

Bibliographic Note

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JOHN GERE

The British Museum

John Arthur Giles Gere 1921–1995

THE BASIC CURRICULUM VITAE of John Arthur Giles Gere — Winchester, Balliol, Oxford and the British Museum — correctly conjures up an image of a distinguished education and professional life, but gives little hint of the rich diversity and originality of character. In the course of his life Gere became a great connoisseur of Italian sixteenth-century drawings, a pioneering collector of landscape oil-sketches and a man of wit and extraordinarily wide learning, whose unusual personality made an indelible impression on all who met him.

The history of the Gere family can be traced back to the mid-seventeenth-century, when in 1644 two small boys, aged twelve and fourteen and heirs to a family estate in Devon, were for nefarious purposes sent off to the New World by a wicked uncle. The latter paid a ship's captain to accept them and then virtually abandon them on the coast of Massachusetts, where remarkably they survived on their own.

The succeeding generations of the family remained in North America until about 1867, when Gere's paternal grandfather, Edward, a manufacturer of castings for water systems, sold out to his partner after the death of his first wife. He came to England after the death of his second wife, an Englishwoman, who had died shortly after the birth of their son, Charles. Visiting her family, he met and married his wife's second cousin, in the first instance to find a mother for his child. But their union developed into a great love match, which produced five

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children including John Gere's father, Edward Arnold, who was born in 1873.

Gere's father was employed by the Patents Office as an examiner of patents. He took an imaginative interest in his work and in retirement during the Second World War he became obsessed with proving that the distillation of sugar beet could provide sufficient food for survival. As a result he used to follow lorries on his bicycle, picking up any of the crop which by chance fell onto the road. In a hut in the garden he set about reducing it in an old sardine tin, consuming the resulting bitter molasses, which he believed to be a very healthy diet.

Although something of his father's character was undoubtedly inherited by Gere, who was born on 7 October 1921, perhaps more important for the development of his later interests were his artistic forbears on both sides of his family, in all of whom he took great pride, hanging examples of their work as part of his collection. His father's half-brother, Charles March Gere, and two of his father's sisters, Margaret Gere and Edith Payne (the latter was married to H. A. Payne, who painted one of the Tudor scenes in the House of Lords), were all artists of the Birmingham school. In marked contrast Gere's mother's sister, Catherina Giles, was initially associated with the Vorticists in the circle of Wyndham Lewis. (Gere's mother was a formidable personality, who in more recent times would have found fulfilment by running a large organisation.)

From an early age Gere stood out from his contemporaries. At kindergarten he 'was so clever that we would defer to him even as children. I remember very vividly making and dressing match-stick figures of the characters in *The Midnight Folk*. He was mad about the book and we had a complete assembly of all the characters'.¹

A contemporary, Sir Patrick Nairne, met Gere 'at the preparatory school, Hordle House, in the early 1930s. It was not a bad school, as schools of that period went; but it was a concentration camp for John. He was then, at the age of ten, a paid-up member of culture and civilisation—art, books, intellectual views: not at all the stuff of prep. school society. He was a rebel (though clever enough to keep out of trouble); I was a wimpish collaborateur. But we were friends, who found the same things funny. On the dreary Sunday afternoon school walks we walked together fantasising about the possibilities of

¹ Letter from Daffodil Andrewes to Charlotte Gere, 29 January 1995.

more agreeable Sunday afternoons devoted to China tea and crunchy bars'.² And 'while the rest of us in the dormitory would be playing dab cricket or reading P. F. Westerman, John would be reading Ronald Firbank. I can hear his laugh as I write'.³

Winchester followed, where he was happy largely due to the support and encouragement of his housemaster, Jack Parr. This was given despite Gere's incurable insubordination, which was less intentional than the result of his failure to understand the apparently irrational requirements of those in authority, a characteristic which to some degree remained with him throughout life. The attitude of other masters towards him was not improved by his success in winning numerous prizes. (In later years he suffered from a nightmare that he was to be beaten without knowing the cause.) Although many of his close contemporaries have predeceased him, something of his views of the school can be gained from what apparently he told Lord Alfred Douglas, with whom, on coming down from Oxford, he was in correspondence in connection with his projected biography of the poet, Lionel Johnson, who had also been a Wykhamist. In reply Lord Alfred wrote: 'what you tell me about Winchester & its present headmaster fills me with consternation. I had no idea of it & do not even know the headmaster's name. I am however not surprised, as it looks as if the gadarene swine rush to the "left" has spread all over the country'.⁴

Gere's attitude to school life must, perhaps not entirely fortuitously, have echoed that of his chosen subject, who was likewise a prize winner. Johnson 'always kept himself aloof and with a certain atmosphere of disdain: assumed, I think—consciously? or unconsciously?—as a kind of defensive armour by one, who felt that his frail physique set him at a disadvantage in the rough and tumble of life at school. . . . He was, almost ostentatiously, indifferent to all the games and athletic side of a public school—no doubt it was good for us to have in him a standing protest against the over-valuation of such things: but you will readily understand that this didn't increase his popularity'.⁵ In Gere's case, there was the long painful struggle, which continued up to the age of seventeen, of trying to learn to swim. Being forced into the water, the inordinately thin boy used to cry out to those

² Letter from the Rt Hon. Sir Patrick Nairne GCB to Charlotte Gere, 21 January 1995.

³ Letter from the same to the present writer, 15 February 1995.

⁴ Lord Alfred Douglas to John Gere, 7 August 1942.

⁵ William Busby to John Gere, 16 August 1942.

whom he saw as his tormentors: 'Do you want to see my lifeless corpse lying at the bottom of the pool?'

On leaving school in 1939, he joined the King's Royal Rifle Corps, but was immediately invalided out on the discovery of intestinal tuberculosis, which must have had an unrecognised effect on his school years. When he was cured, he went up to Oxford in 1940, reading English at Balliol. His tutor was John Bryson, who not only reconciled Gere to Oxford life, but encouraged his scholarly interests in the Pre-Raphaelites and, by example, the collecting of English and continental drawings. A contemporary, Richard Wollheim, recalls that Gere 'lived in rooms which the sun seemed never to reach, and he believed he was very shy, and he spent much of his time doing very small ink drawings of great complexity of the human figure. He had Piranesi prints, & two sang-de-boeuf pots & other things, all of which he found in the original Oxfam shop opposite Balliol — or perhaps some other junk shop, I am now uncertain. But for all his shyness, what John loved most were the foibles of his friends, which he deftly turned into myths, so that it became enough to hear their names for him to collapse in laughter. Gradually the stories accumulated, and I felt that John kept inside himself a mythology as rich as Homer or Ovid'.⁶ 'John was really very private in those days, &, somewhat in keeping with the deliberately anachronistic character of wartime Oxford, he evolved a very rigid system of etiquette. Punctuality, & small rituals designed to show whether you were or were not acceptable, were very much part of it. Here I think that John might have been influenced by 'Colonel' Kolkhorst,⁷ whom he admired for his eccentricity. Once I kept John waiting

⁶ Letter from Professor Richard Wollheim to Charlotte Gere, 19 February 1995.

⁷ George Alfred Magee Kolkhorst, who has been described as follows (Letter from Russell Burlingham to the present writer, 9 December 1995): 'A much-loved and eccentric figure whose heyday was the Oxford of the 20s, where the University's equivalent of the Bright Young Things disported themselves: rainbow-hued butterflies briefly fluttering against the grey stone backdrop of college and quad.

'Kolkhorst's Colonelcy was attributed by some to service in the Portuguese Medical Corps; another school of opinion holding . . . that the rank had been attained during employment with the Buenos Aires Tramway Company. In truth the cognomen was altogether mythical: he was called Colonel because he was so unlike a Colonel.

'He conducted a salon at 38, Beaumont Street. Bowra presided over a rival one at Wadham, they did not like each other and there was a certain amount of competitive manoeuvring. K. spread his nets to draw in only accredited aesthetes: Bowra was not averse to extending a welcome to hearties and the more robust as well. K.'s Sunday mornings drew a wide spectrum of "arty" Oxford. His intimates, dons and undergraduates alike (he was

for about 5 minutes — I am sure no more — at Balliol Lodge. John cut me dead for about a month. He kept some of this up for a few years.’⁸

On coming down from Oxford in 1943, Gere undertook a period of voluntary service at the Tate Gallery, which rapidly ended when he quarrelled, as a number of other people did, with the then director.

University Lecturer in Spanish) called him G’ug—the apostrophe, indicated by a little yawn, was supposed to imply deference. I forget if it was Colin Gill or Gerard Irvine who perpetrated the doggerel lines:

G’uggery G’uggery Nunc,
Your room is all cluttered with junk:
Candles, bamboonery,
Plush and saloonery —
Oh pack it all up in a trunk!

‘Kolkhorst wore a lump of sugar round his neck on a piece of string, “to sweeten conversation”. A quip by one of the circumambient wits ran:

He’s the wise G’ug, who says each thing twice over,
Lest you should think he never can recapture
That first fine *careful* rapture.

‘Betj. always prefaced his letters “Darling Colonel” — anticipating correspondence by an entirely different kind of author to an entirely different kind of Colonel — one memorably opened “you dear horizontal-eyed, cube-headed, wool-dressing-gowned old thing”. I seem to remember reading his quarters smelt of mice and chicken soup. A large photogravure portrait of Walter Pater was prominently positioned on the chimney-piece, at some stage Osbert Lancaster, in a boldly flowing hand, had scrawled Alma Pater over the placid, heavily-moustached features of the great Oxford teacher and evangelist of the Gospel of Beauty.

‘They must have been jolly affairs, those Sunday mornings. A favourite diversion was the propelling of moistened postage stamps, using coins, towards the ceiling, to which, over the years, a multitude of these had adhered. At a fairly late stage in the proceedings everyone joined hands and chanted in a circle as they revolved round Kolkhorst:

D’ye ken Kolkhorst in his art-full parlour,
Handing out the drinks at his Sunday morning gala?
Some get sherry and some Marsala —
With his arts and his crafts in the morning! (Tune: John Peel)

This was always received by K. with “suave equanimity”. . . .

‘K. in later years, until his death in the mid-fifties, inhabited Yarnton Manor, a large rambling Jacobean/Victorian place a few miles west of Oxford. All windows were heavily curtained, day and night. Lunching there was like being in a nightclub, especially when — a frequent occurrence — the Colonel wound up the gramophone and put on “Just the Way You Look Tonight”.

‘It must have been, I think, through John’s old Balliol tutor John Bryson, or perhaps more likely through Eddie (E. H. W.) Meyerstein, that he would have crossed the path of this unique and extraordinary character, as strange as any to be found in Aubrey or Hearne.’ See also *To Keep the Ball Rolling. The Memoirs of Anthony Powell* (rev. ed., Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 90–1.)

⁸ Professor Richard Wollheim to the present writer, 15 September 1995.

Advised that he should acquire professional qualifications, Gere enrolled to study the history of art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, which although founded in 1932 was still a small highly specialised institution. But after one term he decided that it did not offer him what he was looking for. Despite the dire warnings of his contemporaries that he was committing professional suicide, he was soon able to demonstrate that his rapid departure from that centre of art–historical studies did not impair his future career in the museum world. In later years, anyone foolish or bold enough to describe him as an art historian was treated to an indignant denial.

On 25 March 1946 he was appointed an Assistant Keeper in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum and was immediately employed on preparing for publication the catalogue of the early Italian drawings in the British Museum by Popham and Philip Pouncey.⁹ (This was a task, later referred to ‘as perhaps the most valuable part of his entire education’, for which he showed great aptitude. His natural editorial skills were subsequently employed on Wilde’s catalogue of Michelangelo’s drawings¹⁰ and Popham’s catalogue of the Parmese drawings.¹¹ Although an admirer of Popham, he found an immediate spiritual affinity with Pouncey, who became a lifelong friend and initially gave him precisely the training which he felt he needed. As he later recalled: ‘Quite apart from the close scrutiny and discussion of the drawings themselves, he [i.e. Gere] learnt whatever he knows of clarity, accuracy, concision and exactness of expression, attention to shades of meaning, the distinction between hypothesis and fact and the relevant and irrelevant, and the “expression of assent and dissent in graduated terms”’.¹² Those who regularly overheard their often lengthy pursuit of a nuance will readily attest to the accuracy of this testimony.

After serving twenty years as an Assistant Keeper, he was appointed Deputy Keeper in 1966, and, on the retirement of Edward Croft-Murray, Keeper in 1973. In the latter role, he developed into a character, perhaps one of the last of a dying breed in the British Museum.

⁹ A. E. Popham and Philip Pouncey, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, 2 vols (1950).

¹⁰ Johannes Wilde, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Michelangelo and his Studio* (1953).

¹¹ A. E. Popham, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Artists Working in Parma in the Sixteenth Century*, 2 vols (1967).

¹² *The Achievement of a Connoisseur: Philip Pouncey* (Cambridge, 1985), n.p.

His staff may have been in awe of him, but they greatly admired him. He set very high standards in the care of the collections. In the best traditions of the Civil Service, he was, whatever he may have thought privately of the public, very punctilious in carrying out his public duties, often taking considerable trouble to answer a difficult or tiresome question with the fullest information. He was an excellent teacher in the skills of writing catalogue entries and exhibition labels (the ultimate exercise in concision) and in the practice of connoisseurship. He achieved this as much by example as by criticism, the latter developed benevolently but directly, a characteristic he adapted, at least where directness was concerned, to whomever he was speaking. His junior colleagues were also deeply grateful to him when he invariably defended them against what were seen as overbearing directives emanating from the central administration. In one instance his championing of their cause involved a powerful trustee, who was recommending that a senior outside scholar should be appointed to advise the Print Room about its modern acquisitions, leaving the recently appointed assistant keeper with a specialism in that field to perform in a purely subordinate role. This proposal was firmly and successfully aborted by Gere.

Another dispute, which involved Gere even more directly, raised the temperature a little higher. An equally forceful trustee was urging, against the former's objections, and thus undermining the position of the Keeper, the acquisition of an expensive and ugly drawing supposedly by Van Gogh. Gere, who saw the purchase as both undesirable for a great collection and a waste of public money, used what he regarded as a once-only option and threatened resignation. It was, however, a tribute to his standing that both the trustees, Lord Clark and Sir Lawrence Gowing respectively, continued to regard him in a friendly and admiring light. In fact the former, after a visit from Gere to his flat in Albany, went so far as to say that 'John Gere has a better eye and deeper knowledge than anyone else alive today'.¹³

But despite his widely recognised distinction Gere could never escape a lingering feeling that he was not a totally successful Keeper. This was perhaps started by the dilatoriness of the trustees in appointing him and aggravated by his increasing lack of patience with the burgeoning bureaucracy, which now affects everyone in an administrative position. In addition he suffered from a certain innate diffidence, distinctly detectable on occasions in his voice. For someone so essentially privileged this might have seemed an affectation, but was in fact

¹³ Letter from Catherine Porteous to Charlotte Gere, 17 January 1995.

induced by an element of genuine ambivalence in his character. ('It's not so much that I want to be Keeper; it's more that I don't want *not* to be.'¹⁴). At his death the long-time Secretary of the Museum, Bentley Bridgewater, went out of his way to say that 'I must put right any suggestion which John may have made that his performance as Keeper left anything to be desired. He was generally recognized as a first rate Keeper and held in high estimation both inside and outside the Department. . . . Both Trustees and Directors thought of him as a very good Keeper—so, too, did his staff'¹⁵

But there was, of course, his incorrigible irreverence which he couldn't resist, although he knew it caused puzzlement if not irritation, such as on the occasion, when, faced with Gere's resolute opposition to a new museum initiative, the chairman of the trustees, puffing his pipe, came up to him and, taking his arm, said in a cajoling manner: 'You know, Gere, symposia are *a good thing*'. Responding to this rather too obvious attempt at gentle persuasion, Gere feigned to believe that he was being encouraged to set up homosexual drinking parties in the Department. (Introduced to the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, after a barely audible memorial address, 'I told him that the Cathedral ought to be pulled down and replaced by a properly planned auditorium with all the advantages of modern acoustic research'.¹⁶)

During his years at the Museum he was responsible for a number of important purchases of drawings, such as Andrea Mantegna's *St James led to Execution*, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Virgin and Child*, as well as others by Bronzino and, as one might expect, Taddeo Zuccaro. He was no less concerned with building up the representation of lesser artists, such as Polidoro da Caravaggio, Baldassare Franceschini and Lazzaro Baldi, in the Department's collection. He was in addition a generous donor to the Museum and over the years gave works (landscapes, a portrait of Mrs William Morris on vellum and a group of sketchbooks) by his half-uncle, Charles March Gere, a drapery study by Wilkie for *The First Earring*, watercolours by William Bell Scott and George Howard, a drawing by Alexander Monro for his most celebrated sculpture, *Paolo and Francesca*, after a design by Rossetti, and a drawing by Belisario Corenzio.

There was a nice symmetry about the pattern of his scholarly progress, which, as the attached bibliography demonstrates, was remarkably wide-ranging. He started by working on the Pre-Raphaelites, who at

¹⁴ Letter from John Gere to the present writer, 23 April 1972.

¹⁵ Letter from Bentley Bridgewater to Charlotte Gere, 19 February 1995.

¹⁶ Letter from John Gere to the present writer, 27 May 1992.

that time were underrated and in need of reassessment, by publishing, *inter alia*, a book, written with Robin Ironside, on the *Pre-Raphaelite Painters* (1948). He subsequently went back in time to the study of Raphael and his contemporaries, and only in the last year of his life returned to his first love by arranging an exhibition of the Pre-Raphaelite drawings in the British Museum, which was accompanied by an excellent catalogue. It represented a period to which in all aspects of its culture he felt strongly attracted.

His most significant research was done in the field of sixteenth-century Italian drawings, notably his monograph on the drawings of Taddeo Zuccaro and the two British Museum catalogues written with his friend and colleague, Philip Pouncey, *Raphael and his Circle* (1962) and *Artists Working in Rome c. 1550 to c. 1640* (1983). Both of the catalogues set new standards in the connoisseurship of those particular fields and in their scholarly exegesis, offering original judgements and characterisations in beautifully concise, highly wrought entries, which in their preparation had been subject to infinite refinement. The exemplary detailed biographies of the artists whose drawings were included provided a wider and much used work of reference. In the first volume Pouncey and Gere can be seen as pioneers in sorting out one of the most difficult problems of connoisseurship, the drawings produced by artists working around Raphael, as well as for their clear and well-argued definition of the work of the master himself. (As part of this search for convincing answers, Gere, a rare performer, gave six lectures on the decoration of the *stanze* in the Vatican by Raphael and his school, for the newly created History of Art Department at Cambridge.)

Following the establishment of art history in this country, connoisseurship has increasingly come to be looked down upon as a simplistic activity of merely determining the authorship of a work of art. In evaluating the achievements of Pouncey, Gere composed an eloquent defence of connoisseurship, which he argued added up to something very much subtler and more essential for further research than was normally conceded by art historians: 'the essence of the subject lies in the complex interaction of a host of widely differing individual artistic personalities which it is the primary duty of the historian to define and distinguish; and that no critical generalisation can be accepted as valid unless based on a foundation of secure attribution.'¹⁷

¹⁷ 'Philip Pouncey, 1910–1990', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 76 (Oxford, 1991), p. 535.

And both British Museum catalogues are notable for putting precept into practice. Gere's definition of the value of connoisseurship is relevant to his own achievements. But occasionally he felt challenged, albeit in a small way, to produce the synthesis that current art history seemed to demand and when writing an extended review of a book on High Renaissance painting, he tortured himself, to some purpose, to offer a personal definition in a dozen finely honed paragraphs of the meaning of the Renaissance.

Preliminary work on the second British Museum catalogue inspired the theme of his most original research, the drawings of Taddeo Zuccaro, in which he convincingly proved the pre-eminence of this Roman artist over his previously better known, longer lived and more prolific brother, Federico. A number of articles and exhibition catalogues devoted to the two brothers culminated in his masterly monograph *Taddeo Zuccaro, his Development Studied in his Drawings* (1969), which, since Taddeo's art touched so many other artists of the period, succeeded in providing a study of Roman painting at the mid-century. And in its understanding of the artist's use of drawing in the creation of a painting, it went far further than separating one hand from another, even if that, given the changing nature of Taddeo's art, was no mean feat in itself. Although Gere had convincingly established a generally accepted canon of the artist's drawings, it was characteristic of his constantly questioning mind that at the time of his death he had virtually completed an extensive revision, published in *Master Drawings*. The eighty-eight new attributions to Taddeo, increasing his *œuvre* by well over a quarter, are partly due to the reappearance of lost works and partly to Gere's conviction that he had originally adopted too narrow a view of the artist, who on reconsideration should be seen as being more various in his manner of drawing.

In addition to these volumes he wrote a number of exhibition catalogues for foreign print rooms, such as the Uffizi in Florence, the Louvre in Paris and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. But his most memorable exhibitions were held at the British Museum, where, for example, he assembled, in collaboration with his colleague, Nicholas Turner, almost all the drawings in English collections by Michelangelo (1979) and by Raphael (1983). These provided remarkable and very popular displays, which no other country could match and to which justice was done by the quality of the scholarship. The Michelangelo exhibition was repeated in a reduced version in New York later the

same year, when Gere, ever a self-critic, took the opportunity to rework substantially some of his catalogue entries.

Following his retirement in 1981 he continued to be widely consulted by museums and collectors, contributing, for example, to exhibition catalogues of Italian drawings from the collections in Rennes and Turin, and for a number of years he served as an adviser to Christie's on old master drawings. His last assignment was as the first Lehman Visiting Scholar to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1993.

Gere was a passionate collector, following in the tradition of the great collector-connoisseurs of the past, to whom, he was fond of emphasising, so much of our present knowledge is due. He had a particular admiration for Sir J. C. Robinson, 'who in 1870 broke new ground by being the first to publish a scientific and methodical study of an artist's drawings considered as essential elements in the reconstruction and assessment of his work as a whole'.¹⁸ Undoubtedly this consciously chosen inheritance influenced his taste as a collector in which he showed himself to be anything but narrow. He had a keen eye for any drawing of beauty, quality or of unusual character. As a result he had a very personal and varied collection by English, Dutch, Flemish and French artists as well as naturally by Italian artists, which was very different from that made by Pouncey, who was a specialist *par excellence*. The latter was sometimes playfully disdainful of his younger colleague's purchases, as on the occasion when the latter proudly returned one afternoon with a finely executed study by Abraham Bloemart, provoking Pouncey to announce at large that it was sad to see Gere wasting his time and his money on buying a drawing of a cabbage. But as he himself was inclined to say he regarded the collecting of drawings as an extension of his work in the Museum. His more creative instincts were directed towards a new and more original field of collecting, namely small landscape oil-sketches, for the most part done *en plein air*, by artists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, predominantly French of Italian subjects. Over forty-five years he built up a remarkable private collection. Increasingly it developed into his principal passion—a pursuit fully shared by his wife—as they searched for new acquisitions in auction rooms and galleries throughout the world. Often anonymous or wrongly attributed, they were a challenge to the eye and knowledge in much the same way as are old master

¹⁸ *The Achievement of a Connoisseur* . . . , n. 12, above.

drawings, although it was the work's intrinsic quality which was the prime motivation in acquisition. His wife was responsible for hanging them on the walls of their house in such a way that the collection became more than the sum of its parts.

In a wider sense Gere was formidably well-informed. He had an encyclopaedic mind which could almost invariably be relied upon. If he didn't know the answer to a question, you were likely to have considerable trouble in finding out. And he wrote with such style; chiselled, polished, precise and elegant. A perfectionist to the core, he was a demon for rewriting. Over and over his MS he would go, seeking some subtle nuance which still eluded him in often complex arguments. As a letter writer he was more relaxed and many friends have choice specimens carefully preserved. In the field of literature he had a most remarkable knowledge, allied with a memory for what he had read, so that he could freely quote large sections of prose or poetry. (He urged his children to do likewise.) A passionate admirer of the Sherlock Holmes stories, he could still recall all the plots by heart. He was as well versed in, say, the poetry of Shelley and Keats as he was in the novels of Horace Vachell and Desmond Coke. He read voraciously, in practice anything he could lay his hands on, often picked up on the seat of a bus or plucked from a waste-paper basket. But above all his source of literary knowledge was related to his very extensive library. He described himself as an accumulator of books rather than a collector, caring little about condition or whether he was purchasing a first edition. He took particular pleasure in discovering books with incongruous and recondite associations, such as his copy of Meredith's poems which had belonged to E. Phillips Oppenheim. He had a particular penchant for works illustrating the backwaters of the 1890s and the biographies of ecclesiastics and lawyers, as well as collections of epigrams, table-talk and epitaphs.

It was his encyclopaedic knowledge of English literature which led to his appointment as a member of the team of revisers of the third edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

He was not only an original and wide-ranging proposer of new quotations for inclusion, but a judicious and strict critic of others' suggestions. It was entirely because John quite often gave 'G. Madan's notebooks' as the source for some of his proposals for the new *ODQ*, on the roneoed forms we distributed, that I was led to ask, 'Who is this Madan?' And so, after a very long — even by Oxford Press standards — period of discussion, gestation, and preparation, Gere and Sparrow (eds.): *The Notebooks of Geoffrey*

Madan [a miscellaneous assembly of unusual quotations, aphorisms and scraps of table-talk] was eventually published.¹⁹

His friendship with John Sparrow was close and long-lasting. Although reticent about being acknowledged, Gere was a substantial contributor to the latter's anthologies of Latin inscriptions, published under the title, *Lapidaria*. . . .

As is often the case, writing obituary notices of one's friends becomes one of the main preoccupations of retirement, and in this exercise Gere was a superb exponent, deftly conveying the character and appearance as well as the intellectual achievements of the deceased. Apart from his extended obituary of his friend and colleague, Philip Pouncey, for the British Academy,²⁰ one can particularly admire his tact and sympathy in recalling the ultimately tragic life of John Woodward, former Keeper of Art at Birmingham City Art Gallery,²¹ his ability to pinpoint the mercurial and elusive character of the German art historian, Walter Vitzthum,²² and his affectionate but pointed assessment of his predecessor, Edward Croft-Murray.²³

Gere was a complex and fascinating man, whose character was perhaps ultimately only fathomed by his wife, as he himself acknowledged. Making a copy of the classic *New Yorker* cartoon showing a business man with his secretary on his knee, he changed the legend to 'My wife understands me'. (He had married Charlotte Douie in 1958 and they had a son and a daughter. He was extremely fortunate in his marriage since his wife not only fully shared his interests but was assiduous in attending to his wishes, which sometimes were unusually demanding in the *va-et-vient* of daily life.) Initially he was not easy to get to know, although many to the enrichment of their lives succeeded. Although we worked in the same department we did not speak for the first eighteen months of my employment, which in view of our proximity to one another was some sort of achievement. He seemed to require the right introductory note, usually in a field different from that one might suppose to have in common with him. (A colleague from another institution, on an official journey by car in Germany, only succeeded in breaking the uncomfortable silence by the chance mention

¹⁹ Letter from Richard Brain, editor of the third edition of the *ODQ*, to Charlotte Gere, 19 January 1995.

²⁰ *Op. cit.* above, n.17, pp. 529–44.

²¹ *Burlington Magazine*, cxx (1988), 434.

²² *Burlington Magazine*, cxiv (1972), 721–2.

²³ *The Times*, 24 September 1980.

of a detective novel.) But once the rapport had been established he became the easiest and most communicative of friends. He was a man of contrasts. In many ways old-fashioned and conventional, he had a deeply unconventional side to his character, indeed one can say that the more one studied him the more he emerged as a true eccentric.

He had a highly rational and precise mind, which was sharp as a razor. This informed his scholarship and attitude to work. At the same time there was a strong element of fantasy and imagination which so delighted his friends. His natural wit invariably surfaced whatever the occasion. It was devilishly accurate at hitting its target. It was rarely malicious but was beautifully pointed and usually extremely funny. His humour was extended to his habit of gentle teasing of those he liked. To a younger colleague, who had just announced his engagement, Gere 'was full of congratulations, and then went on to express polite surprise at the fact that I had styled myself 'Doctor' . . . "I was under the impression that only medical practitioners, bishops', [pause] 'and cathedral organists actually used the title'"²⁴

With wit so much depends on circumstance and tone of voice, and Gere never lost an opportunity to take advantage of either, but as a formal example one can cite his demolition of some hugely infelicitous art history: 'Of an art critic of an earlier day it was said that in his prose the English language lay in state; in Professor [. . .]'s prose the language lies, as it were, extended on a slab in a mortuary, having been unrecognizably battered to death in the course of the author's passionate struggle to force the ultimate shades of meaning from what is clearly a hopelessly intractable medium. His efforts evoke the image of someone trying to thread a needle while wearing a pair of boxing gloves'.²⁵

As far as he was political, he was to the right. He loved to play the role of Colonel Blimp or act as an old fogey, and the pose was not without some reflection of his true nature. If he so much as touched a copy of the *Guardian* newspaper, eagerly promoting a caring society, it was only to do the crossword. He extravagantly castigated Mrs Thatcher's views as being leftist and he was even heard to claim in an extreme moment that the *Daily Telegraph* was written by a group of crypto-Communists.

As a result of his grandfather being an American, Gere had parti-

²⁴ Letter from David Ekserdjian to Charlotte Gere, 17 January 1995.

²⁵ *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 January 1963.

cular empathy for the United States; both the country, especially New York, and the people among whom he had a body of friends and admirers. When in New York he usually stayed at the Union Club. Seated in a large, curved-back, leather-upholstered chair in the vast entrance hall, with a club-sized Scotch beside him, he looked like one of the longest standing and most genial of the members. In fact he appeared more at home there than he ever did during his membership of the Athenaeum.

An important annual family event consisted in what may be called *les vacances de Monsieur Gere*, when he became another person and delightfully, for the benefit of his friends fortunate enough to be around, revealed his capacity for clowning. ('As I get older, I seem to live from one summer holiday to another, regarding the intervening 11½ months as a tedious distraction'.²⁶) Ensnared in the unchanging Suffolk town of Southwold, the Gere family for a number of years was forced to rent an unattractive modern house near the pier, for some unexplained reason called 'Hoopers'. The level of the road was higher than the ground floor so that the house was approached by a bridge leading into the upper floor, where on your arrival you were as likely as not to be greeted by Gere playing the part of a wildly gesticulating lunatic, an act which quickly attracted an audience of gawping holiday-makers, whose increasing bewilderment only served to prolong the performance. Inside the furniture was shoddy and totally inadequate for Gere's ample frame. But the house's deficiencies were grist to the conversational mill, and there could be no greater incongruity between the house and its current occupant than the sight of Gere posing on a low stool before the cheap dressing-table with its triptych mirror. And there were gastronomic compensations. After his early morning bathe, showing that his suffering at school was not in vain, Gere had a regular diet of kippers for breakfast and dressed crab for lunch, which he himself would go and buy daily from the local fishmonger.

Unlike the casual holiday-wear adopted by most of the population, Gere always dressed like an English gentleman at the seaside; a light-weight brown jacket with a thin black stripe, waistcoat, invariably a tie, grey flannel trousers and a pair of smart canvas yachting shoes. Had he worn a boater, it would not have seemed out of place. He also carried a walking stick, which, however, had a dual purpose. He was an avid and serendipitous beachcomber, riffling through the bordering undergrowth

²⁶ John Gere to the present writer, 17 October 1972.

and along the beach, in the same way as he rummaged through dustbins in the search of copies of *The Times* or the *Daily Telegraph* for their crosswords. The treasure that was found on the shore was either kept, read or burnt. With his unerring eye for an old piece of wood in a skip, Gere was never short of firewood. On the last day of the holidays, all inflammable rubbish within a certain remote area would be gathered together and a great fire would be lit on the beach, both symbolic of the return to London and an act of cleansing the environment.

But it was at home in London that Gere was happiest. A childhood friend of Gere's son retains an image of 'him at the sitting room table reading Pope-Hennessy's *Gothic Sculpture* whilst simultaneously dipping into an obscure clerical biography and *The Loom of Youth*, and asking us to make less noise because he couldn't hear the Marx brothers on the telly'.²⁷ A warm and very convivial friend, Gere took great pleasure in entertaining his close friends to a delicious meal prepared by his wife and often accompanied by one of his best bottles of claret—he was a generous host who took trouble not only to choose the wine but to select the pre-dinner drinks which would particularly appeal to his guests. And it was on such occasions that reminiscences would flow. It was as if there was a different trunk of memories stored in the house awaiting the return of each of his varied range of friends, the contents of which would be taken out, polished and augmented. (Gere was a sharp observer of human follies, clipping out items from newspapers which would either be sent to friends, often embellished with witty comments, or kept for future delectation. Two albums preserved the deeds and sayings of two of his favourite subjects, trendy museum directors and liberal bishops.) Entertained by Gere's humorous observation of all aspects of life, a person from outside his profession could be forgiven for not being aware that he or she was conversing with a distinguished Renaissance scholar. Usually cleverer and better informed, he never induced any feeling of inferiority in his conversant. But towards those who had no excuse for not being *au fait*, he adopted a more stringent approach. 'Verbally when one was with him one had to be absolutely on one's mettle—he could after all pounce as mercilessly on a slovenly expression as on an absurd and/or pretentious museum director—but his own breadth of knowledge and coruscating conversation had the effect of raising the game of those around him'.²⁸

²⁷ Undated letter (1995) from Paul Martin to Charlotte Gere.

²⁸ Letter from Noël Annesley to Charlotte Gere, 23 January 1995.

But Gere's generosity towards his friends went further than picking out choice bottles from his cellar. A number of friends in trouble or in ill-health, or in need of moral or financial support were unobtrusively helped. In his retirement, he was an assiduous visitor to sick and elderly friends to whom he would read and cheer with the gaiety of his conversation. His very sudden end on 11 January 1995, sitting in an armchair in his library in the early hours of the morning, which as an insomniac he regularly did, denied those fortunate recipients of his friendship the opportunity of offering something in exchange as he himself slipped into old age.

He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1979; he was also elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1986.

CHRISTOPHER WHITE

Fellow of the Academy

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