries biography are perhaps the most revealing, sketching the character of the man before he found fame. Harries had exclusive access to the "Heftchen", or small diary notebooks, that Pevsner kept from the age of 14. These reveal a teenager full of insecurities and haughty self-confidence. As Pevsner began his academic career, though, a clearer picture emerges of a man who



the essential reader: Sir Nikolaus



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yearned to belong, to be considered a proper German, and who had an abiding sense of shame about his mother's liberal and artistic attitudes and his father's embarrassing Russian accent.

He found happiness in the strict, systematic German university system, and admired to the point of hero-worship his early mentors. Pevsner's work as an art historian began at a time when it was fashionable to consider the ethnic and national characteristics of art, and he passionately hated Impressionism and other bourgeois styles.

His early enthusiasms were for medieval sculpture and Expressionism, in which styles he saw art that served society. This belief that art should have a function, that it should be oriented towards some social objective, would stay with him, and led to his unflinching belief in the functionalist school of the modern movement in architecture.

The book deals compellingly and even-handedly with his political convictions (or lack thereof). It is clear that there was much in National Socialism that appealed to Pevsner, and while he was never a member of the party, nor did he ever condone violence, he believed until the mid-1930s that there might be something to the Nazis' views on art. He even imagined that there might be a place for himself in the Nazi art establishment, even as his own children were beginning to experience anti-Semitism at their school.

By this time Pevsner was in the UK (he lost his job at Göttingen University

because of the Nazis' interdictions on Jewish lecturers), lonely and unfulfilled, and perhaps this explains his deluded hopes of being accepted again into the German establishment. Separated from his wife Lola (and also fond of childish crushes on other women that were never consummated but strained their relationship) and his three children, he trailed around the country applying for academic jobs and subsisting on meagre grants and earnings from lectures.

But quickly Pevsner got on, and with the publication of his brief, accessible and useful *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1936), he made himself central to the promotion of modernism in the UK, and gained a critical reputation.

But it was when, after the Second World War, Penguin took up his idea for a comprehensive survey of Britain's architectural heritage that his place in history was cemented. Each of the books for the *Buildings of England* was a titanic undertaking. The trips to each county had to be undertaken during holidays from his teaching job at Birkbeck University, and involved thousands of miles of driving. In four weeks he would cover 2,000 miles in his 1932 green Wolseley Hornet, in the company of his wife, or a secretary. The resulting books are both encyclopaedic and subjective, scattered with Pevsner's characteristic dry humour and obsessively consistent in their detail.

There is more in this book than can possibly be reflected in this brief review. The ease of Harries's writing will reward any reader but the broader currents of the cultural history of the 20th century that are described as the background to Pevsner's life make this book very valuable indeed.

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