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Book review:

Fighting on All Fronts: John Rothenstein in the Art World, Adrian Clark

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Fighting on All Fronts: John Rothenstein in the Art World, Adrian Clark (London: Unicorn Press, 2018), ISBN 978-1-910-78782-3, pp. 264, £20.

John Rothenstein's life was full and fraught. His father, William Rothenstein, a celebrated British portrait painter, was a hard act to follow. His religion, Judaism, was a source of embarrassment that he readily cast aside. His tenure of twenty-six years at the Tate Gallery, where he became the fifth director in 1938, was the stuff of controversy and highly public drama. It is this story that Adrian Clark tells in his thorough study, *Fighting on All Fronts*, which looks at Rothenstein (1901–1992) from a threefold perspective, demonstrating why Rothenstein deserves book-length attention: he examines the man in his time, fleshes out why Rothenstein became such a divisive figure, and illuminates his major achievements – most prominently his contribution to the acclaimed standing of the Tate today and the cornerstone status of his three-volume magnum opus, *Modern English Painters*. Clark divides his book into four parts, focusing on Rothenstein's life before he directed the Tate; the state of the Tate before Rothenstein's arrival; his years at the Tate; and a short but solid dissection of Rothenstein's writing, notably his three-volume autobiography (1965, 1966, 1970) and *Modern English Painters* (1952, 1956, 1974).

I came to the book knowing about the two-year Tate Affair, a scandalous moment in otherwise quiet art circles that is familiar to those who study museums and modern art. In short, a number of insiders at the Tate nearly forced Rothenstein out with a series of duplicitous orchestrations because they were unhappy with Rothenstein's poor management skills, questionable judgment, and parochial taste in art. This played out against the backdrop of unrealistic expectations on the part of the Board of Trustees. As Clark ably demonstrates, Rothenstein undoubtedly left the Tate in a better position than he found it. He did so, *inter alia*, by creating more effective relations between the Royal Academy, the National Gallery, and the Tate; by cultivating an appreciation of American art in Britain; by procuring much-needed funding; and by improving the museum's British art collection. Nonetheless, his shortcomings as a manager of people and his faulty judgment – an incident with Zsa Zsa Gabor placing her foot on the base of a sculpture caused a particular stir – made him an easy target. Rothenstein's frustrations culminated in an altercation with the influential modern art collector Douglas Cooper, whom he punched in the face.

Clark's monograph necessarily concerns itself with the complexities of the dramatic and duplicitous Tate Affair. Thanks to his meticulous attention to detail and close examination of archival materials, he offers some new dimensions to our understanding of the affair. Yet, perhaps most interesting and original is his detailed treatment of Rothenstein's rather less well-known youth, including his relationship with his famous father (the elder Rothenstein also wrote a three-volume autobiography) and the contacts in the art world it afforded him. Also chronicled are Rothenstein's lesser known early successes at galleries in Leeds and Sheffield, where he acquired significant works. He reorganized the galleries in Leeds and put together first-rate exhibitions in Sheffield, culled from the collection alongside significant loans. Then there is his casting off of Judaism, surely the reason the book was sent to a Jewish studies journal for review. To that end, I would like to turn now to that aspect of Rothenstein's life.

Rothenstein was the son of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother and raised with little religion. As a teenager, he studied scripture and chose to embrace Roman Catholicism. In his autobiography, Rothenstein reflected on, and celebrated, this conversion in some depth and conspicuously downplayed the Jewishness of his family. Clark ascribes two particular motives to Rothenstein's conversion: an effort to distance himself from his overbearing father, on the one hand, and the desire to escape from "the taint of Jewishness in his family" (p. 26) and the ensuing antisemitism he faced, of which Clark gives a detailed account, on the other. Problematically, Rothenstein's overly zealous attempts to eschew Judaism and embrace Catholicism sometimes influenced his early curatorial choices and coloured his scholarship. To name but one example, in a digression in an early book, *The Artists of the 1890's* (1928), he unnecessarily touted the Catholic religion of several major figures (pp. 61–2). Rothenstein was so determined to distance himself from his religio-cultural heritage that he wrote a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* insisting that all the members of his family belonged not to the Jewish community but "definitely to another faith" (p. 30). It is one thing to convert quietly and out of sincere belief, but quite another to broadcast such public and adamant disavowals, which are generally unseemly, cast a negative light on Rothenstein's character, and highlight his defensive personality – a quality that sometimes served him poorly in the professional arena.

Clark's book is solidly researched, clearly if dryly written, and neutrally drawn. It does sometimes slip into minutiae; part two on the Tate before

Rothenstein's arrival offers lengthy biographies of various figures who had previously played a leading role at the museum. While readers new to the Tate Affair certainly need some background, a biography of Rothenstein does not require, for instance, a three-page digression about the birth, education, and career path of D. S. MacColl, a figure of little significance to Rothenstein's path. In contrast, Clark throws out the names of dozens of artists with little word about who they are and what their art looks like. Photographs of major figures are abundantly reproduced and yet there are no installation photographs of exhibitions that Rothenstein curated or the state of the Tate's galleries before or after Rothenstein, nor are there reproductions of any of the major acquisitions he made. Nonetheless, Clark's exploration of a crucial scholar of British art and pivotal figure for museum studies, whose contributions as both a museum director and writer reverberate to this day, is a welcome addition to the field.

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