Editorial

Editor Martin Bellamy


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When not editing the work of other authors I try to find time to carry out my own research. At the moment I am working on the history of the Burrell shipping dynasty. Once one of the largest tramp shipping businesses in the UK, it is now only remembered as a result of Sir William Burrell’s extraordinary gift of over 8,000 art treasures to the city of Glasgow. This Burrell Collection played a pivotal role in the transformation of Glasgow from a failing post-industrial shell in the 1970s into a now thriving city of culture. However, beyond being called a ‘shipping magnate’ there is little public perception of how Burrell made his money to create such a collection.

Those who attended the recent excellent conference on Art and the Sea hosted by the Centre for Port and Maritime History at Liverpool John Moores’s University will have heard me talk about how Burrell’s art collection betrays little indication of its maritime origins. The fine medieval tapestries and French paintings were designed to elevate his social status and lend an air of nobility by obscuring his mercantile background. He left no memoir or diary and pursued something of a scorched-earth policy in relation to his business records. His final instruction when winding up all of his different businesses was that the records be destroyed. One could argue that he was simply being tidy, but I suspect the motive was more calculated. The end result is that any attempt now to ‘following the money’ or trace the myriad family business connections needs rather more cunning than a business archive would have required.

The recent explosion of online resources such as digitized newspaper archives, government records and genealogy sites such as Ancestry and Findmypast now offer unparalleled research tools that previous generations could never have dreamed of. Fortunately the public library system in the UK has moved with the times. Despite periodic press reports announcing the death of the library, national and municipal libraries now offer virtual access to these resources to far more people than ever visited in person to borrow or consult books.

Bizarrely, given his remarkable municipal generosity in relation to art, Sir William Burrell actively campaigned against the notion of a free municipal library service. Thankfully his wishes were ignored and I am now able to use a vast array of research materials to trace together the story of his family and business empire. All this from the comfort of my own home, and for free, as a result of a vastly underrated act of civic generosity that arguably has far greater impact than the gift of any shipowner’s art collection, no matter how pretty.

Martin Bellamy
Editor