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OBITUARY

NIGEL NICOLSON, B.A., M.B.E., O.B.E., F.S.A., F.R.S.L.

Nigel Nicolson, Patron of the KAS since 2000, Vice-President (1991 to 1999) and Member from 1964, died at Sissinghurst Castle on 23 September 2004, aged 87. It was his home since 1932, inherited in 1962 and transferred to the National Trust in 1967. Nicolson was internationally known, a soldier, politician (MP 1952-56), author, brave publisher and lover of Kent.

He was the second son of Vita (daughter of Lord Sackville of Knole) and Harold Nicolson. Not unwillingly, he was the surrogate survivor and custodian of the embers of the 'Bloomsbury Set' movement. Like his father, he was educated at Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, at which he confessed to 'being jolly lazy'. In the Second World War, he became a Captain in the Grenadier Guards. In 1989 this led to his appearing for the Defence in a libel case mounted by his then senior officer, Toby Low, against Count Tolstoy even though Low as Lord Aldington (who won) was a near neighbour.

In 1949 he was the co-founder of Weidenfeld & Nicolson, publishers and a Director until 1992. Many of his works come from them such as *Kent* (1988). These also included *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), the revelations in which of his parents homosexual propensities attracted much opprobrium. The book, unlike the play, gives space to his parents' creation of the Gardens at Sissinghurst (in which, he told your obituarist, he was not allowed to do any gardening!).

His autobiography, *Long Life* (1997) contains references to a veritable international compendium of prominent figures of the Twentieth Century. He states 'Kent is my County' and describes his pleasure over local walks and canoeing on the Beult and Medway. From 1992 to 2002 he wrote a weekly column, latterly for the *Telegraph*, much devoted to the Kent countryside. He was Chairman of Governors of Cranbrook School, 1971-81.

In *Who's Who* he gives Archaeology as his sole recreation. He describes it as 'the poor relation of Architecture' but by no means in a denigratory sense. His first field involvement was at a Romano-British site at Angmering, Sussex, with the support of Mortimer Wheeler. Later, they

explored the tunnels under Dover Castle. Typically, they meet with the relevant Minister in 1956 at the Travellers Club in Pall Mall; the outcome being the designation of Hadrian's Wall as a World Heritage site. He advocated a Museum for Kent, suggesting Leeds Castle as a location, saying 'I bequeath the idea to my successors'.

He masterminded, and largely paid for, the erection in 1998 of an inscribed large Ragstone boulder on the bank of the Medway at Burham to commemorate the crossing by the Roman legions to defeat the forces of Caractacus in AD 43. He describes this as second only to Hastings as the most significant battle on English soil. His skill in recruiting the support of the K.A.S. and Maidstone Museum in this project is well known to your author. Thus he sent quotations in Greek to the authorities as well as deploring the 'extraordinary dilatoriness of Local Government officers'. He squashed the Museum's proposal of an opening ceremony. 'Imagine a rainy day with only half-a-dozen people present, a press photographer, and the Mayors of Snodland and Burham, who will have to walk half a mile to the site, their robes trailing in the mud'. He was a skilful protagonist in the debates over the site of the battle against the advocates of a Sussex alternative. The later request he resign as a Vice-President (to make way for others) was accepted with amused indifference.

Another contribution to Kent was with The Jane Austen Society. He joined in 1968, the Committee in 1992 and became a Vice-President in 1994. He was the first Chairman of the Kent branch on its foundation 12 years ago, writing three books for the Society including *Godmersham Park during and after Jane Austen* (1996) and his last published work, *Was Jane Austen Happy in Bath?* (2003). Members describe him as always with something new and interesting to say but not a 'committee man'.

He was a most civilized but private individualist, highly capable in many fields. His writings and his children confirm his debt to and mutual affection with his father. His relationship with his mother, who was gauche and shy, was far less close. This, his father's frequent absences and the boarding school ethos of his youth must have had a considerable bearing on his personality.

He wrote and published over 20 substantial works and presented his Papers to the University of Sussex in 1992.

He married Phillipa Tennyson-d'Eyncourt in 1953 and they divorced in 1970. He has three children, Juliet, Adam and Rebecca. Particular thanks are due them and Helen Lefroy and Maggie Smith of The Jane Austen Society.

PETER DRAPER