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Manolo Guerci considers the benefits of funding and expert mentorship to the life of a writer

<https://www.sahgb.org.uk/girouardcampaign/manolo-guerci>

29/03/2024

Manolo Guerci recalls the combination of mentorship, influence and generosity, from the completion of his PhD to the research and rigour that shaped his path to becoming a prize winning author “in the school of” Mark Girouard.

Mark Girouard was instrumental in many ways for my book *London's Golden Mile: The Great Houses of the Strand* (YUP 2021) and my overall research on English architecture. His knowledge and expertise on the period was unrivalled, while his magnum opus *Elizabethan Architecture. Its Rise and Fall. 1540-1640* (YUP 2009), which brought together decades of research on the subject, represented a fundamental reference source for me. Not only did it provide me with state of the art research, but also with a model of how one approaches complex and multi-layered subjects while keeping things clear, accessible to all, and above all fun to read!

My relationship with Mark began with his examination of my PhD on 'The Strand palaces of the early seventeenth century: Salisbury House and Northumberland House' (Cambridge, 2007), which initiated a pattern of regular visits to last some twenty years. Over tea, or, more often, a drink, around his paper-packed dinner table, we would discuss all aspects of my research, forensically looking at any source I happened to bring in, and often digressing to gossip about people.

This book reconstructs a complex pattern of art, architectural, political and social history in the aftermath of the Reformation by focussing on the so-called 'Strand palaces' - eleven great houses that once stood along the Strand in London. Between 1550 and 1650, this was the capital's 'Golden Mile': home to a unique concentration of patrons and artists, and where England's early-modern and post-Reformation elites jostled to establish themselves by building and furnishing new, secular cathedrals.

The book was the product of almost two decades of work, as each case study represented, *de facto*, a book in its own right in terms of research. Benefitting from close archival investigation, the research unveiled incredible array of unpublished sources, shedding new light on one of the most important chapters in London's architectural history, and on English architecture more broadly. Then - that is to say, during the time covered by my book - and now, the 'people' involved with my Strand palaces cover the main names of the realm, and Mark knew most if not all of their 20th c. counterparts. He was also invariably familiar with the repositories in their respective country seats, and with the seats themselves, which triggered many happy conversations on the relationships between those houses in the country, at times unchanged since the period of my book, and the Strand palaces themselves. The relationship between town and country, explored by Mark throughout his work, then became part of my book too.

A mixture of scholarly and chatty, always full of wit and interesting anecdotes, our meetings provided me, more broadly, with a unique introduction into English architectural history, and in a way into English culture. This proved not only precious - as my research involved going to many private archives in the homes of these great families - but also most enjoyable and illustrative of how one brings history alive. Mark was also very generous with time, as well as unassumingly curious, which put one at ease. At his happiest when one brought architectural news to him, he offered in exchange a wealth of knowledge, and took you under his care. This has been a constant reference in my research, and has taught me a way of approaching architectural history which I share with my own students.

Mark's books were known for the very high quality of their illustrations and maps and images integral and indeed instrumental to study. In particular, a succession of diverse views provides key sources, to be interpreted in the light of detailed documentary evidence. In effect, the art of London's topography, rooted in the Northern European tradition where most of the artists involved came from, developed alongside the Strand palaces. For instance, Wenceslaus Hollar, one of the main protagonists of this book, is reputed to have drawn his views from surveys made from the top of Arundel House. Yet hardly ever did records easily match topographical evidence, hence the challenge was to disentangle an intricate jigsaw of a great variety and number of

documents, accounts and inventories in particular. Drawings and plans that are directly relevant to architectural reconstruction, all shown here, are in fact rare survivors. In addition, the reliability of this body of evidence, much of which was either presented here for the first time or re-examined afresh, was also in itself a challenge particularly given the absence of the buildings.

The 231 illustrations included in the book were therefore integral to the overall argument and approach. Many were reproduced in colour and at the highest quality so that reproduction fees and image rights were substantial. The Paul Mellon Centre provided for 50% of overall costs, while funding to cover the rest was successfully sought from the Marc Fitch Fund and the SAHGB, which kindly contributed £1000 towards this area. The book was included amongst the five best history books of 2021, got special mention as *'essential to the future of London archaeology and archival research'* by the Museum of London, was on the final shortlist for the SAHGB Alice Davis Hitchcock Medallion and the William Berger Prize, and won the 2023 HBA (History of British Art) prize for single-authored pre-1600 book.

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