

National Treasures: Saving the Nation's Art in World War Two

By Caroline Shenton

JUST as everyone on the Home Front faced a maelstrom of pre-war preparations during the Phoney War of 1939-40, the staff preserving cultural heritage jumped to attention too. Curators, conservators, archivists, academics and logisticians felt compelled and duty-bound to protect great art collections from impending attacks by the Luftwaffe. Their priorities, explains the author in this meticulously researched, lively book, was to ensure that 160 artworks by greats such as van Gogh, van Eyck, Holbein, Constable, Hogarth, Monet, Millais, Stubbs, Turner, Cézanne and Nash – along with rare books and manuscripts including the Magna Carta – were moved.

But where to, and how? What of the Elgin Marbles, valuable ceramics, metalworks and other resounding statues and sculptures? There were all sorts of items adorning the hallowed hallways of the capital's British, Victoria and Albert and Imperial War Museums, National and Tate Galleries and the Wallace Collection. Numerous unresolved questions faced the mild-mannered wartime 'geeks' and experts serving on a committee set up by the newly formed Office of Works.

As for the main characters chosen to lead this great escape of national treasures, never were three men so different in character. The flamboyant art historian and head of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark (later Baron Clark), was appointed to lead operations. He was the political force and supremely good at securing positive responses to wants and needs, seeing himself more of a 'connoisseur' than a manager.

Then we meet the introverted (yet brilliant) scientist and conservator Ian Rawlins, of the National Gallery, chosen to devise the construction of a purpose-built store inside the Manod Mawr slate mines in Wales. His knowledge of the special climates required for the protection of ancient artworks and essential chemicals associated with preserving wood, glue and paint, was mind-blowing. That said, Rawlins' big passion was for all things railway – which proved useful when moving art from London Waterloo to Penrhyn Castle. His boss, Clark, regarded Rawlins as "a kind, good man, but one of the most relentless bores I have ever encountered, who fussed to me interminably over the most trivial details".

Such minutiae was vital to the rescue of beloved works. For instance, Rawlins determined underground railway tunnels would be too damp for rare books and manuscripts and would only be fitting for pottery and statues – including the Elgin Marbles. Stately homes and castles took in most treasures, with the University of North Wales at Bangor, the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, Caernarvon Castle, Trawsgoed and Penrhyn Castle among them. Records reveal how many aristocrats and wealthy occupants claimed they would prefer to house rare artefacts and paintings than "noisy girls from Croydon who are far more easy to replace".

The third man was key to the packaging and transportation operation: the tall, aloof, gap-toothed Martin 'Dry Martini' Davies, assistant keeper at the National Gallery and in charge



of logistics. Unlike Clark, he strongly believed that "art was not for public entertainment", but, he said, for scholarship only.

Despite their differences, the desire to evacuate the nation's treasures formed an unlikely bond of purpose. They were greatly assisted by Muriel Clayton – the dedicated acting head of textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum – who had steadfastly risen to the top in a world dictated by men.

Some artefacts, such as heavy totems from Hawaii and other large statues, were left in place and sandbagged, as they been during the Zeppelin raids of the last war. However, the future of certain items was not quite so certain: the Elgin Marbles would spend the war in the underground at Aldwych; the principal librarian of the British Museum, Sir John Forsdyke, complained about "the poor condition and risk of flooding".

We learn too how artist Anthony van Dyck's 12ft tall 17th-century oil *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* was transported to Manod Mawr in a crate built for elephants. The journey was not without incident, thanks to a brusque encounter with the Hen Capel Bridge at Llan Ffestiniog! The London-based No-Nails Company also proved extremely useful, supplying lightweight easy-build plywood cartons and boxes, in which museum and gallery staff carefully stored items in wood, cotton wool and old copies of the *News of the World*.

This welcome book is extraordinary, a raft of information described with wit and panache by a well-informed, experienced archivist who knows her stuff!

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