

No-one ever suddenly became depraved

“There are many invisible circumstances, which whether we read as enquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science, or increase our virtue, are more important than publick occurrences.”

Boswell's Life of Johnson



image: ANNE ELLIOT

THE TACTLESS, prurient glare which has so cruelly been cast upon Julian Spalding, Glasgow's Director of Museums, has blinded us to the proper distinction of “publick occurrences” and “invisible circumstances.” This not only discourages virtuous enquirers and fails to increase their moral knowledge, but engineers a field-day for muckraking and effrontery, which has occupied the confusion purely to generate scandal where none exists.

While infantile and repetitive slander may entertain the jaded palate, it has sufficiently wearied the unbiased yet silent majority, that an unvoiced desire is almost palpable in the atmosphere of Glasgow, which calls out for the exposure of the hienious nature of the lies and conspiracy theories which have so distorted and poisoned our appreciation of one of the city's most forthright and dedicated public servants.

Firstly there is the pernicious myth that prior to coming to Glasgow, Julian sacked Terry McCarthy and the entire staff of the National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) in Manchester. Nothing could be further from the truth. The NMLH moved from London to Manchester and, following common practice, quite naturally left a lot of its staff behind. Julian's role was in a purely advisory capacity in its reorganisation; and in any case, McCarthy (an old fashioned Socialist) had held his position for 13 years and surely fresh blood was needed. Ask yourself this: would Julian have been a successful candidate for the position of Director of Museums, in the eyes of a Labour Council and NALGO, if he had a track record of ruinous spiteful vendettas against

anyone with a left-wing outlook on social history? Of course not! The utter folly inherent in this assertion is revealed by the misapprehension that he was brought to Glasgow expressly for this purpose by the now Lord Provost, Patrick Lally. This is not the case. He was head hunted by someone else. Their inspired choice is vindicated by the fact that nobody can now remember who he replaced, Alisdair Auld, who was approaching pensionable age. Also, think of the other applicants for the post: Roger Billcliffe, Christopher Carrell and

Elsbeth King. With all due respect, would they have brought such verve, flair and media attention to the job? Perhaps, but only perhaps.

Wearily, we turn now to the so-called Elspeth King Affair, which with all its attendant hysteria, saw her demonize Julian in a vicious attempt to hound him out of office. The facts of the matter are as follows. Julian freely offered King (a Communist) the position of Temporary Keeper grade and a golden opportunity to manage 1990's flagship exhibition, upon which rested all the hopes for the new Glasgow. Her disgraceful response described *The Words and the Stones* (TWATS), in a letter of 28/8/89 as follows: “You perhaps do not know how poisonous the cup is. Most people in the West of Scotland who have the option are not co-operating with this project... To turn this situation around will require... the risk of my own reputation and personal integrity.” What was the price of her involvement? “The least I require in return,” she wrote, “is a recognition of departmental status for social history, my immediate appointment as keeper and Michael Donnelly's appointment as depute keeper.” How could Julian be expected to strike such a Faustian bargain with someone willing to compromise her reputation and integrity so wantonly. How could he reconcile this with his position as one of the Council's department heads on the exhibition's board safeguarding the city's investment? King then foisted on him a list of 24 questions about TWATS, riddled with unnecessary and niggling jibes, which impugned the financial management and political direction of the exhibition and thus the entire city. All that really happened was that a small group of professional cynics then aimed to try to link these events to King's eventual resignation, ignoring that this occurred a full year later, and that she resigned of her own volition. The exhibition, renamed Glasgow's Glasgow, had by then become an unqualified success, bringing £4.3m of inward investment to the city and vanquishing forever the city's poor public image of poverty, violence, housing schemes, political dissent and general unpleasantness which had perverted Glasgow into the linchpin of perfidious Albion.

We were later to witness numerous petty reruns of attacks on Julian's professionalism, particularly with the “Glasgow Girls” exhibition, where he was falsely accused of “ousting” Jude Burkhauser (an American) and muscling in on “her” exhibition. Critics here ignore the fact that she had only performed some minor research on the exhibition, attenuated as it was over three years, and that again Julian's role was only in an avuncular advisory capacity. This is typical of how aspects of his private life and personal dealings, which have no right to be in the public gaze, and should have been kept invisible, are outrageously invaded. Even the happiest day of his life, his wedding, was brutally intruded upon, with wildly unfounded allegations that he had failed to pay for the hire of the Kelvingrove Museum for his wedding reception, surfacing during his honeymoon. This is nothing short of

vile persecution. These unfounded, often sexist, allegations (nothing has ever been proven in a Court of Law) persist with all the characteristic regularity typical of a smear campaign.

Perhaps the most vicious calumny attached to him, is that he has subsumed the identity of individual Galleries into an overriding corporate identity and censors any dissent by employees. This is simply a demonstration of the ignorance of his detractors of his efforts to develop a more democratic form of management. Indeed, in the Kelvingrove Museum, junior members of staff are actively encouraged to criticise the displays of their departmental heads and challenge them for the right to replace their exhibits. The cheerful morale of the Museum's staff and its open working practices were themselves on display for all to see in the programme, “Dinosaurs and Sacred Cows,” produced by Julian with assistance from Ishbell McLean. As for censorship, during 1990 more comment was made on culture in the Glasgow Herald than on the Poll Tax, a great deal of which either concerned Julian directly or had his sanction. Neil Wallace, Mark O'Neil and others all spoke out frequently to silence the critics and artists on the loony left who were becoming an embarrassment to the City and its clients.

A champion of respectable good taste—perhaps he is a Museum Director's Museum Director. He has not made a mockery out of the new Museum of Modern Art by including what small factions within the reactionary establishment impose on us as contemporary art; but what is in reality the connivance of inflated personal ego and whim, vested interest and the ugly, hidden, dangerous agendas of wierd secret cabals. His stalwart critique of the excesses of modern art and its petulant inability to face criticism, was in evidence from the start of his tenure, some 7 years ago, with his denouncement of the British Art Show, and his organisation of the Great British Art Show as a replacement. Here we saw the roots of his radical ethos, which seeks to put the interests of the paying public first: and is fully cognizant that they require a simple clarifying vision to steer them through the maze and obfuscations of ‘conceptualism’ and ‘ideas.’ The four new galleries in the new Museum are mercifully free of concepts. That one lone, and now sadly isolated figure, can achieve as much as Julian Spalding in so short a time, is a testament to the openness and opportunity that his enlightened dictatorship has brought to Glasgow, and which he has single-handedly striven to protect for those few loyal individuals who deserve it.