

The art of compromise

The founding of the National Gallery of British Art, 1890-1892

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Abstract⁴

This article argues that the press played a key role in defining the Tate Gallery by facilitating a national debate about the siting, nature, and purpose of the proposed National Gallery of British Art. Art critics, politicians, journalists and a variety of newspaper editors weighed in on whether Britain should create a museum of modern art, a museum of national art, or both. The understanding of British art as quintessentially modern at the time of the founding of the Gallery meant that from the beginning the Tate Gallery was founded as both the National Gallery of British Art and a museum of modern art. The changing definition of modern art in the twentieth century, however, created fractures between these two identities that eventually led to the split between Tate Britain and Tate Modern.

Introduction

The period 1890-1930 has often been called the 'golden age' of journalism, in which local and national papers, unrivalled as sources of information and entertainment, competed for a mass readership swelled by the effect of national education. At the same time, a broadly unified ruling élite could – aided by the technology of rail and telegraph – participate in a national 'conversation' through correspondence pages and leading articles. When Henry Tate offered his collection of contemporary British art to the National Gallery in 1889, he entered a pre-existing debate about the formation of a National Gallery of British Art. In fact, what became known as the 'Tate Gallery,' the new National Gallery of British Art, was conceived, in the fullest sense of the word, in the press: imagined, sited, and built in words before it became a reality in stone. In addition, it was in the press – as well as through negotiations between the Government and Henry Tate – that the National Gallery of British Art also became a Gallery of Modern Art. This double identity came out of a particular cultural moment, but has had lasting implications.

In writing about the National Gallery of British Art, journalists created a clear imaginative divide between what was foreign and old, in the National Gallery, and what was modern and British, which would find a home in the new National Gallery of British Art. In doing so, the papers expressed a confidence in contemporary British artistic production that would not be repeated until a century later, and helped to define the new gallery as both a National Gallery of British Art and a Gallery of Modern Art. In periodicals' discussions of what Tate's offer meant and might mean, modern art was British. This is surprising now, when we see late Victorian art from across the cultural chasms of modernism and postmodernism. But to what the press called the 'art-loving public' of the early 1890s, the British School was at new heights of accomplishment and world significance, and it was generally accepted that the national school was young and modern, having only begun with Hogarth.

The new interest in the British School came from a new class of collector: middle class art-buyers preferred modern and contemporary (that is, by living artists) British art, as opposed to aristocratically acceptable Old Masters. In keeping with this, there was a strong nationalistic element in arguments for the National Gallery of British Art; correspondents and journalists consistently expressed the wish to show off the achievements of the 'native school' to Continental and American visitors.¹ Of course, a minority of artists and poets stood opposed to that middlebrow culture shared by such a wide proportion of the population. Jackson (1934: 52), Stokes (1989: xx). However, the impulse for the project of the National Gallery of British Art came not from the small number of avant-garde Aesthetes, but from the popular art

establishment, which included collectors such as Henry Tate, heavily influenced by the Royal Academy, the Academy itself, and the press. Indeed, James McNeill Whistler, unofficial spokesman for those of more 'advanced' tastes ever since his 1878 libel case against Ruskin, came out against the popular project, arguing that art could never be national.² In his vision of modern art, as in his work, Whistler anticipated the major cultural shift taking place that would begin to break into wider cultural consciousness (at least within the élite) soon after the Gallery was completed.

It was in fact when supporters of that conglomeration of new technologies, aesthetics, and cultural conventions associated with Modernism entered the artistic élite, that the Gallery's previously unified identity as 'modern and British' became problematic. The 1904 Parliamentary Select Committee looking into the administration of the Chantrey Bequest – effectively questioning the Royal Academy's control of the Tate Gallery's only acquisition fund – began what would be a long process of reconciling the Gallery's dual missions of Gallery of Modern Art and National Gallery of British Art. The next attempt occurred in 1915, when the Gallery was given the remit (through the Curzon Report) to include *foreign* modern art. Fyfe (1996). However, the definitive break only came in 2000, when, after many years of cramped housing of the permanent collection (swollen into one of the world's largest collections of modern art), the Tate Gallery finally divided into the Tate Britain and the Tate Modern. The Gallery's role as a historical record of British art – a National Gallery of British Art – is now fulfilled in the collection at Millbank, its role as a Gallery of Modern Art at Bankside. It is the argument of this paper that these dual roles were first developed and debated in the press of the 1890s.

Before Tate's offer of his pictures to the National Gallery, correspondents, editors and leader writers voiced concerns about the representation of British art – and therefore, as I discuss below, the representation of *modern* art – in the National Gallery. Afterwards, they argued over the siting, purpose, funding, and administration of the new Gallery that they imagined his offer would make possible. Indeed, after Tate offered his pictures to the nation, intending them to form the nucleus of a new National Gallery of British Art, papers occasionally pointed out that Tate himself was incidental to the question of the new gallery that he proposed; that the problem of greater representation of British art in the National Gallery was an old one, and that many commentators had advocated the need for an entirely separate gallery for British art. Each point of Tate's negotiations with the Treasury raised issues debated by editors and their writing public.³ Should works by living artists enter the National Gallery? Should a separate National Gallery of British Art be modeled on the Palais de Luxembourg in Paris?⁴ Should the new gallery be built with private or public funds? Would South Kensington, with its purposes of improving industrial design, be an appropriate place to site a gallery of fine art? Who should administer the new gallery? If it were to be primarily a collection of works by living artists, what would prevent corruption among the Royal Academy, art dealers, artists, and the gallery?

The gallery that eventually emerged was a compromise between claims for a gallery of modern art and for an historical gallery of British art, and between advocates of private and of Government support of the arts. It was not the institution that many had dreamed of for so long, but then again, it was not what many had feared. Ultimately the compromises reached took place behind closed doors: the Treasury offered the Millbank site and Tate accepted it; the National Gallery Trustees took over the administration; the Royal Academy transferred the Chantrey pictures; G.F. Watts promised his substantial gift. Yet the presence and strength of the press, the existence of such a public forum in which the many possible galleries could be put forward and argued over, supported and decried, meant that, finally, all sides could take action with a full range of options and alternatives in view, could know the range of élite opinion and public support. It was the nature of this particular moment of cultural history that the compromise thus reached was to seem appropriate and laudable for only a short time.

The Press, the City, and the New Journalism

There is a well-established historiography linking the development of the Victorian press to the process of urbanization; Michael Wolff, for example, has written of 'the press as the verbal

equivalent of the city,' of 'journalism [as] essential in both the creation and the revelation of a general urban culture.' Wolff (1980: 7-8). In Wolff's view the press essentially doubles the city in words and images, revealing the culture of the city and thus a crucial element of nineteenth-century history. More recently, discussing the 'new journalism' in Berlin, Peter Fritzsche has pointed out that it 'was the popular or penny press that first tried to make the new world of the industrial city sensible to readers,' that these newspapers 'filled in the blank spaces of [readers'] mental maps' of the metropolis. Fritzsche (1996: 20). I would take this argument a step farther still, and point out how the press functioned as a forum in which the city was built and rebuilt in a public conversation that – while certainly not directly demolishing slums or directing construction crews – could effectively make certain changes possible and even more likely than others. The history of the founding of the Tate Gallery is one example of this kind of interaction between the press and urban development.

This power of the press to facilitate and direct a conversation that could impact public opinion and Government policy was both self-conscious and derived from its new pervasiveness in the second half of the nineteenth century. Baylen (1992: 33). Matthew Arnold famously complained of what he called the 'New Journalism,' a new stridency in the press which entailed a series of innovations, such as specialized pages that attracted different groups of readers: the letters, women's, gossip, and sports pages, among others. In fact, these developments had been appearing since the 1850s. Baylen (1992: 38). With these usually dramatically illustrated and eye-catching ways of presenting news and entertainment, proprietors and editors attempted to sell papers to an ever-expanding mass audience. What emerged in the 1880s, however – exemplified by W.T. Stead and his *Pall Mall Gazette* – was the role of the press as moral crusader, voice of the people, the 'fourth estate' that would be essential to the development of modern democracy.⁵ The expanded use of the correspondence column was 'democratic' in another sense, in that it allowed the voices of readers onto the printed page. John Stokes presents the correspondence column as a 'form of cultural production through which ideas were put into general circulation,' i.e., that these columns made possible the exchange of ideas and the shaping of public opinion while allowing readers to feel engaged with the ever-expanding press. Stokes (1989: xxi).

If the nineteenth-century mass press helped to create and define the city through innovation and the inclusion of a variety of voices, however, there were larger economic and political forces at work as well. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, the press demanded increasing amounts of capital for the technology for mass production – the steam press and the system of rapid distribution made possible by the railways – as the century continued. Williams (1978: 47). At the same time, in another example of the press generating and being generated by cultural changes, political parties became increasingly well-defined machines that could use the press to broadcast and popularize their goals. To the mixture of the strong moralizing impulses and attention-grabbing innovations of the 'democratic' New Journalism, and the centripetal tendencies of capital, we must add the galvanizing force of party politics.

For the most part, the London and regional newspapers were Liberal, although by the 1890s the Tories had begun to gain control of some regional papers. Baylen (1992: 39). (The London *Times*, of course, was the notable exception, stolid in its conservatism but carrying a weight, and claiming a place of legitimacy and respectability, of representing the Establishment.) Through the editorial 'we,' the consciously arch language of journalistic objectivity, newspapers and journals took partisan views at a time when parties were in a state of rapid reconfiguration and issues could often be claimed by all sides. What is crucial for the purposes of this paper, however, is that a new Liberal vision was emerging, a strategy to defuse the resentment of the lower working classes – and the threat of Socialism – with Government spending for what we would call today 'improved public services.' The issue of who should pay for the Gallery, or for the land it was to be built on, was an ideological one, but not strictly a party one. Some Liberal papers advocated more Government support for the arts, while some shared a Conservative emphasis on private philanthropy and traditional forms of patronage. Thus we will see that the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Daily Telegraph*, both staunchly Liberal papers at the time, disagreed on their visions of a National Gallery of British Art.

The Victorian press reflected and helped to create the complexity of a society striving for stability while undergoing unprecedented social, economic, and political change. One

element of stability was a new national culture that found expression in activities that all classes could enjoy, and that could be labelled broadly 'English' or 'British,' such as art or sport. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1993), Hobsbawm (1987). Increasing interest in the British School of Art and the role of the press in generating this interest provide evidence for the development of this new, national culture, based not on classical education but on an alternative set of shared institutions and values. Taylor (1999). The discussions about the proposed National Gallery of British Art were inextricably linked to the championing of a British School of Art, and played an important role in developing the new national culture and the institutions to sustain it. In short, the new prominence of Modern over Old Masters marked the increasing cultural clout of the middle classes.

From Old to Modern Masters: the rise of contemporary British art

In 1888, a year before Henry Tate offered his modern British paintings to the National Gallery, Edward Tyas Cook explored the question of the English School in *A Popular Handbook to the National Gallery*. In the *Handbook*, Cook attempted to define the nature of the English School of Art.

Is there an English School at all? In the fullest sense of the term, there certainly is not . . . taking all the English pictures together, one cannot detect any uniformity of method and style, such as would justify the application, in the strict sense, of the term 'English School.' . . . But in another sense there certainly is an English School. Not only do the separate manifestations of English art form a considerable and noteworthy whole; but considered broadly, they reflect many aspects of the national mind. . . . that seriousness of purpose, that predominance of the moral element, which has been said to distinguish the English character, is very conspicuous in English art... Cook (1888: 387-90)

Cook found art an important window onto the field of national character, and vice-versa.⁶ However, when he looked for a specific connection between national character and artistic form, he found a confusing multiplication of technique and style. To get around this, Cook primarily defined the similarities between English painters as deriving from shared subject matter.⁷

Why this interest in the English (or British – the phrases were used interchangeably) School of Art? Without attempting to explain the origins of nationalism itself, we can cite a couple of key factors: the ability to compare national schools in museums and international exhibitions; the growth of an exhibition system – supported by the press – to accommodate middle class collectors; and the rapid increase in galleries and museums built because of and then fuelling a wide interest in contemporary – and generally British – art. According to Shearer West, Richard and Samuel Redgraves' pioneering justification of an 'English School of Art,' *A Century of Painters of the English School* – first published in 1866 – was a 'by-product' of the International Exhibition of 1862. West (1990: 310). In fact, the Redgraves themselves charted the beginning of interest in the English School to the International Exhibition of 1855, and wrote their history of the School to show the longer tradition (beginning with William Hogarth) from whence the new accomplishment in art had come. Redgrave, R and Redgrave, S (1866). In the wake of the Redgraves' work, the English School was defined not in terms of history painting, the traditional queen of the visual arts, but in terms of landscape (with increasing emphasis on England's preeminence in water-colour) and genre painting. West (1900: 311) By the time of the debates about the need for a National Gallery of British Art, an accepted canon of modern British masters had emerged, with sufficient theoretical justification in terms of comparative historical and artistic value as to merit either admission into the National Gallery (which many complained favoured the Old Masters of the Italian School) or an entirely new and separate gallery.

But what prompted this justification of modern British art? One part of the answer, and probably the most important factor in the interest in the English/British School at all, was the development of a new market for art as the emerging middle class began to collect. Waldfoegel (1976: 166) and Lorente (1998: 18). This new class of collectors bought contemporary British

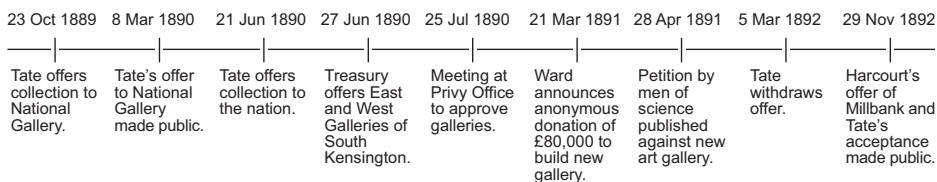
art and shunned Old Masters – limited in number and hence out of the price range of most buyers – not least to differentiate themselves from aristocratic connoisseurs. Roberts (1982: 88) and Macleod (1996: 30). As artists lost their traditional sources of patronage, an exhibition system developed in London and the great regional cities to connect artists to their new, anonymous public. Capitalizing on increasing public interest, the press reported on art exhibitions, guided the new buyers in aesthetic decisions, and explained the merits of the rapidly multiplying numbers of artists. Landow (1976: 125-6). Artists and buyers found each other through exhibitions in London and the regional cities that were publicized in the national and local press and new, specialized journals. The explosion of museum-building in the last half of the nineteenth century arose out of and in turn fuelled a new enthusiasm for contemporary British art; the most important regional art museums such as Manchester and Liverpool held annual exhibitions of new works for sale to raise revenue, and often bought from these exhibitions. Woodson-Boulton (2003). The Royal Academy, commercial galleries, and regional art museums, in concert with the national press, all participated in the diffusion and popularization of contemporary British art. As interest in it grew, so did pressure for a dedicated public space for its collection and display.

Many correspondents on the issue of a public museum of contemporary art feared the interest of art dealers and of the Royal Academy. For example, during the debates about the proposed National Gallery of British Art, Harry Quilter – art critic for the *National Review* – wrote in a letter to *The Times* that the influence of ‘the great picture-dealers...is essentially and naturally the worst of all influences with regard to English art, if only because their interest lies directly in favour of obtaining the highest possible price for works of art, and especially for the works of art of a few selected popular painters.’ *The Times* (28 July 1890: 4e-f). Eight months later, a letter signed ‘The Headmaster of the Royal High School in Edinburgh’ accused Sir Frederick Leighton, P.R.A., of supporting the idea of a National Gallery of British Art only because he saw an opportunity to create a gallery ‘for the works of Royal Academicians and their friends.’ *The Times* (20 May 1891: 13c). The Headmaster took as proof of this the ‘dreary walls at South Kensington where hang the works bought with the funds of the Chantrey bequest.’ *The Times* (20 May 1891: 13c).

For good or ill, there was enormous continuity between the exhibitions in the galleries of the Royal Academy, commercial dealers, and regional municipalities – as there was extensive social and economic interaction between artists, dealers, and the men who ran the regional art galleries. Contemporary British art – the same artists and often the same paintings – could be seen in all three types of gallery. Indeed, in the same letter, the Headmaster above argued that ‘provincials have opportunities more than enough of seeing contemporary art. It abounds not only on the Academy walls, not only on the walls of our provincial galleries, such as Liverpool and Manchester, which have been largely worked on the ‘worthy homes for contemporary artists’ principle, but in every dealer’s rooms in London and elsewhere.’ *The Times* (20 May 1891: 13c). The richness of the provinces in public collections and the interest in contemporary British art led some to argue that they would not want to support a metropolitan gallery, others that London needed to catch up with them, and still others (including Tate himself) that any national collection should be set up to provide loans to provincial galleries.

Thus, by 23 October 1889, when Henry Tate offered his collection of modern British works to the National Gallery, there was wide interest both in the historical British School (beginning with Hogarth) and in the achievements of living British painters. However, there was no clear consensus about the place these different kinds of collections should hold in a national public museum. Indeed, much of the debate about the proposed National Gallery of

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British Art hinged on the whether the State should be supporting an historical collection of British art, or a gallery of contemporary works.

Debate Part I: The National Gallery vs. the English Luxembourg

Artists and art-critics had raised the issue of the purported lack of representation of English art in the National Gallery well before Mr Tate made his offer. Water-colourist Sir James Linton, President of the Royal Institution, wrote an essay in the *Magazine of Art* in 1887 advocating that the National Gallery collect modern British masters, including works in water-colour (as mentioned above, a medium seen as quintessentially British). Linton (1887: 150-3). 'How much more valuable and instructive would be the National Gallery,' he argued, 'if it were in every sense national; not alone 'national' because it is the property of the nation, but 'national' in its most useful sense? Amongst the gathered works within its walls we ought to be able to see all that is best of our own school, as well as of its great predecessors.' Linton (1887: 152). Instead, he complained, '[m]any of the masters are not seen at their best, and many are entirely unrepresented, while the works of the three masters who *are* represented by their water-colours are relegated to out-of-the-way rooms.' Linton (1887: 153). James Orrock, R.I., took up this argument on 11 March 1890, in a lecture to the Society of Arts in London, just a few days after the first news of Henry Tate's offer to the National Gallery leaked into the press on March 8. *Manchester Courier* (8 March 1890: Tate Gallery Archive, History of the Tate Gallery, volume 1: Tate Archive Newsclippings, hereafter TAN, 4) and *New York Herald* (8 March 1890: TAN, 6).

By 10 March 1890, at least eighteen papers had carried the story of Tate's offer to the National Gallery. TAN (1890). Some papers supported the entry of Tate's pictures into the National Gallery – the *Leeds Mercury* argued that '[t]here are so few modern pictures in the Trafalgar-square collection that we cannot afford to let slip the opportunity of adding to their number [by accepting the Tate gift],' while the *Dundee Advertiser* opined that 'Mr Tate will render the Gallery thoroughly representative of current art, as well as that which is regarded as historical.' *Leeds Mercury* (10 March 1890: TAN, 5) and *Dundee Advertiser* (10 March 1890: TAN, 4). Others, however, questioned whether current art should be included in the National Gallery, and saw the solution to the problem in an entirely separate institution: the *Liverpool Echo*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and the *Yorkshire Herald* all ran the same article that felt that, while '[s]ome of the pictures in the collection, and especially Millais' noble 'Vale of Rest,' would be desirable additions.... as a matter of principle, it is more than questionable whether paintings by living artists should be admitted at all to the national collection.' *Liverpool Echo* (10 March 1890: TAN, 3), *Manchester Guardian* (10 March 1890: TAN, 4), *Yorkshire Herald* (10 March 1890: TAN, 5). The article then set the stage for much of the subsequent debate, setting the National Gallery as parallel to the Louvre and arguing for an 'English Luxembourg.'¹¹ It is thus worth quoting at some length:

The Louvre is governed by the wholesome rule that ten years from the death of any artist must expire before any of his works are qualified to attain the supreme honour of admission, and this provision undoubtedly gives public opinion time to settle itself, unbiassed by the burning questions of school and standpoint which must always affect the appreciation of contemporary performances. But then France has a worthy home for modern art, the Luxembourg; Berlin possesses the admirably managed National Galerie, and Munich the Neue Pinakothek. If London could boast a national establishment similar to these the difficult question would be settled at once, for to it and not to the National Gallery would such a collection as that of Mr Tate properly belong. The Chantrey Fund pictures might constitute the basis of such a modern national picture gallery, which would in all probability be very rapidly increased by the generosity of individuals. *Liverpool Echo* (10 March 1890: TAN, 3).

The public airing of this idea for a completely new gallery clearly pre-dates Tate's offer of his pictures to the nation for the purpose of forming a National Gallery of British Art.

Over the next few weeks, publications of all kinds took sides on this idea. Although no

kind of official public announcement of Tate's offer had been made, nor had his offer been directed to the formation of any kind of new institution, the press plunged into debating the merits of the entry of modern works into the National Gallery (in order to rectify the paucity of British art there), and the need for a completely new and independent institution, an English Luxembourg. Those who supported the entry of Tate's collection of modern British works into the National Gallery included *News of the World*, the *Leeds Mercury*, *Land & Water*, *St. James' Gazette*. *News of the World* (9 March 1890: TAN, 7), *Leeds Mercury* (10 March 1890: TAN, 5), *Land & Water* (15 March 1890: TAN, 7), *St. James' Gazette* (18 March 1890: TAN, 8).

Those against the inclusion of modern works in the National Gallery immediately took up the idea of an 'English Luxembourg,' advocated by the *Liverpool Echo*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and the *Yorkshire Herald*, as mentioned above. This idea gained the support of *British Architect*, which published a nearly identical article, and of the venerable and conservative *Times*, when it reported on Orrock's lecture. *British Architect* (14 March 1890: TAN, 7), *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9c).¹² *The Times* identified a problem that would dog the formation of such a new and independent gallery: the current dispersal of existing public collections of British art between South Kensington, the National Gallery, and the British Museum. The article pointed out that '[n]o Ministry and no Act of Parliament strictly limits and defines the scope of each of these bodies in the matter of acquisition, so that they work at cross purposes, and, if they do not actually compete with one another at public sales, each buys or accepts what ought to be the exclusive concern of one of the others.' *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9e). The editorial advocated 'a really representative and choice collection of our art gathered together in some great central gallery,' and wondered why London could not have, 'started partly by voluntary effort and afterwards subsidized and directed by the Government, a gallery that shall do for English art what the Luxembourg does for French.' *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9e). The article concluded that 'whether the works of living artists are to be purchased by the State or not, we do say that the time has come for the creation of a great British Gallery' and proposed that 'the land adjoining Kensington Palace would be suitable for such a purpose.' *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9e). In response, the *Pall Mall Gazette* – in its crusading style – published a four-point plan for the reform of the National Gallery; the last point put forward was that 'the pressure on the National Gallery should be relieved by the removal elsewhere of all pictures by living or recently deceased British artists. We want in London a gallery like the French Luxembourg – a gallery representative of the native art of our own time. There is no need, as some have suggested, to multiply galleries by building a Luxembourg in Kensington Gardens. The nucleus of such a gallery exists already at the South Kensington Museum, in the CHANTREY pictures and Mr WATT's gifts.' *Pall Mall Gazette* (15 March 1890: TAN, 11).

On 21 June 1890, Mr Tate sent to the Editor of *The Times* the letter that he had sent to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Goschen, that contained an offer of 57 pictures to the nation along with a nine-point plan to establish an 'English Luxembourg.' From advocacy of greater representation of the British School in the National Gallery, to the proposal of and support for the idea of an 'English Luxembourg' in the press, the National Gallery of British Art had become a subject of serious debate and real possibility. The debate about the nature, siting, administration, and funding of this previously imaginary and now quite possible institution had begun.

Debate Part II: Defining the Tate Gallery

In the summer of 1890, the *South London Record* asked, 'Where is the gallery to be housed? Who is to pay for its cost? Who are to administer its rules and its riches? What principles, or what conditions are to regulate its birth?' *South London Record* (19 July 1890: TAN, 33). Alternative visions of the new Gallery proliferated in the national press. This 'Gallery' was of course still imaginary, but it had been given a blueprint in the form of Mr Tate's scheme for giving 57 of his pictures to the nation. Tate had proposed an entirely new institution, to be housed in a building provided by the Government, to be constituted along the lines of the Luxembourg in Paris, to have an independent administration, and to contain British art since about 1750 (as *The Times* noted, this 'would practically include the whole history of British art').

The Times (23 June 1890: 9c). After detailing some of his ideas for this scheme, Tate finished by wondering whether, '[i]n order that a representation of the arts of painting, sculpture, &c., as practised in Great Britain and Ireland shall be as complete as possible,' British works from the National Gallery and in South Kensington – including the Chantrey bequest pictures bought annually by the Royal Academy – might be moved into the 'proposed new National Gallery of British Art.' *The Times* (21 June 1890: 12a). It was a grand scheme, which incorporated many ideas that had been proposed over the years in the press and no doubt privately to Tate at the banquet he held each year before the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

While each correspondent offered his own slightly different proposal for the siting, administration, collection, and funding of the new institution, there were some points of consensus. First, there was strong and widespread support for the idea of a National Gallery of British Art. Out of nearly three hundred and fifty articles consulted for this essay, I have identified only two that were against the proposed gallery outright: the Headmaster from Edinburgh quoted above, and the painter John Brett, R.A. (both emphasized the potential for corruption engendered by collecting the works of living artists). *The Times* (20 May 1891: 13c) and *The Times* 23 May 1891: TAN, 53). Second, there was general agreement that the Department of Science and Art, which maintained the South Kensington Museum (and hence the existing National Gallery of British Art comprised of the Sheepshanks, Vernon and Chantrey bequests) and a national program of technical education, should not administer the new gallery. Third, most correspondents and journalists expressed a wish that the gallery should consolidate London's existing collections of British art into one gallery, although this possibility came to seem increasingly unlikely. Fourth, while some urged the Government to spend enough to finance a splendid and imposing new building, most agreed that this was almost impossible, and anticipated that private funding would be necessary to house the new institution.

Within that range of broad consensus, two sets or levels of debate took place. One was, of course, the published conversation to which we have access; but there was another, hidden set of negotiations between Tate and the Treasury, which also included powerful members of the Royal Academy, the National Gallery, and the Department of Science and Art. This second level did occasionally enter into the public debate, to push a point or make a case to a wider audience. The press thus functioned as a forum, a testing ground for new ideas, a means of gauging public opinion, and a bullhorn for official announcements. Within the published debate, writers speculated on the nature of such an institution as a National Gallery of British Art. They expressed preferences for either private or Government funding, for ways of administering the Gallery, and for whether or not living artists should be admitted to the collection. They placed the new Gallery in Kensington Palace, in the East and West Galleries by the Horticultural Garden in South Kensington, on Exhibition Road in South Kensington (in a new gallery), at Trafalgar Square (behind the National Gallery, where St. George's barracks were still housed), on the Embankment, and finally at Millbank in the place of the derelict prison there. Each of these sites in London had its own history, set of associations, and symbolic meaning.¹³

As we have seen, Kensington Palace had been suggested well before Tate made his offer to the nation public. Indeed, it had been floated as a possible home for the National Portrait Gallery, which was eventually built behind the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square. *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9e). One of the clearest expressions of the symbolic weight that the Palace held occurred in the 1 April 1890 letter from J.C. Robinson, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, who described Kensington Palace as 'rapidly going to decay' and then gave his vision of the gallery he would have built there:

I picture to myself happy crowds of visitors from all parts of this vast metropolis flocking to the new source of perennial attractions; happier, clearer-minded, and more reverent, even as Sunday excursionists, for the enjoyment of purer air and beautiful shrubs and flowers in Kensington-gardens and the park, ending their day of rest in the inspection of fine works of art and the instructive retrospection which the old-world Palace, with its thousand memories, would

most surely evoke. *The Times* (1 April 1890: 4e).

This gets at the heart of the argument that its advocates put forward for the Palace: the beneficial location, surrounded by greenery and clean air; the opportunity to restore a grand old Royal residence; and the associations with the old tradition and Royal patronage of the Palace itself. Robinson was not suggesting, however, that the Gallery be housed *in* the Palace – rather, that a new gallery be built adjoining it but administered separately. He imagined visitors moving from the now-restored staterooms of the Palace into a National Gallery of British Art that would begin with the works of Hogarth, providing a suitable transition from the old order to the new.¹⁴

The Graphic immediately took up Robinson's suggestion, and after Tate's offer to the nation published eleven weeks later, on 21 June 1890, press reports began conflating Tate's proposed National Gallery of British Art with the Kensington Palace idea. *The Graphic* (1 April 1890: TAN, 10), *St. James' Gazette* (21 June 1890: TAN, 19), and *St. James' Gazette* (27 June 1890: TAN, 25). So much so, in fact, that after the Treasury offered the galleries built for the 1862 International Exhibition (the East and West Galleries by the Horticultural Gardens in South Kensington) in a letter published on 27 June 1890, the *Pall Mall Gazette* wondered, 'Why is it that in the correspondence between Mr Tate and the Treasury as to the establishment of a British Luxembourg, no reference is made to Kensington Palace?' *Pall Mall Gazette* (27 June 1890: TAN, 25). *Land & Water*, as well, took Tate's offer of his pictures to the nation as the impetus to create an 'English Luxembourg' at Kensington Palace. *Land & Water* (28 June 1890: TAN, 28). The *Pall Mall Budget* published an extended interview with Sir James Linton, President of the Royal Institution and – as we have seen – a long-standing advocate of a National Gallery of British Art. *Pall Mall Budget* (4 July 1890: TAN, 39). Linton fleshed out the proposal, arguing that the ideal site was at Kensington Palace; that it could be built with private funds; and that it could be filled with the British art in the National Gallery, South Kensington, and British Museum, to create a historical department (like the Louvre) and a contemporary one (like the Luxembourg). *Pall Mall Budget* (4 July 1890: TAN, 39).

If Robinson's plan received a boost from Tate's offer, it received the promise of material aid from art dealer Sir William Agnew, who wrote to the Editor of *The Times* to offer £10,000 towards the building of the new gallery if it were built at Kensington Palace. *The Times* (22 July 1890: 9e). Agnew shared Robinson's vision of a park-like setting, Royal patronage, and a gallery that would incorporate the collections of British art in existing galleries; many papers took up the idea. *Pall Mall Gazette* (22 July 1890: TAN, 42), *St. James' Gazette* (22 July 1890: TAN, 35), *Western Mail* (23 July 1890: TAN, 42), *Liverpool Courier* (24 July 1890: TAN, 41), *Building News* (25 July 1890: TAN, 30), *Bristol Times* (26 July 1890: TAN, 30), *Huddersfield Chronicle* (26 July 1890: TAN, 30), *British Architect* (August 1890: TAN, 43). By August, the *St. James' Gazette* was musing that while South Kensington was better than nothing, they wondered what had happened to Robinson's Kensington Palace plan. *St. James' Gazette* (18 August 1890: TAN, 43). Two years later, just before Tate finally withdrew his offer, the *Echo* outlined the history of the movement for a National Gallery of British Art. The editors cited Robinson's original idea for Kensington Palace, and argued that only swift action by the Court to divert public pressure had prevented such a 'nationalisation' of royal property, the Court directing the Government to offer the Galleries by the Imperial Institute to revive that flagging royal project. *Echo* (22 February 1892: TAN, 69).

Papers often threw opposing camps together to make a point, especially when reports of events or published opinions appeared within a short space of time. The art critic Harry Quilter specifically offered £2,000 towards a gallery in the centre of town – he suggested Trafalgar Square or the Thames Embankment between Charing Cross and Blackfriars – and later wrote vehemently against the Kensington Palace idea. *The Times* (16 July 1890: 13a). When Agnew made his Kensington Palace offer less than a week later, however, the two became intertwined, and many short and general reports of the progress of the National Gallery of British Art listed them together as evidence that a new gallery could be built with the support of wealthy philanthropists. Thus, the *Western Mail* reported that

the capitalists are now coming in to provide a special Gallery. Mr Harry Quilter offers £2,000. Mr Agnew offers £10,000. Only the other day the provision for a

National Portrait Gallery was made by the generosity of a millionaire. By a similar generosity we are now likely to obtain a Gallery in which the English art of the century will be illustrated and honoured. *Western Mail* (23 July 1890: TAN, 42).

Indeed, the meaning and implications of the Kensington Palace option changed after the Government had offered the East and West Galleries at South Kensington at the end of June, and after Quilter's and Agnew's offers in mid-July. The *Western Mail* supported both Quilter and Agnew against the Treasury, and did not bother to choose between them, and the *St. James' Gazette* hailed Agnew's promised gift for the same reason: 'If the scheme be executed at all, it may as well be done well; and there is reason in Mr Agnew's suggestions, especially his scouting of the Government South Kensington proposal.' *St James' Gazette* (22 July 22 1890: TAN, 35).

The reaction in the press to the Government's offer of the East and West Galleries at South Kensington to house Tate's collection was swift and overwhelmingly negative. This was in part because the Kensington Palace plan, as noted above, had become aligned with Tate's gift and the idea of an autonomous National Gallery of British Art. The South Kensington Galleries option seemed a poor substitute for the grand vision of a new, purpose-built home for all of British art, old and new, set in an extensive park, adjacent to a Royal Palace restored to its former glory. But in equal measure, antagonism to the East and West Galleries stemmed from their associations with the industrial purposes of the South Kensington Museum itself. It must be borne in mind that South Kensington was at this point a series of buildings built at various times for varying purposes. It was not a museum of fine arts (although it included fine art collections), but had been founded for the benefit of British industrial design and manufacture out of the proceeds of the Great Exhibition of 1851; the Galleries themselves had been built for the International Exhibition of 1862. The Government argued in favour of the East and West Galleries at South Kensington as a home for Tate's collection that they were 'fireproof and could afford good light.' Letter to the Editor from W.L. Jackson, M.P., Financial Secretary to the Treasury, *The Times* (27 June 1890: 10c). But to many, the Galleries still bore the taint of commerce. As Harry Quilter argued in a letter to the *Times*,

if such a thing as an English Luxembourg is to exist, it must be a place to which entrance is above all things a coveted honour . . . no place could be so unfitting [as South Kensington] . . . the mere subordination of our modern masterpieces of painting to the collection of heterogeneous objects with which the main part of the museum is, and always will be, filled would be inverting the true relations of each collection . . . strong objection to the locality of South Kensington is its distance from the central portion of London. *The Times* (16 July 1890: 13a).

This is representative of the kinds of letters and editorials published against the siting of the National Gallery of British Art at South Kensington.¹⁵ Most objected to the distance from Central London, to the 'jumble' of disparate collections at South Kensington, to its poor reputation, to the 'poor quality' of the works shown there, and to the 'make-shift' nature of the solution. This was a compromise that those interested in the representation of British art – as much as Tate himself – were not ready to accept.

Meanwhile the Government pushed ahead with the South Kensington plan and rallied the art institutions in its favor. According to *British Architect*, the Earl of Carlisle (a Trustee of the National Gallery) had sent a memorandum to the Government arguing for a scheme that would connect the East and West Galleries to the Imperial Institute nearby. *British Architect* (August 1890: TAN, 43). Lord Cranbrook called together a meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Privy Council Office on July 24, 1890, which included Sir Henry Layard (Trustee of the National Gallery), Sir Frederick Leighton (President of the Royal Academy), Sir Frederick Burton (Director of the National Gallery), Sir James Linton (President of the Royal Institution), Sir John Gilbert, (sculptor and Royal Academician). This meeting outlined a plan that would put the National Gallery of British Art in the East and West Galleries, connected to the Imperial Institute, but – as *British Architect* reported – with a new and separate administration 'composed, to some extent, if not wholly, of those connected with national art

in this country,' which would 'give confidence' to those who might give to the new institution. The *British Architect* continued:

Considerable discussion took place with respect to the eastern and western galleries, and Sir F. Leighton mentioned that it had been agreed by the Commissioners of the 1851 Exhibition that these galleries should be connected with the Imperial Institute, so that there would be a dignified entrance in harmony with the Imperial Institute and with the connecting gallery. *British Architect* (August 1890: TAN, 43).

The journal further reported that 'in consequence of that meeting a further meeting was called, and a certain number of those who had been present visited these galleries on 26 or 27 July 1890 and reported them to be adequate for the purpose, and well lighted.' *British Architect* (August 1890: TAN, 43). This information was made public on 15 August 1890, in the report on the proceedings of the House of Lords in *The Times*. The following day, Layard, Leighton, Burton, and Linton wrote to *The Times* to attest that the East and West Galleries at South Kensington were 'adequate in space and well-lighted... [we] inspected the ground on which it is proposed to erect a connecting gallery, with a central hall for sculpture, and find it in every way suitable.' *The Times* (16 August 1890: 5e).

The Royal Institution, Royal Academy, and National Gallery had thus stepped behind the South Kensington plan. Several newspapers offered a cynical explanation for artists' support for the Government's plan and the link to the Imperial Institute. Henry Du Pre Labouchere's satirical society journal *Truth*, for instance, argued that the Imperial Institute was a failure and needed the boost and extra funds it would gain from being connected to the National Gallery of British Art:

Who cannot read between the lines? Who cannot perceive how the whole thing was 'worked' at the Privy Council Office? Who cannot guess at the preliminary smoothing down of these gentlemen before they met there? Who cannot imagine how Lord Cranbrook was first got at by the Imperial Institute people? Who cannot picture to himself Mr Goschen's oily concurrence in the proposal, as though he had never before heard of it? Who cannot appreciate Sir Frederick Leighton's contribution to the discussion? Who does not smile at the thought of a 'certain number' going through the farce of inspecting the galleries? *Truth* (4 September 1890: TAN, 44).¹⁶

Others thought that it was the artists who wished to take advantage of the Institute; as *Land & Water* wrote, '[t]he word has gone forth to reconcile the artists to South Kensington by pointing out it will be an advertisement of their wares with the colonial purchasers. Unfortunately for this fable, the Imperial Institute is the one place the colonial is sure to avoid.' *Land & Water* (16 August 1890: TAN, 39). The *Echo* combined the two explanations and added a third, namely that public pressure for the Kensington Palace plan had reached dangerously high levels, and needed to be staved off:

The artists were told that the home-visiting Colonials, being without any particular taste, but possessing a keen desire to 'do the right thing,' would see their wares hanging in the porches and passages of the Institute, and give large orders to sample. The move was ingenious. Not only was an awkwardly reasonable demand for Crown property frustrated, but a pet project of royalty was likely to receive valuable assistance. *Echo* (22 February 1892: TAN, 69).

Ironically, supporters of the Kensington Palace plan had indeed offered the East and West Galleries up as ideally designed in terms of light and ventilation. As J.C. Robinson, advocating the Kensington Palace idea, wrote, 'I picture to myself a grand and spacious new gallery, built on to the old Palace; such a one as was erected at South Kensington to contain the pictures, &c., contributed to the Exhibition of 1862.' *The Times* (1 April 1890: 4e).

While the press remained hostile to the idea of the East and West Galleries, the art establishment quickly rallied around to support its members. J.C. Robinson wrote in to *The Times* that Leighton and Carlisle, in coming forward with and getting the Government to accept

their own scheme, had 'made a great point in committing our rulers to the main principle of the formation of a truly representative gallery of British art.' *The Times* (10 September 1890: TAN, 45). James Orrock, of the Society of Arts and – as we have seen – one of the original promoters of greater representation of British art in the National Gallery, wrote that in fact

the original agitators for 'a thorough representation of British art in the National Gallery' only aspired to the completion of the great collection we already possess...the suggestion for an English Luxembourg came from Sir Frederic Leighton, who directly stated his view on this point in a letter to Mr James Edmoston, the president of the Art Society in Conduit-street.... six or seven years ago...an answer...to a letter asking for the support of the Royal Academy for the complete representation of British art at the National Gallery. *The Times* (19 September 1890: 5c).

The Artist, which had initially been skeptical of the South Kensington idea, now endorsed it, arguing that it was sufficiently changed and enlarged to warrant reconsideration. In addition, they argued that the 'connection of the Gallery of British Art with the Institute of the British Empire' was 'an admirable idea.' *The Artist* (1 October 1890: TAN, 44).

A further explanation for the art establishment's acceptance of the Government's South Kensington scheme is offered by James Orrock in a speech given in Birmingham in early November 1890, at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Application to Industry (a meeting attended by many of the great and the good of the art world, but with firmly utilitarian principles much closer to South Kensington than to the Royal Academy). Reiterating the arguments for the existence of a national school of art, and the need to show this to the nation and the world at large, Orrock ended his address by explaining how it was that those original agitators for greater inclusion of the British School in the National Gallery now endorsed the South Kensington plan. '[H]owever much other schemes might appear desirable, to mature one or other of them meant probably delay till the distant future. Our President, Sir James Linton, who was one of the Commission, therefore acted wisely in accepting the offer of the government to utilise the galleries of the 1862 Exhibition.' Orrock (1891: 194). Rather than face the long wait for an ideal situation, Orrock suggested, the art establishment took what it could get.

After the frenzy of debate in the press over the British gallery through the summer, in the autumn and winter of 1890 the papers suddenly went very quiet. Indeed, the *Pall Mall Gazette* worried that the silence indicated inactivity and that Tate's collection would be lost. *Pall Mall Gazette* (3 December 1890: TAN, 46). In fact, Tate himself felt that the Government had offered him a make-shift solution, and on 21 March 1891, his friend Humphry Ward wrote to *The Times* to announce that an anonymous donor (Tate himself, which was very soon widely acknowledged) would be willing to spend £80,000 on a new National Gallery of British Art, to be erected on land in South Kensington unconnected with the Imperial Institute or East and West Galleries. *The Times* (21 March 1891: 10a), Ward (1887). The Government was of course glad to have a solution to the problem that would incur no expense for them whatsoever, and offered Tate the site he wanted on Imperial Road. Unfortunately, this site turned out to have been promised for permanent buildings for the Royal College of Science and an adjacent Science Museum. This was to lead to the next symbolic debate (as the *Pall Mall Gazette* put it), 'Science vs. Art.' *Pall Mall Gazette* (20 April 1891: TAN, 55).

In this debate – whose nearly year-long vicissitudes are too many to be laid out in great detail in this paper – the *Daily Chronicle* took the side of Science, and the *Pall Mall Gazette* took that of Art, offering good examples of the arguments offered on both sides.¹⁷ Both were staunchly Liberal papers; the difference was not partisan, but rather illustrates the papers' campaigning zeal and sense of their own importance during this period: the *Gazette* had been advocating for a National Gallery of British Art for years, and was not to be deterred at the eleventh hour. The *Chronicle* argued that there was another site nearby that would serve equally well (the Government later offered to buy this site, which held the temporary buildings for the Art Needlework Society). *Daily Chronicle* (9 April 1891: TAN, 55). The *Pall Mall Gazette* took the position that as the South Kensington site was the only practicable one left out of all

the various suggestions that had been mooted, Art should be allowed to build on the Imperial Road site. *Pall Mall Gazette* (8 February 1892: TAN, 60). But the issue was also one of organization and administration; unlike the grand vision of a National Gallery of British Art containing all of the British School, gathered from the various collections then scattered through the London museums, the gallery that Tate would build in South Kensington could only guarantee his 57 pictures, the possibility of the Chantrey pictures, and the hope of further donations of British art. The *Daily Chronicle* – writing explicitly against the *Pall Mall Gazette* – pointed out that this was not what the art establishment had originally had in mind. *Daily Chronicle* (11 February 1892: TAN, 64).

The heart of the problem was the failure of the major art institutions and their leading figures to support Tate's scheme against the cause of Science. The *Pall Mall Gazette* could not understand the art establishment's silence, and urged artists and those concerned to become more active.¹⁸ (While Science fought against the Gallery's being sited on Imperial Road, the *Gazette* complained, 'the artist world remained sublimely supine and inert. Certain individual artists were in warm sympathy with Mr Tate: others knew little, and apparently cared less, about the matter.... The scientists were alert and active; but neither the Royal Academy nor any other body of artists made the slightest move in the matter.' *Pall Mall Gazette* (8 February 1892: TAN, 61). The *Gazette* was especially perplexed about the silence of the Royal Academy, and on the day that negotiations broke down – Tate officially withdrew his offer in a letter published in *The Times* on 5 March 1892 – castigated the artists for not proclaiming their cause more forcefully.¹⁹

Indeed, several papers placed the blame for the failure of Tate's South Kensington scheme squarely on the artistic community. As we have seen, the National Gallery, Royal Institution, and Royal Academy had supported the East and West Galleries, connected with the Imperial Institute, based on the idea of both a historical and a contemporary collection. Tate's rival offer did not gain the support of the art establishment, and the *Daily Chronicle* gives us a clue as to why: 'For what is Mr Tate's proposal? It is to present to the nation a 'British Art Gallery,' consisting of sixty pictures, mostly by living Academicians and Associates, and to present them *en bloc*, the nation to accept Mr Tate's views of what is good art and what is bad.' *Daily Chronicle* (11 February 1892: TAN, 64). Although Tate was personally close to many Royal Academicians, he had snubbed the combined power of the art world through his refusal of the East and West Galleries. Supporting this, the magazine *Truth* wrote that the only group against Tate's proposals was 'a small, cantankerous, artistic clique whose views are of no consequence to any one but themselves;' the *British Weekly* cried that '[t]he artistic community were against the proposal and were strong enough to defeat it.' *Truth* (10 March 1892: TAN, 84) and *British Weekly* (19 March 1892: TAN, 83).

While the battle between Science and Art raged, correspondents suggested alternative sites: first on the Embankment – land that the Corporation of London would have to give or sell at a low price to the Treasury – and then on site of St. George's barracks immediately behind the National Gallery, which was owned by the War Office. The press warmly embraced the idea of the Embankment – and Tate himself was enthusiastic – but the Corporation was unwilling to sell the land at a loss when other bidders were willing to offer the market price. Similarly, the War Office insisted on another central site in London before it would vacate Trafalgar Square, leaving the Treasury still needing to find an expensive piece of land.

After Tate's withdrawal of his offer on 5 March 1892, there was a sudden spate of articles on what might have been – his architect, Sidney R.J. Smith, contributed essays to several publications, including drawings and plans of the proposed gallery that would have been built on the Imperial Road site. While there is no evidence that Tate authorized this 'media campaign' himself, it is intriguing when one considers that Smith would have been unlikely to take such a course without Tate's permission. Similar illustrated articles appeared in the *Pall Mall Budget*, *St. Stephen's Review*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *The Builder*.²⁰ *Pall Mall Budget* (10 March 1892: TAN, 82), *St. Stephen's Review* (10 March 1892: TAN, 82) and (26 March 1892: TAN, 90), *Pall Mall Gazette* (12 March 1892: TAN, 81), *The Builder* (19 March 1892: TAN, 88). Speculation continued for some days as to the possibility of the Embankment Road site or sites elsewhere in London. Birmingham offered itself as an art-loving city that would happily accept Tate's collection.²¹ While the press was still engaged in picking apart why the Gallery

of British Art – which had now been consistently in the news for two full years – was not to be and who was to blame, a letter from E.F. du Cane appeared in *The Times* advancing the idea of Millbank as a site. *The Times* (17 March 1892: 14c). The *Pall Mall Gazette* immediately took up the idea: ‘The idea seems worth attention. Moreover, the land is actually in possession of the Government.’ *Pall Mall Gazette* (17 March 1892: TAN, 86) and (31 March 1892: TAN, 87). The Millbank site joined the Embankment and Trafalgar Square as the points of continued enquiry about the state of the proposed National Gallery of British Art, becoming a real possibility in the press long before the August elections that brought down the Conservative government and pushed Gladstone in for his final term. Once again, in this final example, the range of possibilities for the National Gallery of British Art was explored in the press before any official action.

Support from the Liberal press for the Millbank site, however, was hardly unanimous: many saw it as a failure of Government support for the arts, a most unpalatable compromise between private and public patronage. After the elections, in November 1892, rumours surfaced of negotiations between Tate and William Harcourt, the new Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, to put the proposed gallery at Millbank. As Brandon Taylor has amply shown, Millbank was an area associated – not unreasonably – with decay. Taylor (1994: 9-33) and (1999: 111-22). Newspapers tended at first to react to the idea of putting the National Gallery of British Art there with protests against the physical unsuitability of the site. The *Echo*, for example, objected to Millbank on ‘atmospheric and other grounds,’ emphasizing its exposure ‘to the damp south-easterly winds, which, besides being saturated with moisture, bring over the smoke of a number of Thames-side works, both undesirable intruders in a picture gallery.’ *Echo* (4 October 1892: TAN, 94). Others objected to a site so devoid of any connection with the arts.²² But all this boiled down to a problem, again, of funding for the arts. Was this the best that could be done? The *Liverpool Daily Post* complained that

[t]he English nation, in its collective aspect, does less than any other in Europe to encourage art amongst its own people, the bulk of the funds allocated to the National Gallery being spent in the purchase of the ‘squint-eyed saints’ beloved of Sir Frederick Burton, and in procuring pictures by artists no longer living. The provision of a really fine and central gallery for contemporary British Art would give a stimulus to private benefactions which would at once enrich the national treasures and encourage our best arts to work less for the ‘pot’ and more for the fame that a liberal representation in a national collection would surely bring them. *Liverpool Daily Post* (2 November 1892: TAN, 95).

The *Pall Mall Gazette*, on the other hand, wished that – since the Government was not willing or able to afford anything else – private donors would come forward to purchase a more suitable site:

Shall we, then, have the British Luxembourg after all? ...Of course, there would have been little argument if the City authorities or the London County Council had opened their hands and said, ‘There is a site. Take.’ If this cannot be done, then surely Mr Tate could combine with one of the great London landlords, such as the Duke of Westminster, the Duke of Bedford, or Lord Portman, and share honours with them; they giving the land and he the pictures and the building. *Pall Mall Gazette* (15 November 1892: TAN, 96).

As we have seen, of great concern throughout the debates was the question of funding, i.e., of the proper role of Government in arts patronage. Built by private initiative on Government-owned land, the new gallery at Millbank proved a compromise that, like all compromises, left some dissatisfied, especially with the – as they saw it – Government’s short-sighted penny-pinching; but in the end it could be claimed as a (political) victory for wise Government expenditure as well.²³

The Art of Compromise: Modernity and the press at the last fin-de-siècle

The new National Gallery of British Art was a compromise in two different senses. The

first was between private and public funding, a long-standing issue in British arts patronage and indeed, in British politics in general. The issue of providing a site for the proposed gallery became political inasmuch as it was a Liberal Government that managed to reach an agreement with Tate, but the tendency of both parties was towards parsimony. As one historian has put it, writing of Conservative George Goschen when Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'Goschen and most of his colleagues were strict Gladstonians in finance, viewing any reduction in government expenditure as a good thing unless it could be proved otherwise.' Rubinstein (1998: 218). Throughout the extended debates about the proposed National Gallery of British Art, there was in fact a wide consensus that while the Government should provide a site, only private moneys could be given on a scale to build a worthy building. The press thus reflected a small range of opinion on the issue of funding, with even those sympathetic to the cause of the Gallery allowing that politically it would be impossible for the Government to spend the predicted £100,000 necessary.²⁴ Only the Liberal papers the *Manchester Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* advocated that the Government should actively spend money on the scheme, and even then only within the context of Tate's offer of £80,000 to build the gallery.²⁵

The second level of compromise involves the nature of the National Gallery of British Art as both a gallery of modern art and a gallery of British art. As we have seen, there was considerable difference of opinion about the goal of such a gallery, or even if such an institution – separate from the National Gallery – was necessary. While there was broad consensus in favour of a new gallery to show off British art – which was above all a modern school – the issue became cloudy when it came to admitting the work of living artists. The model of the Luxembourg would allow this, indeed this would be the gallery's function, as an antechamber to the 'Louvre' of the National Gallery. But those calling for a complete collection of British art – an historical collection, made up of works culled from the major London museums – expressed doubt that living artists should find a place within it. Frederick Leighton had a broad, inclusive vision of a National Gallery of British Art; he wrote that it 'should present in worthy and characteristic examples a complete epitome of the art of our country from the days, say, of Hogarth, and be from henceforth kept continuously abreast of the times...every form and phase of that art in whatever medium it may have found expression, and in so far as it is capable of being displayed in a gallery.' *The Times* (21 May 1891: 6d.) He found a solution to the problem of accepting the works of living artists by distinguishing between 'old masters,' 'modern' works, and 'contemporary' works: the gallery would be of 'modern' art, that is, 'though not of today, is still living amongst us.' *The Times* (21 May 1891: 6d).

As one correspondent to *The Times*, W.M. Conway, put it, '[t]he relation between contemporary and ancient art is similar to the relation between politics and history. No estimate of products of contemporary art can be free from prejudice. Party-spirit is essential...but...is inconsistent with that impartiality which should rule...the formation of a great historical collection.' *The Times* (11 April 1891: 4f). The question of the nature of the collection, of whether the National Gallery of British Art should be a historical or a contemporary collection, or both, was resolved in no small measure by giving the administration of the new gallery to the Trustees of the National Gallery. This made possible the removal to the Millbank gallery of 98 modern British works in the National Gallery (giving the historical depth desired by some advocates), in addition the combination of modern and contemporary works in the Chantrey and Tate collections, and the contemporary works given by G.F. Watts. *Illustrated Catalogue* (1897: 5). The question of modern *foreign* works did not yet arise – that would come later, under pressure from a new generation of art critics and artists.

The initial impetus was for the greater inclusion of the British school – modern works by accepted definition – in the National Gallery. From this, to the idea of a British Luxembourg, the National Gallery of British Art took shape in the press and was transformed into both a historical and a contemporary collection. The Tate Gallery thus showed the British School as a thriving modern school of art, unified under the aegis of national identity. As Lionel Cust, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, put it,

To Sir Henry Tate's patriotism and munificence, the nation owes its first chance of proclaiming to the world the fact that '*there is an English School of Art* . . .

in the closing years of the nineteenth century the nation is prepared to back its own country-men to produce paintings or sculpture, especially the latter, equal in merit, if not superior, to those of any other nation, France included. Cust (1899:10). (Emphasis in original.)

In setting its collections off from the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery stood modern, British art against the work of (foreign) Old Masters. Indeed, in the arguments for creating a National Gallery of British Art, it had become a commonplace in the press to complain of the galleries of 'squint-eyed saints' at Trafalgar Square. But this was not, in fact, a sign of a Victorian break with the past. In fact, it is proof of the extent to which artists and art critics, and the general press, viewed art as still operating within the familiar canon, able to argue for the superiority or not of modern and contemporary British artists over Renaissance masters. The age-old *Querelle* between ancients and moderns, that is, was alive and well; art used an established language of symbolism and representation, and modern art could compare itself to the art of centuries previous. The Tate Gallery was modern without being Modernist, although by including a remit as a gallery of modern art it held the potential to be so. Fyfe (2000: 78-79).

On the other hand, the foundation of the Tate Gallery shows us evidence of changes in the ways in which social groups negotiated for and wielded political influence. There is no need to argue that London at the end of the nineteenth century was a new kind of conurbation, a metropolis more vast than anything before imagined, or that in its new technologies and diverse population it created new cultural, political, and social forms. What I hope this paper has shown is the ways in which the press contributed to the articulation and creation of the limits of London's development, in this case in the formation of a new national art institution. In a related sense as well, the formation of the National Gallery of British Art was part of the increasing nationalism at the end of the century – a period associated with Imperialism, the Boer War, the naval arms race with Germany, fears of industrial competition from abroad, and new forms of association like football, walking or cycling clubs – also made possible by the unifying element of the national press. (Indeed, the National Gallery of British Art, which to be precise had existed at South Kensington since Sheepshanks' bequest in 1857, could perhaps have only found separate architectural and institutional expression during a period of such confidence in the nation-state as the proper unit of measure of all things.)²⁶ Sir James Linton described the movement to build a National Gallery of British Art as a 'great national movement...which means the placing of our own art in all branches before the people and the world.' *The Times* (5 April 1890: 4b.) The Tate Gallery offered a new means of national identification, and the 'community of Britons' it presented was first imagined in the national press.²⁷

Thus, this paper has shown, first, that the National Gallery of British Art developed in the context of public debates in the national press; and second, that the resulting gallery functioned as both a gallery of modern art and a gallery of British art. And it was in fact the middle classes – suspected by some historians of abandoning the ideal of modernity at just this time – who through their patronage strengthened the close connection between the ideas of modernity and Britishness. Middle-class patrons had moved from Old foreign to modern British Masters in their collecting habits, and the formation of the National Gallery of British Art announced both their own political ascendance and the role of contemporary art as an important means of class-definition in a moment of high nationalism.

Put into its context in this way, the Tate Gallery in its founding and its early years appears as a transitional institution. That is, it appeared in a moment – and was, of course, absolutely a product of that moment – which soon seemed irretrievable.²⁸ What is perhaps more remarkable is the ways in which the debates that surrounded the founding of the Gallery created an institution that left an opening for the cultural changes that were to follow: by being a gallery for the display of modern and contemporary British art, the Gallery became defacto the national home for *all* contemporary art. The arguments at the end of the nineteenth century – because of the Victorians' supreme confidence in their own contemporary art production – laid the seed for Tate Modern on the cusp of the twenty-first.

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Notes

¹ A good early example is this excerpt from a leader in the London *Times*: 'A wealthy country like ours, which possesses so fine a national school as we do – a school of landscape and a school of portraiture containing so many of the elements of greatness – ought to be able to stop the mouths of foreign critics by showing them a really representative and choice collection of our art gathered together in some great central gallery.' *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9e).

² As the *Evening Standard* wrote on 23 June 1890, 'Mr WHISTLER contends that to speak of 'English art' is wrong, as art is universal, and has no country. It is art or not - generally the latter; but a collection of pictures by English painters, a 'British National Gallery,' is none the less a most desirable institution, and it is to be hoped that advantage will be taken of Mr Henry TATE's nobly generous offer of pictures representative of most of the best modern British painters.' *Evening Standard* (23 June 1890: Tate Gallery Archive's bound volume, History of the Tate Gallery, vol. 1, Tate Archive Newsclippings [hereafter TAN], 19). Emphasis in original.

³ It is perhaps not necessary to state that this public was limited to those members of the literate class interested in the development of a national school of art and places to exhibit it – a necessarily small number, obviously disproportionately influential (as the ruling élite in general). This is not to say, however, that art galleries did not have a wide variety of visitors, merely that the numbers of those participating in the national conversation about the National Gallery of British Art was of course relatively small.

⁴ The Palais du Luxembourg was the Paris museum for modern French painters, established in 1818 under Louis XVIII; according to Germain Bazin, 'throughout the [nineteenth] century, and until the transfer of the Impressionists [in 1897], the Palais du Luxembourg functioned as a sort of novitiate for the Louvre.' Bazin (1967: 216). Henry Tate had proposed that the new National Gallery of British Art would 'be established on lines similar to those of the Luxembourg Gallery, Paris, which is devoted exclusively to modern works of French artists.' Letter to the Editor from Tate, *The Times* (21 June 1890: 12a).

⁵ As Baylen writes, 'What W.T. Stead contributed to the 'New Journalism' (and Arnold deplored) was the concept ...of 'Government by Journalism' – or the establishment of a press which would interpret and communicate 'the will of the people' to the government and, when necessary, force the government by press 'agitations' and/or sensational revelations to legislate what the masses wanted or needed.' Baylen (1992: 38). A fine example of this kind of crusading is in the way in which the *Pall Mall Gazette* vocally and untiringly campaigned for a National Gallery of British Art. During the period covered by this article, this campaigning zeal was carried into the sphere of culture under Stead's replacement, Edward Tyas Cook. Cook had been invited to the *Gazette* by editor John Morley, a leading figure in arts circles, in 1883, and stayed on after Morley left shortly thereafter. Griffiths (1992: 167). Cook is perhaps best known now for his role as editor of Ruskin's complete works. For a brief biographical sketch of Cook see Hilton (2000: 81-5). Cook was the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* 1889-1893, and was a vocal proponent for a National Gallery of British Art.

⁶ A parallel movement took place in France in the 1870s and 1880s. Mainardi (1993: 45).

⁷ Following John Ruskin, who wrote the introduction to the *Handbook*, Cook saw English culture and character as creating a unified whole. Even the fact that 'we have shown little excellence in purely decorative design' he found as supporting his sense of the English character: 'This is partly the result of our being such a 'practical' people, and partly due to the absence of any hereditary art discipline.' Cook (1888: 391).

⁸ Helene Roberts discusses Harry Quilter's contribution to the system of art exhibition and press coverage. Roberts (1978: 82, 86, 87). See also Diane Sachko Macleod on Harry Quilter's accountant father, William Quilter, who encouraged his son to become an art critic (and used growing interest in water-colours amongst the middle classes to speculate in the art market – was this the source of his son's disdain for dealers?). Macleod (1996: 232, fn. 99, and 233).

⁹ For the first, see Letter to the Editor from W.M. Conway, *The Times* (11 April 1890: 4f): 'As local institutions and local self-consciousness increase in intensity, the provincial taxpayer will be less and less willing to assent to the expenditure of public money upon any metropolitan collections which are not of obvious national profit and importance. Now Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester, and Birmingham, and several other towns already possess valuable collections of modern paintings. They may well be unwilling to hear of an expenditure of national funds upon the formation of a similar collection for the metropolis. Such a collection, if called national and paid for out of the Consolidated Fund, will have to be constantly itinerant, though possibly with a central depot. If the collection is to be permanently fixed in London it must be paid for out of the London rates or by private munificence.' TAN, 13. For the second (hoping that the loan of Chantrey pictures to the provinces would end if they entered a national collection in London), see the *Globe* 25 June 1890: 'They [the provinces] are, as a rule, much better off as regards pictures than London.' *The Globe* (25 June 1890: TAN, 23). For the third, for loans to provincial galleries, see the *Yorkshire Post*: 'For our own part we would prefer to see a loanable collection. Comparatively speaking, anyhow, London is rich enough already in art and other collections purchased and administered at the expense of the nation at large. A little judicious decentralisation in such matters would be productive of beneficial results all round.' *Yorkshire Post* (23 June 1890: TAN, 19).

¹⁰ Tate made his offer in a letter of that date to the Trustees of the National Gallery. Spalding (1998: 13).

¹¹ I have not been able to ascertain the origin or authorship of the article, but one strong candidate is Charles Prestwich Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian* 1872-1929, and involved in Manchester's municipal art scene through his participation in the City Art Gallery Committee. On Scott's editorship of the *Guardian*, see Griffiths (1992: 509). On his work on the Manchester City Art Gallery, see Woodson-Boulton (2003).

¹² The leading article explains its previous silence on Tate's offer as an attempt to not disrupt negotiations, and takes a swipe at rival papers: 'We have abstained till now from calling attention to the gift which this gentleman intends to make, knowing that in such cases premature disclosures are often extremely impolitic; but now that various indiscreet persons have made the proposal public, there is no harm in referring to it. We would only say, however, that the arrangements are by no means complete, and that we believe that nothing has been even approximately settled between the three parties concerned – the giver, the Trustees of the National Gallery, and the Treasury.' *The Times* (13 March 1890: 9c).

¹³ Brandon Taylor has explored the symbolism of the siting of the Tate Gallery in place of Millbank Prison in terms of a triumphal conquest of urban decay through the civilising force of art. See Taylor (1994: 9-33). He repeats this argument in his more recent account of the founding of the Tate Gallery. In his summary of the debate (put into a long footnote), he tends to dismiss contemporaneous proposals such as Kensington Palace as never seriously considered: 'At this point it became almost routine to put suggestions into the ring.' Taylor (1999: 100, footnote 33). I would argue that these suggestions put forward in the press were

taken quite seriously and debated as real possibilities, epitomizing the role of the press in this period as a unifying force that allowed a varied public to participate in the symbolic creation of the metropolis.

¹⁴ 'What, for instance, would be more appropriate than the immediate transition from the old-world actualities and relics in these rooms to the immortal pictural [*sic*] works of the first great painter of the English school – Hogarth – in which the human actors of those very days seem to live and move again, amidst the same surroundings, portrayed with inimitable truth and circumstantiality?' *The Times* (1 April 1890: 4e).

¹⁵ Indeed, even Robert Collinson, former Director of Studies in Figure and Painting Schools at South Kensington Museum, argued that it would be inappropriate to house the National Gallery of British Art there: Parliament supported South Kensington 'entirely for the buildings and purchase of objects of decorative art, such as would lead to the advancement of public taste in designs for the improvement of our national industries and manufactures, and towards the support of all the schools of design throughout the country.' *The Times* (19 July 1890). (This was written specifically in response to Harry Quilter's letter). See also *Liverpool Post* (c.25 June 1890: TAN, 21), *Pall Mall Gazette* (c.27 June 1890: TAN, 25), *Star* (28 June 1890: TAN, 20), *Scotsman* (2 July 1890: TAN, 29), *Newcastle Chronicle* (21 July 1890: TAN, 27), *Pall Mall Gazette* (22 July 1890: TAN, 42), *St. James' Gazette* (22 July 1890: TAN, 35), *Western Mail* (23 July 1890: TAN, 42), *Huddersfield Chronicle* (26 July 1890: TAN, 30), (reprint of *St. James' Gazette* article 22 July 1890), *British Architect* (August 1890: TAN, 43) *Land & Water* (16 August 1890, TAN, 39), *Truth* (4 September 1890: TAN, 44), *Evening Standard* (21 May 1891: TAN, 52), *The Graphic* (13 February 1892: TAN, 65), *Daily News* (5 March 1892: TAN, 75), *Nottingham Express* (November, 1892: TAN, 96).

¹⁶ *Truth* combined the campaigning radical zeal of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the New Journalism-informality of *Vanity Fair* and *World*. George Bernard Shaw was the one of *Truth's* art critics in the early nineties, but given the degree of editorial control (which probably precipitated his departure) his authorship of this notice is uncertain. Sullivan (1984: 423-432).

¹⁷ *The Saturday Review* blamed the whole National Gallery of British Art scheme on the influence picture-dealers looking to make a profit. *The Saturday Review* (27 February 1892: TAN, 71). Several periodicals – *The Graphic*, *The Saturday Review*, and the *Daily News* – argued against the siting of any other national museum in South Kensington, for the sake of the gallery rather than for the sake of Science. *The Graphic* (13 February 1892: TAN, 65), *The Saturday Review* (27 February 1892: TAN, 71), and *The Daily News* (5 March 1892: TAN, 75). On the other side, the *Birmingham Daily Post* (9 February 1892: TAN, 62), *The Spectator* (13 February 1892: TAN, 65), the *Yorkshire Herald* (15 February 1892: TAN, 68), and the *Manchester Courier* (20 February 1892: TAN, 68) argued for the cause of Art. As *The Spectator* put it,

The question, then, is: Are the scientific authorities to be allowed to prevent – what all artists agree in declaring a serious want in England – the creation of a gallery where the modern English school can be seen and studied? We trust that the country will support Mr Goschen in accepting Mr Tate's offer. It is monstrous that a man who makes an offer like Mr Tate's should be treated as if he were a criminal, with burglarious designs on the national property.

¹⁸ 'It behoves all who feel strongly upon the matter, be they artists or amateurs of art, to take immediate action. We believe that Mr Goschen personally is most anxious to present the site; but his hand needs strengthening. Everything depends upon what is done in the next few days; for upon the decision of the Government in favour of Art or of Science hangs the immediate fate of the promised Gallery of British Art.' *Pall Mall Gazette* (8 February 1892: TAN, 60).

¹⁹ Citing Sir Frederick Leighton's Academy Banquet speech of the year before in which he commended the Government for completing negotiations with Tate for the Imperial Road site, the *Pall Mall Gazette* admitted that '[w]hy, if Sir Frederick Leighton regarded the Government's gift of the adequate site as a memorable and era-marking event of good omen and joyful significance; why, if he considered us open to reproach among the nations, so long as Mr Tate's scheme was not realized, he should have remained silent and acquiescent (so far as any public utterance was concerned) when the Government threatened to withdraw that adequate site, and to leave us still open to that reproach – is more than we can pretend to explain.' *Pall Mall Gazette* (5 March 1892: TAN, 78).

²⁰ As *St. Stephen's Review* wrote, 'Our illustrations, for which we are indebted to the courtesy of Mr Sidney Smith, the architect, give at a glance an accurate idea of the general appearance of the beautiful gallery which, unfortunately for the nation, appears likely to remain as unsubstantial an edifice as any 'castle in Spain.'" *St. Stephen's Review* (26 March 1892: TAN, 90).

²¹ 'Without being selfish we may throw out a hint that Birmingham already has an Art Gallery of no mean proportions; and one which might be readily extended. Should Mr Tate be disposed to transfer his noble offer to Birmingham, he may be assured that the Midland capital will assist in providing a gallery in all respects worthy of becoming the recognised temple of modern British Art.' *Birmingham Daily Post* (5 March 1892: TAN, 76).

²² As the *Daily Telegraph* wrote, 'Artistic associations take some time in forming, and we fear that in this instance they would hardly grow of their own accord. No one, for instance, would think of founding an art gallery on the site of Newgate.' *Daily Telegraph* (1 November 1892: TAN, 95). See also *Daily Telegraph* (3 November 1892: TAN, 95).

²³ This is how the Liberal *Daily News* claimed the siting of the National Gallery of British Art as a Liberal triumph; after linking it to the Government's unemployment policies, and outlining the failure of the last Government to reach an agreement with Mr Tate, the article concludes that 'jobbery makes the masses indignant. They do not hold that to spend public money for the benefit of the public is a crime.' The *Daily News* (29 November 1892: TAN, 98). See also *Liverpool Daily Post* (30 November 1892: TAN, 99), that called the 'conclusion of the matter, like the dew from heaven, ...twice blessed – it secures for the nation a princely endowment which, with the best intentions, Mr Goschen succeeded in imperiling, and it appreciably lessens the difficulty of the unemployed by providing work that will provide wages for some hundreds of men through the winter months.'

²⁴ Thus Sir James Linton, Sir Charles Robinson, and W.M. Conway, all in favour of a National Gallery of British Art, argued for private funding (by philanthropic individuals or public subscription) to build it. For Linton, see his letter to the Editor, *The Times* (5 April 1890: 4b). Conway argued for the models provided by the provincial art museums, and doubted that the provincials would want national funding to go to a collection that would be similar to those already supported by municipal art museums; see his letter to the Editor, *The Times* (11 April 1890: 4f). Arguing for the Kensington Palace site, Robinson felt that if that the Government were to make that available, no additional funds would be needed; see his letter to *The Times* (1 July 1890: 8b). Other papers which doubted that the Treasury would spend the necessary funds, and so hoped for private generosity, included *British Architect* (27 June 1890: TAN, 24), *The Graphic* (28 June 1890: TAN, 23), *The Daily Graphic* (reprint of article in *The Graphic*) (30 June 1890: TAN, 29), and *The Builder* (11 August 1890: TAN, 43).

²⁵ The *Manchester Guardian* 'hoped that the Government will be ready to add thereto any reasonable sum which may be necessary to make the building worthy of the treasures it will contain.' (23 March 1891: TAN, 50). The *Daily Telegraph* wondered,

In what other European nation, we may well ask, would there be all this haggling over the terms on which so munificent an offer should be accepted? The natural

impulse would be to say to the donor of such a princely gift, 'Choose your own site; it is sure to satisfy us. Take any piece of Government land you like, provided that you do not actually covet Palace-yard, or Trafalgar-square, or the centre of Hyde Park. Nay, if you see any other plot of land which strikes your fancy, and which does not belong to the Government, we will in that case do our best to secure it by purchase, so that under no conceivable circumstances may your generosity be wasted.

The article went on to argue that an expenditure of £30-40,000 would have been prudent to secure Tate's gift. (8 March 1892: TAN, 74). The *Pall Mall Gazette* more cautiously merely 'trust[ed that] the Treasury will see its way to securing Mr Tate's splendid collection for the nation by promising that 'reasonable pecuniary assistance' for which he stipulates as a *sine qua non*.' (c. 23 June 1890: TAN, 19).

²⁶ For a defence of the Sheepshanks as the original National Gallery of British Art, see letter to the Editor from Y, *The Times* (24 June 1890: 8c). For a discussion of the Robert Vernon's gift of British works to the National Gallery and its relation to the growing interest in the British School, see Hamlyn (1993).

²⁷ The phrase is Gordon Fyfe's, reviewing Brandon Taylor's *Art for the Nation* in *tate the art magazine*. 'Taylor demonstrates how...The iconographic programmes of this, the first museum movement, rationalised the experience of art through chronology and national style and incorporated visitors in an imagined community of Britons.' Fyfe (2000: 78).

²⁸ By 1934, the official guide to the National and Tate Galleries could categorically state that '[t]he most significant developments in the history of painting during the nineteenth century took place in France,' and hailed 'Monet, Manet, Renoir, Sisley, and Pissarro' as the leaders of Impressionism, the 'one original development in modern art.' Wilson (1934: 90).

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