

A group of people, including a man with glasses and a woman, are working on large, ornate red ceramic vases. They are wearing purple gloves and appear to be in a workshop or studio setting. The vases are decorated with intricate floral and butterfly patterns in gold and white. The scene is set against a dark background, and the lighting highlights the glossy surface of the vases.

**British Art Studies**  
**November 2017**

*British Art Studies*

Issue 7, published 30 November 2017

Cover image: Clare Twomey, *Made in China*, ceramic vessels, 2016. Installed at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 2017.. Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art | Photo: Richard Caspole

PDF generated on 15 February 2024

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Published by:

Paul Mellon Centre  
16 Bedford Square  
London, WC1B 3JA  
<https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk>

In partnership with:

Yale Center for British Art  
1080 Chapel Street  
New Haven, Connecticut  
<https://britishart.yale.edu>

ISSN: 2058-5462

DOI: 10.17658/issn.2058-5462

URL: <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk>

Editorial team: <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/about/editorial-team>

Advisory board: <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/about/advisory-board>

Produced in the United Kingdom.

*A joint publication by*



YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

# Contents

“The Snob’s Chaldron”: Alexander Davison and the Private Patronage of History Painting in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain, Katherine Gazzard



# “The Snob’s Chaldron”: Alexander Davison and the Private Patronage of History Painting in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain

Katherine Gazzard

## Abstract

*In 1806, the wealthy merchant Alexander Davison commissioned eight leading artists to produce paintings depicting scenes from British history to hang in the dining room of his London townhouse in St James’s Square. Many of these pictures are now lost but a record of the gallery is preserved in the patron’s Descriptive Catalogue, which is presented here as a digital facsimile. Davison’s project represents a rare example of a private individual investing heavily in history painting at a time when the dearth of patronage for the genre in Britain preoccupied artists and critics, prompting widespread debate over who could and should support the production of historical pictures. This article explores Davison’s activities in the light of these concerns. It argues that the gallery was designed to serve an ambitious private agenda as the merchant—a prosperous parvenu and convicted fraudster—sought to secure entry into upper-class society and to escape the taint of scandal. Deploying a traditionally public genre for private gain, Davison’s project invites us to consider the opportunities, as well as the problems, associated with patronizing history painting in early nineteenth-century Britain.*

## Authors

Katherine Gazzard is an AHRC-funded collaborative PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia, the National Maritime and the National Portrait Gallery. The topic of her doctoral project is portraiture and the British naval officer, 1739–1805.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based upon an MA dissertation submitted to the Courtauld Institute of Art in June 2015. I would like to express my gratitude to David Solkin for his guidance in preparing the dissertation, to Sarah Monks and Mark Hallett for supporting me in developing the text into an article, to the three anonymous readers for their valuable critical input and to the team at *BAS* for their careful editorial work and for producing the digital facsimile of the *Descriptive Catalogue*. I am also grateful to Alexander Davison’s

descendants in Germany, who kindly provided me with information. My contact with this branch of Davison's family was facilitated by Martyn Downer, who was extremely generous in sharing his research with me. Thanks as well to the staff of the Bodleian Library, the British Library, and the National Art Library, and to Oliver Cox for sending me a copy of his DPhil thesis.

### **Cite as**

Katherine Gazzard, "'The Snob's Chaldron': Alexander Davison and the Private Patronage of History Painting in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain", *British Art Studies*, Issue 7, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-07/kgazzard>

## Introduction

By collecting from other countries, the individual may possibly enrich himself, but can never give immortality to his name for patronage, or the country in which he lives the honour of having cherished the fine arts. The encouragement, therefore, extended to a single *living artist* . . . is a higher proof of true patriotic ardour. <sup>1</sup>

In July 1806, during a brief interruption to his tenure as President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West wrote these words in a letter to Alexander Davison, a wealthy merchant who had risen from lowly origins to become a powerful government contractor and a close friend of Admiral Lord Nelson. <sup>2</sup> In his letter, West accepted a commission from Davison to participate in an ambitious artistic project. Already active in the art world in various capacities, including as a collector of rural genre paintings and a supporter of the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts, Davison became a major player when, on 10 June 1806, he contracted the engraver Valentine Green to oversee the creation of a gallery of painted scenes from British history in the dining room of his house at number 9 St James's Square in London. With Green acting as his agent, Davison commissioned pictures from eight leading artists, upon whom he imposed two unusual conditions: first, each painter should choose his own historical subject; second, each should include a self-portrait within his work. <sup>3</sup> The artists selected to take part were James Northcote, David Wilkie, Henry Tresham, Robert Smirke, John Singleton Copley, Richard Westall, Arthur William Devis, and West. By June 1807, all eight commissions had been completed and delivered to Davison. They were joined on the walls of his dining room by an earlier work, Copley's *Death of the Earl of Chatham* (Fig. 1), which Davison won in a lottery shortly after announcing his project and decided to incorporate in his nascent gallery. <sup>4</sup> The patron celebrated the display's completion by publishing a "descriptive catalogue" of the collection. This contained entries on the individual paintings written by the artists themselves and typed facsimiles of their correspondence with Davison, including the letter from West excerpted above. <sup>5</sup>

The gallery had a relatively short life and was dismantled in 1823. <sup>6</sup> Of the nine paintings which originally constituted the display, only three are presently known to survive: Copley's *Death of Chatham*, West's *Sir Philip Sidney, Mortally Wounded, Rejecting the Water Offered to him, and Ordering it to be First Given to a Wounded Soldier* (Fig. 2), and Wilkie's *Alfred Reprimanded by the Neat-Herd's Wife* (Fig. 3). There is a visual record for a

further two of the pictures: Devis's *The Conspiracy of Babington against Queen Elizabeth, Detected by her Minister, Sir Francis Walsingham* was engraved in 1830 (Fig. 4) and Copley's *The Offer of the Crown to Lady Jane Grey, by the Dukes of Northumberland and Suffolk, and other Lords, Deputies of the Privy Council* is known through an early twentieth-century photograph, published in the *Connoisseur* magazine in 1928 (Fig. 5).<sup>7</sup> The other four paintings have not been traced to date. However, the remarkable *Descriptive Catalogue* has survived and provides a wealth of information about the gallery.<sup>8</sup>



[View this illustration online](#)

**Figure 1.**

John Singleton Copley, *The Death of the Earl of Chatham in the House of Lords on the 7th July 1778*, 1779–81. Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 307.3 cm. Collection Tate, London (N00100). Digital image courtesy of Tate, London 2017.



**Figure 2.**

Benjamin West, *The fatal wounding of Sir Philip Sidney, who rejects the water offered to him and orders it to be first given to a wounded soldier*, 1806. Oil on canvas, 198.1 × 157.5 cm. Collection Woodmere Art Museum: Bequest of Charles Knox Smith (Inv. 202). Digital image courtesy of Woodmere Art Museum: Bequest of Charles Knox Smith, Photograph by Rick Echelmeyer.



**Figure 3.**

David Wilkie, *Alfred Reprimanded by the Neat-herd's Wife*, 1806-07. Oil on canvas, 109.2 × 154.9 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Hulton Archive.



**Figure 4.**

John Singleton Copley, *The Offer of the Crown to Lady Jane Grey, by the Dukes of Northumberland and Suffolk, and other Lords, Deputies of the Privy Council*, 1806-07. Oil on canvas, 191 × 171.5 cm. Collection unknown. Digital image courtesy of Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.



**Figure 5.**

John Charles Bromley after Arthur William Devis, *The Conspiracy of Babington against Queen Elizabeth, Detected by her Minister, Sir Francis Walsingham*, 1830, mixed media mezzotint engraving on paper, 66.6 × 57.3 cm. Collection the British Museum (Inv. 2010,7081.5831). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

A facsimile of the catalogue, taken from a copy at the Yale Center for British Art, is published alongside this article (Fig. 6). This is intended to draw attention to a unique and understudied primary source. Consisting of a collection of detailed essays written by the eight artists about their own work, the catalogue is without parallel among documents from the same period. Moreover, it contains copies of the painters' initial correspondence with the patron. Such letters, if they survive, are usually buried in personal archives, rather than typed and bound in a published volume. It is hoped the facsimile will be useful beyond this article to scholars of British art, especially those interested in history painting, artists' writings, and the artist-patron relationship. In this article, the *Descriptive Catalogue* is used to help

construct an account of the gallery from its creation in 1806 to the dispersal of the paintings seventeen years later, focusing upon the motivations and ambitions of the display's prosperous but shady patron.

[View this illustration online](#)

### **Figure 6.**

Alexander Davison, *Descriptive catalogue of the series of pictures, formed on subjects selected from the history of England, painted by British artists for Alexander Davison, Esquire, MDCCCVI. In the order in which they arranged, at his house in St. James's-Square, London.* (London : Printed by Bulmer and Co., 1807). Collection of the Yale Center for British Art (Call Number N5247 D3 D3+ Oversize). Digital image courtesy of Digital facsimile courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

## **Questions**

Alexander Davison was a wealthy parvenu, a nouveau riche from a humble background who, in the 1780s and 1790s, amassed an immense fortune as a shipping magnate, factory owner, government contractor, and banker, and set about establishing a place for himself within the metropolitan elite.<sup>9</sup> However, his rapid social rise stalled in 1804, after he was found guilty of electoral malpractice and handed a nine-month prison sentence. Following his release, he endeavoured to rebuild his reputation but, less than two years later, he was in trouble again, facing accusations of serious financial fraud. It was during this tumultuous passage in his life that he created his gallery of history paintings.

Davison's project has been largely overlooked by modern scholars, except for a brief analysis by Holger Hoock, who examines the gallery in the context of broader trends in private collecting.<sup>10</sup> As Hoock observes, the acquisition of foreign Old Masters was widely regarded in eighteenth-century Britain as the most prestigious form of art collecting. In the early nineteenth century, however, increasing numbers of wealthy individuals, including the politician Samuel Whitbread II and the landowner Sir John Leicester, began assembling collections dominated by the work of living British artists.<sup>11</sup> Hoock terms this practice "collecting British", although the behaviours involved might be more accurately described as "patronage" or "sponsorship".<sup>12</sup> Citing Davison's gallery as an example, he suggests that "collecting British" functioned as "a form of conspicuous cultural patriotism."<sup>13</sup> This assessment is supported by the above excerpt from West's letter to Davison, in which the painter casts aspersions on the "patriotic ardour" of those who purchase pictures "from foreign countries" compared to those who patronize native artists. West also suggests that the latter practice could "give immortality to [the patron's] name", according with Hoock's conclusion that collectors who invested in "the cultural cachet and patriotic prestige that came with sponsoring British

artists” often did so in order to “legitimise [their] private agendas”.<sup>14</sup> Building on this scholarship, I will argue that Davison’s gallery was designed to serve a particularly ambitious private agenda as the merchant sought to enhance his social status and to repair his damaged name.

Among patrons of this period, Davison was highly unusual in choosing to commission history paintings. Although several early nineteenth-century commentators exhorted private patrons to commission such pictures, their pleas went largely unheeded.<sup>15</sup> Defined by the representation on a large scale of narrative subjects, typically historical, mythological, literary, or biblical in character, history painting was presented in academic theory as the pinnacle of artistic achievement. It was traditionally viewed as a publicly oriented genre, the imagery, patronage, and display of which were supposed, ideally, to promote public good over private interest. Given the prestige attached to the genre, many British artists and theorists were eager to see it thrive in their own country. Yet a lack of patronage from the state and the church—the public institutions which supported the flourishing schools of history painting on the Continent—worked against the realization of this goal. From charitable donations to the Foundling Hospital to entrepreneurial solo-shows, the eighteenth century witnessed various attempts to find alternative patrons, display spaces, and audiences for history painting in Britain. Blurring the boundaries between public and private, these efforts generated widespread debate about whose interests the genre might legitimately serve. The same questions continue to preoccupy scholars today.<sup>16</sup> In Louise Lippincott’s words, “the principal questions then and now were and are: who would support history painting in eighteenth-century Britain, why would they do it, and how?”<sup>17</sup>

To these three questions—who, why, and how—I would add a fourth: where? Davison’s gallery needs to be understood in relation to the cultural geography of early nineteenth-century London, which provided crucial precedents for the display. The gallery space itself is another “where” that must be considered. Davison did not exert complete control over the room, instead allowing his agent, Valentine Green, and his painters to make their own decisions concerning the subject matter and display of the artworks. Yet the collection remained tied to the patron’s reputation and perceptions of the gallery shifted in line with changes in his status. Investigating what was at stake for the merchant in this grand but ultimately ill-fated endeavour provides a unique insight into the functions that history painting could serve at a time when the patronage of the genre raised more questions than answers.

## Context and Precedents

Davison commissioned this series of history paintings in the midst of a personal crisis. Having earned vast amounts of money as a merchant in Quebec, Canada, during the American Revolutionary War, and as a government contractor in Britain following the outbreak of the French Wars in 1793, Davison, the son of a Northumbrian farmer, endeavoured in the late 1790s and early 1800s to enhance his social position.<sup>18</sup> In 1795, he bought a country estate in Northumberland and, three years later, he acquired his elegant townhouse in St James's Square.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, he deepened his long-standing friendship with Admiral Nelson, which had begun in Canada.<sup>20</sup> This connection to Britain's most celebrated naval commander helped Davison establish a network of influential contacts, including government ministers and royal princes. He also demonstrated his patriotic credentials: in 1798, he sponsored a medal for veterans of the Battle of the Nile; in 1799, he oversaw an ultimately unsuccessful project to erect a public monument commemorating a series of recent British naval victories; and, during the invasion crisis in 1803, he spent £3,000 raising the Loyal Britons volunteer corps.<sup>21</sup> However, his social aspirations were dealt a major blow in 1804, when he was sentenced to nine months in prison for electoral fraud, the charges relating to his unsuccessful attempt to gain a parliamentary seat two years previously.<sup>22</sup> The conviction severely damaged his reputation, costing him a knighthood.<sup>23</sup> His problems were then worsened by the death of Nelson, his most valuable personal connection, at the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805.

Seeking to recover his social standing, Davison set about creating an impressive picture gallery in his London residence. At this time, St James's Square was embedded within a thriving hub of cultural activity. The Square opened onto the genteel thoroughfare of Pall Mall, then home to numerous polite public attractions, many of which involved artistic displays.<sup>24</sup> The surrounding streets were filled with opulent private dwellings, in which members of the social elite displayed their artistic treasures. Davison recognized the importance of art collecting as a mechanism for constructing elite identity. He displayed his collection of history paintings in his dining room, where he regularly hosted fashionable dinner parties attended by "very distinguished personages". The merchant's motive for sharing his "hospitable board" and his art collection with this elite audience was, according to one observer, "the project . . . of making him a *baronet*".<sup>25</sup>

Old Masters were the pictures traditionally most sought after by private collectors in Britain. Davison would have encountered many impressive displays of such works in the townhouses of his wealthy and aristocratic

neighbours in London's fashionable West End. Belonging to Granville Leveson-Gower, first Marquess of Stafford, the largest and most famous collection of this sort in Britain at this time was displayed in Cleveland House on St. James's Street, off Pall Mall.<sup>26</sup> Davison did not entirely reject this model of cosmopolitan collecting, acquiring several seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes and two paintings by Claude Lorrain for his library.<sup>27</sup>

However, in his dining room, Davison sought to create a different kind of display, one consisting entirely of modern British paintings. There were relatively few precedents for a gallery of this type. An early trailblazer for the collecting of contemporary British art was Charles Watson-Wentworth, second Marquess of Rockingham. The marquess's eclectic art collection encompassed classical sculpture, family portraits, and Italian religious paintings but, in the early 1760s, he created a display of recent works by British artists in the "large front parlour" of his townhouse in Grosvenor Square.<sup>28</sup> Including animal pieces by George Stubbs and landscapes by the Irish artist George Barret, this gallery functioned as a stage for Rockingham's "aristocratic self-fashioning".<sup>29</sup> The parlour was furnished with expensive sofas, chandeliers, and a marble chimneypiece. Large windows enabled people on the street to glimpse the magnificent interior and the artworks on the walls. In these grand surroundings, the marquess—the eponymous leader of the Rockingham Whigs—met his allies to debate political strategy. His British paintings provided a backdrop to the discussion, foreshadowing Davison's later decision to place contemporary art at the heart of his social life.<sup>30</sup>

Rockingham died in 1782. His patriotic model of patronage was slow to catch on but, by the early nineteenth century, the number of private collectors investing in British art had begun to increase. For example, in 1805, Sir John Leicester converted the library of his house in Hill Street into a "Gallery of Paintings by modern Artists".<sup>31</sup> In the following year, it was rumoured that Robert Grosvenor, second Earl Grosvenor, planned to furnish a room in his new house on Park Lane "with English pictures only".<sup>32</sup> However, these individuals remained in the minority among private collectors in Britain, most of whom continued to covet Old Masters above all else. Thus, in commissioning British artworks for his dining room, Davison was adopting an innovative mode of art collecting.

The merchant's gallery was especially unusual because, unlike other collections of British art being formed at this time, it was exclusively devoted to history painting. Art collectors in this period were generally reluctant to commission historical pictures, preferring instead to acquire portraits, landscapes, and genre paintings.<sup>33</sup> The most significant exception to this rule was the king. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, George III

commissioned upwards of forty history paintings from Benjamin West, including a series of eight pictures representing the life of Edward III for the Throne Room in Windsor Castle.<sup>34</sup> Focusing on English history, this suite of paintings offers a precedent for the display of subjects from “the annals of our own country” that Davison sought to create in his dining room.

Yet royal palaces were not the only places in Britain where history paintings were displayed at this time. Although only accounting for a small percentage of submissions, examples of the genre routinely occupied prominent positions in the capital’s annual exhibitions and, since the 1780s, some artists had been exhibiting their own history paintings in spectacular one-picture shows.<sup>35</sup> There was, however, a significant difference between these temporary public exhibitions and the permanent gallery that Davison sought to create in his private dining room. A closer parallel for this domestic display was provided by West, the king’s favoured history painter, in his house and studio at 14 Newman Street in Westminster, which he occupied from 1774 until his death in 1820.<sup>36</sup> Placing the artist in the vicinity of wealthy and aristocratic patrons and projecting an image of social and professional respectability, the establishment of a grand residence at a fashionable address was considered almost essential for successful painters, sculptors, and architects in this period.<sup>37</sup> However, West’s home was unique among contemporary artists’ residences because it was dedicated to the promotion of history painting. Visitors to the property, who included potential patrons, aspiring painters, and members of the public, were conducted through a long gallery hung with the artist’s preparatory sketches before emerging into his painting room.<sup>38</sup> Here, they would encounter his current works-in-progress, surrounded by examples of his finished history paintings. West himself was often present in this space, receiving his visitors as he worked. Dramatizing the production of historical compositions and culminating in a live demonstration, this sequence of displays framed the artist as a pre-eminent exponent of the genre.

In spring 1806, shortly before Davison launched his gallery, West boosted the profile of his house and studio as a display space by withholding his most recent historical picture from the annual exhibition at Royal Academy and insisting that visitors viewed the work at his residence.<sup>39</sup> The painting in question depicted the death of Nelson, a recent event which had captured the national imagination, and its display attracted significant public and critical attention.<sup>40</sup> This would surely have caught Davison’s interest, given his friendship with the late admiral. The exhibition shone a spotlight upon West’s private residence, where, as Kaylin Weber observes, the artist had created “an elaborate ‘temple’ to history painting and to himself”.<sup>41</sup> In his

dining room, Davison sought to establish something similar, except, rather than focusing upon the process of artistic creation, it celebrated the act of patronage.

### **The “Liberal-Minded Maecenas”**

A long-standing source of concern in the British art world, the patronage of history painting became an especially prominent issue in 1806, following the demise of John Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery and Robert Bowyer’s Historic Gallery. Boydell and Bowyer were print publishers. Launched in 1786 and 1792 respectively, their galleries had sought to turn history painting into a profitable enterprise.<sup>42</sup> Both men commissioned leading artists to paint subjects from a famous British text: the works of Shakespeare in Boydell’s case and David Hume’s *History of England* (1754–61) in Bowyer’s. The resulting canvases were publicly exhibited and engraved, the publishers generating revenue by selling the engravings in periodic instalments.<sup>43</sup> These ventures were initially successful but, after losing access to the lucrative European print market during the Napoleonic Wars, both became financially unsustainable. The closure of the Shakespeare Gallery was announced in March 1804 and completed the following January.<sup>44</sup> One month later, Bowyer applied to Parliament for permission to dispose of his paintings by lottery, initiating a lengthy process which concluded in April 1807 with the dispersal of the collection.<sup>45</sup> Together with fellow publisher Thomas Macklin, who undertook a similarly ill-fated project with subjects from English poetry in 1787–99, Boydell and Bowyer provided a steady stream of historical commissions for British artists at a time when few other patrons were investing in the genre.<sup>46</sup> The withdrawal of this vital source of support caused artists and critics to fear for the future of history painting in Britain.

In St James’s Square, Davison lived in close proximity to the Shakespeare Gallery and the Historic Gallery, which were both located on Pall Mall.<sup>47</sup> In commissioning history paintings from contemporary artists, he picked up where the publishers had left off. His desire to create a display of pictures representing subjects from English history, albeit not specifically from Hume’s text, suggests that the Historic Gallery in particular may have inspired him. He certainly took an active interest in Bowyer’s venture, helping the publisher promote the lottery of his paintings in the winter of 1805–6.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Davison hoped that his private gallery would be seen as a phoenix rising from the ashes of the unfortunate commercial project.

Davison's gallery can be read as a response to contemporary opinions regarding the ambitions and misfortunes of Boydell and Bowyer. In his *Rhymes on Art* (1805), the painter Martin Archer Shee outlined two commonly held but starkly opposed views of the Shakespeare Gallery. Some observers, he wrote, considered the project to be "a vast commercial speculation", which had encouraged the "advancement of the arts" in order to derive "profits". Others viewed it as "a plan originating in the patriotic ambition of a man, [who was] . . . raised above the temptation of interest" and "determined to risk the accumulations of his life" in support of British art.<sup>49</sup> The latter viewpoint echoed the promotional rhetoric that Boydell and Bowyer had employed when launching their projects. Both publishers had claimed to be pioneers working to "establish an *English School of Historical Painting*," a genre which had "[hitherto] been almost unknown" in Britain due to a want of "adequate encouragement".<sup>50</sup> In this way, they presented their actions as a generous service to the nation, disguising the fact that they were divorcing history painting from its traditional role as an instrument of public moral instruction and redeploying the genre in pursuit of private financial gain. Seen according to this viewpoint, the relationship between Boydell, Bowyer, and Davison could be construed as one of continuity. Although men of commerce, the publishers had acted in a manner removed from narrow self-interest; at their downfall, Davison, another man with a mercantile background, had taken over their patriotic mission of cultivating "an *English School of Historical Painting*".

Equally, Davison could claim that his gallery was superior to the schemes of Boydell and Bowyer because it was not driven by commercial imperatives. The publishers' commercialism could be viewed positively: Boydell had been hailed as a "commercial Maecenas" and had highlighted "the advantage of promoting the Arts, in a commercial point of view", suggesting that his project would benefit the British economy, as well as the nation's art.<sup>51</sup> However, the financial collapses of his and Bowyer's galleries prompted a pessimistic reassessment of the value of commerce as a means to support the arts.<sup>52</sup> Shee, for instance, declared that "the arts treated commercially . . . never can flourish".<sup>53</sup> He argued that art could only be properly supported by government funding or by private patronage from "men of rank", who were elevated above the "wants and caprices" of the market.<sup>54</sup> Prince Hoare, the Royal Academy's Secretary of Foreign Correspondence, echoed these sentiments, suggesting in 1806 that, following the Historic Gallery's failure, it was time for a "patron in a higher station of life" to become "the liberal-minded Maecenas".<sup>55</sup> Viewed from this perspective, Davison's privately funded gallery could be interpreted as a corrective to Bowyer's profit-making one.

One year prior to launching his art project, Davison donated 105 guineas to the newly founded British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts, an organization funded entirely by wealthy and aristocratic collectors.<sup>56</sup> Taking over the premises on Pall Mall formerly occupied by the Shakespeare Gallery, the Institution claimed to be rescuing the arts from the vicissitudes of commerce. It aimed to encourage “the talents of Artists of the United Kingdom” by displaying Old Masters for their education and staging public exhibitions of their works.<sup>57</sup> Although it did not focus exclusively on history painting, it presented the promotion of the genre as its ultimate goal.<sup>58</sup> Shee welcomed this development, suggesting that the “rank, respectability and influence” of the Institution’s donors would enable them to “execute [their plan] with effect.”<sup>59</sup> Through the British Institution, Davison made important contacts in the art world. Indeed, this is presumably how he met Valentine Green, the engraver whom he subsequently hired as his agent, who was the inaugural Keeper of the British Institution. As Davison donated more than one hundred guineas to the British Institution, he was automatically appointed to the body of Hereditary Governors.<sup>60</sup> These governorships were advantageous for arrivistes like Davison: the only condition for appointment was a generous donation but, because they were hereditary, they carried an aristocratic lustre. Associating social prestige with artistic patronage, this may have encouraged the merchant to believe that his personal ambitions could be served by responding to the calls for a “liberal-minded Maecenas” that followed the downfall of Boydell and Bowyer. In effect, the art world’s reaction against the publishers’ unsuccessful efforts to exploit history painting for commercial gain created what Davison must have seen as the perfect conditions for him to deploy the genre in pursuit of a different kind of private profit, as he sought to recover his damaged reputation.

Reports of the merchant’s gallery were published in a number of contemporary newspapers and periodicals, providing Davison with the favourable publicity that he craved. In 1807, *The Artist* heralded the paintings as one of the “principal collections lately formed from the works of living painters, and with the noble purpose of encouraging contemporary merit.”<sup>61</sup> The *Examiner* wrote, in May 1808, that Davison was “conspicuous among the Patrons of Painting for his munificent encouragement of British Art, in the noble example he has set to wealthy amateurs, in his series of pictures from British History.”<sup>62</sup> As these comments reveal, supporters of the project presented Davison’s gallery as a generous and patriotic endeavour. Shaped by the period’s ongoing debates about artistic patronage, this rhetoric is a testament to the way in which Davison carefully positioned his project in relation to existing models and recent events in the London art world.

## Inside the Gallery

Although Davison's gallery was widely discussed in the press, his artworks were hidden from public view. None of the pictures were engraved until the 1820s and Davison declined to follow the example being set by other leading collectors of the period, including Thomas Hope and the Marquess of Stafford, who opened their galleries to the public during the social season.<sup>63</sup> Hanging in his dining room, Davison's paintings were seen only by the important individuals who attended his "grand dinners". Following his imprisonment and the death of Nelson, the merchant continued to stage these lavish entertainments. For example, the *Morning Post* reported in February 1806 that the Prince of Wales and "most of the Ministers" had attended a recent "festive party" hosted by Davison.<sup>64</sup> With his reputation under threat, he presumably saw these exclusive events as a means of reasserting his place in high society. The creation of his gallery produced a grand setting for this concerted campaign of social networking.

It is difficult to reconstruct the spectacle that the gallery would have presented to Davison's guests. Two-thirds of the original artworks are lost and there are no visual records of the display. The house in St. James's Square survives but the eighteenth-century neoclassical interiors, designed by Robert Adam, were removed in the nineteenth century. Although it is not known for certain which of the numerous parlours served during Davison's occupancy as the dining room, the large front room on the first floor appears to be the most likely candidate.<sup>65</sup> Piecing together evidence from different accounts, it seems that the room was accessed through the library, where the merchant displayed his two Claudes, some Dutch landscapes, and a large number of rural genre scenes by the British artist George Morland.<sup>66</sup> From this space, visitors proceeded into the dining room, entering through a door in the north wall. There were windows on the south wall, opposite the entrance, and the nine history paintings were divided equally between the other walls, as detailed in a list at the beginning of the *Descriptive Catalogue*, which also gives the works' dimensions. The pictures are numbered in the catalogue "in the order in which they are arranged", starting with James Northcote's painting "on the left hand of the door" and proceeding in a clockwise direction around the walls.<sup>67</sup> Printed only for "private distribution", the catalogue may have been intended for perusal within the space, guiding visitors' movement around the room.<sup>68</sup> Now that the gallery no longer exists, it is a vital source of information about the display.

Catalogues were a common part of the apparatus of artistic display in the early nineteenth century. They were produced for commercial galleries, private collections, and temporary exhibitions, including those at the Royal

Academy. In most cases, however, they gave only the title of each work, the name of the artist, and occasionally a quotation from a relevant text.<sup>69</sup> By contrast, Davison's catalogue features lengthy entries for each of the paintings, introducing their historical subject matter and giving a detailed description of the composition. This level of detail was consistent with other self-proclaimed "descriptive" catalogues of the period, most of which were dedicated to foreign Old Masters. These texts were typically written by connoisseurs, critics, and dealers, rather than by patrons or artists.<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Daniel Daulby's *Descriptive Catalogue of the Works of Rembrandt* (1796) and the *Descriptive Catalogue . . . of some Pictures, of the Different Schools, Purchased, For His Majesty, the Late King of Poland* (1802) published by the picture dealer Noel Desenfans prior to his sale of the Italian, Spanish, French, German, Flemish, and Dutch works from the collection.<sup>71</sup> Significantly, in 1793, Valentine Green wrote a catalogue of this type for an exhibition of his mezzotints after Old Master paintings in the Dusseldorf Gallery. He stated that he had produced a descriptive catalogue because "without [one], a competent idea of the magnitude and consequence of that Collection cannot be formed."<sup>72</sup> It is therefore tempting to see the creation of a similar catalogue for Davison's collection as evidence of Green's active role in managing and shaping the project. This decision made a bold claim for British art, suggesting that its productions were equal in "magnitude and consequence" to important works of the Continental schools. Yet, although it conformed in some ways to a pre-established type, Davison's catalogue was unique in two respects: the entries were written by the painters themselves; and it also featured letters from the artists to the patron.

The catalogue stresses the freedom that Davison allowed those whom he employed. It begins with a letter from the merchant to Green, in which he entrusts the engraver with "the chief arrangement of the business with regard to the choice of Artists, and of the Subjects for the Pictures".<sup>73</sup> Green appears to have functioned as a negotiator and facilitator, mediating between the preferences of the patron and the ideas of the artists. Examining the selection of artists, it is curious that, alongside well-established history painters such as West, Northcote, and Copley, the young Scottish artist, David Wilkie, was also invited to participate. Debuting at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1806, Wilkie burst onto the London scene only a few weeks before Davison launched his project. There was undoubtedly cultural prestige in acquiring a work by the art world's newest star but, given that his fame was founded on a small-scale rural genre scene, he was an odd choice for a gallery of history paintings.<sup>74</sup> This strange selection was perhaps prompted by Davison's enthusiasm for patronizing Scotsmen, which stemmed from his own Anglo-Scottish identity, the result of having grown up near the border in Northumberland.<sup>75</sup> However, although this suggests that the merchant exerted some influence over the choice of artists, it was Green

who approached the chosen individuals: the painter and diarist Joseph Farington recorded that, when he called on Robert Smirke on 25 July 1806, “Green was there upon the subject of giving Smirke a Commission to paint an Historical picture for Alexander Davison.” <sup>76</sup>

### “Subjects from English History”

When it came to the choice of subjects, Green may have guided the selection, but he did not dictate what the painters should represent. A prefatory note in the catalogue asserts that the artists were given “the entire advantage of having selected their own subjects”. <sup>77</sup> They were reportedly asked to submit “a List of three Subjects from English History”, from which Davison would “make his choice of one from each.” <sup>78</sup> From the correspondence in the catalogue, it seems that Northcote was the only painter who followed this instruction. <sup>79</sup> The other artists propose only one option in their letters to Davison, some soliciting his approval, others presuming his automatic consent. <sup>80</sup> However, it is unlikely that they would have defied the patron, if he had rejected their choice. He also retained the right to refuse to admit their pictures to his gallery: “after each picture is finished,” Farington noted, “[Davison] will pay the money due for it. . . . If it be approved He will place it in his picture room, if not he will send it to an Auction.” <sup>81</sup> There is no evidence that Davison rejected any works and it can be assumed that all of the paintings met with his approval.

The prefatory note in the catalogue also states that, “intending to mark this Collection distinctly from others of their works,” the artists were required to include self-portraits in their pictures. <sup>82</sup> The acquisition of self-portraits aligned Davison with several highly prestigious precedents, including the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, who amassed an extensive collection of painters’ self-portraits over the course of the eighteenth century. <sup>83</sup> However, the merchant’s request that the artists embed their likenesses within history paintings was unusual. Acting of their own accord, painters sometimes depicted themselves as historical figures—James Barry had famously painted himself as the ancient Greek painter Timanthes in *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture* (1777–83), his series of murals for the Society of Arts—but this was rarely done at a patron’s behest. <sup>84</sup> George III’s insistence that West include a self-portrait in *The Institution of the Order of the Garter* (1787), one of the Edward III paintings for the Throne Room at Windsor, provides perhaps the only precedent for Davison’s stipulation. <sup>85</sup> Thanks to the presence of the self-portraits, the artists themselves were as much the subject of the display in the merchant’s gallery as the historical scenes that they chose to represent.

For viewers in the early nineteenth century, some of the historical episodes selected by the painters would have been very familiar. Six of the eight artists—West, Wilkie, Tresham, Smirke, Copley, and Westall—picked scenes that were identical or closely related to subjects depicted in Robert Bowyer’s *Historic Gallery*.<sup>86</sup> This is unsurprising given that the publisher’s project was an important source of inspiration for the gallery as a whole. Wilkie, the most inexperienced history painter in the group, elected to paint *Alfred the Great in the Neat-Herd’s Cottage*, an iconic moment in English history which had been represented many times throughout the eighteenth century, providing the artist with a surfeit of potential models.<sup>87</sup> However, as a comic incident in a rural cottage involving burnt cakes and mistaken identity, this scene was also ideally suited to his talents as a genre painter.

Two of the painters selected more obscure historical incidents. These were apparently chosen because they were appropriate to Davison’s personal interests, or to the requirements of his commission. Northcote depicted *Henry Percy, fifth Earl of Northumberland, presenting the Princess Margaret, eldest daughter of Henry VII, to James IV of Scotland*, which he believed had “never yet been painted.”<sup>88</sup> This scene saluted Davison’s Anglo-Scottish identity and featured an ancestor of his long-standing friend and aristocratic patron Hugh Percy, second Duke of Northumberland.<sup>89</sup> Devis also depicted a scene for which there was little artistic precedent, representing *The Conspiracy of Babington against Queen Elizabeth*. His painting showed the Tudor queen viewing an incriminating group portrait of the conspirators. Depicting himself as Babington’s portraitist (the figure holding the painting), Devis selected this subject, according to his friend John Landseer, because it offered an “adroit” solution to Davison’s instruction that “each Artist should introduce his own Portrait” in his picture, allowing the painter to represent himself as an artist.<sup>90</sup>

Whatever specific reasons each artist had for selecting his subject, there are some recurring themes among their choices. All eight painters depicted scenes from the Medieval or Tudor period featuring royal or noble protagonists. This is consistent with the historicist interest in the knightly and courtly culture of the Middle Ages that became an increasingly prominent feature of British culture during this period.<sup>91</sup> Other common themes can also be discerned. A number of these are explored by Holger Hoock and summed up in his description of the display as a “gallery of scenes of virtuous royal, civic, and military leadership and English dynastic history.”<sup>92</sup>

One particularly intriguing aspect of the gallery is the preponderance of scenes centred upon female royalty, of which there were five. Two of these subjects—the marriage of Margaret Tudor and Elizabeth I saved from Babington’s plot—depicted moments of dynastic growth and personal

survival. By contrast, the other three represented royal women in distress: Elizabeth Woodville forced to surrender her children; Lady Jane Grey pressured into accepting the crown; and Mary, Queen of Scots, fleeing from defeat. In the gallery, these three subjects were displayed together on the east wall. Opposite, on the west wall, hung the Elizabeth painting while the Tudor marriage scene was on the north wall. This arrangement invited viewers to compare and contrast different historical models of femininity. In eighteenth-century histories, Woodville, Grey, and the Queen of Scots were seen to exemplify “the proper ornaments of [their] sex”, such as beauty and tenderness, and the vulnerability associated with these “ornaments”, which caused them to be led astray by “treacherous counsel” and doomed their attempts to occupy positions of power.<sup>93</sup> By contrast, Elizabeth I was presented as a successful monarch because, it was claimed, she lacked “those amiable weaknesses by which her sex is distinguished”, possessing instead the masculine qualities of “vigour”, “magnanimity”, and “heroism”.<sup>94</sup> This imagined contrast between feminine weakness and masculine strength was writ large upon the walls of Davison’s gallery, where the tribulations of Woodville, Grey, and the Queen of Scots were juxtaposed with Elizabeth’s triumph over Babington. Positioned in between these two extremes, Northcote’s representation of Margaret Tudor “modestly presenting her hand to the King of Scotland” and, in so doing, bringing about “peace and amity” between the warring nations of England and Scotland offered an ideal model for the union of masculinity and femininity through the institution of marriage.<sup>95</sup> The emphasis in the gallery upon female roles raises the possibility that women formed part of the intended audience. When the newspapers reported upon Davison’s “grand dinners”, the attendees mentioned by name were generally male. However, the merchant’s wife, Harriett, is recorded as playing an active role in hosting these “fashionable parties”, suggesting that women were also present upon these occasions.<sup>96</sup>

The grouping of three similar subjects on the east wall prompts further questions about how the subjects were chosen. As the dimensions given in the catalogue show, the canvases were different sizes. This was apparently done to enable specific paintings to fit specific spaces, such as above the door, and to create symmetry on each wall.<sup>97</sup> The arrangement must therefore have been worked out before the artists started painting. One possibility is that the painters selected their subjects independently and the hang was designed around their choices. Yet it is also possible that the selection of subjects and the placement of the works evolved in tandem, through a process of consultation and coordination between the various artists, Green, and Davison.

## Exemplary Patronage

Although the choice of subjects for the gallery may have resulted from a collaborative effort, the catalogue entries are self-contained texts, each artist discussing only his own painting. This presents the gallery to the reader as a series of independent artistic efforts. In the late eighteenth century, independence, together with originality and freedom, was heralded as one of the distinguishing features of British art, echoing an older ideal of “Englishness” associated with liberty and Protestantism.<sup>98</sup> For Davison, there was prestige in appearing as an appreciative facilitator of this supposed creative independence. In an open letter to the Society of Dilettanti in 1798, James Barry had condemned “self-important” individuals who imposed their own “ideas” upon artists and argued that the true role of a patron was “to furnish a field for the exercise of talents.”<sup>99</sup> Davison’s wish to be seen to embody this ideal offers a compelling explanation for the most unusual features of his project: the self-portraits and the *Descriptive Catalogue*. His desire to display his painters’ likenesses suggested his respect for them as individuals. Written in the artists’ own words, the catalogue entries showed his willingness to allow their genius to speak for itself.

Of course, there was one picture in the gallery that Davison had not commissioned: the *Death of Chatham*. Depicting the fatal collapse of William Pitt, first Earl of Chatham, in the House of Lords on 7 April 1778, this work was painted by Copley between 1779 and 1781.<sup>100</sup> It was a speculative production, the artist seeking to make his profit through a one-picture exhibition and print sales. He also hoped to sell the painting but failed to find a buyer. It remained unsold for more than two decades until, facing mounting debts, he resolved to dispose of the work by lottery. Tickets were priced at one hundred guineas each, one twentieth of his original asking price for the painting, and the draw was held on 27 June 1806.<sup>101</sup> Emerging as the winner, Davison resolved to install the picture in his nascent gallery of history paintings. Divided into two sections and featuring a description of the composition, the entry for *Chatham* in the *Descriptive Catalogue* is similar to the other catalogue essays but appears to have been written by someone other than the artist, probably Green. It does not describe how Davison came to possess the picture, perhaps because revealing the method of acquisition—at a bargain price, through a lucky gamble—risked undermining the munificent self-image that the patron sought to project. Glossing over the painting’s past, the entry hails the work as evidence of “present high state of national talent in this first walk of the graphic Muse [history painting]” and issues a rallying cry for future patronage: the picture is said to call “most imperiously and persuasively” on “the patriotism and the liberality of the affluent, to enrich their country and posterity with similar examples of

excellence in art.” <sup>102</sup> This statement functions as an implicit tribute to Davison, framing his commissions as proof of his exemplary “patriotism” and “liberality”.

Extolling the virtues of the merchant’s patronage, the artists’ letters printed in the second half of the catalogue reinforce this message. Northcote refers to Davison’s commissions as “such singular proofs of your truly liberal character”, while Tresham asserts that the patron “will be awarded the rich harvest of public applause for his patriotic munificence”. <sup>103</sup> This obsequious language is conventional for such letters: it was expected that artists would respond to offers of employment with grateful blandishments. <sup>104</sup> However, Davison was alone among patrons of the time in publishing the flattering missives that he received from his artists. In so doing, he relayed their testimony concerning his importance to British art to the influential individuals with whom he shared his catalogue, presumably hoping that it would enhance his reputation in wider society.

Davison himself has the last word in the *Description Catalogue*. The concluding text is a letter that he sent to Green upon the gallery’s completion, in which he writes,

I trust [the paintings] will leave it no longer doubtful whether the productions of our own country deserve the patronage of the great and the affluent . . . May this example have the full effect it was meant by me to produce! <sup>105</sup>

Like the rest of the catalogue, these comments advance his effort to achieve self-advancement under the aegis of patriotism. Presenting himself as a champion of British art and a model for his powerful friends to follow, the merchant simultaneously asserted his willingness to serve the cultural interests of the nation and his status, despite his lowly origins and criminal record, as an exemplary member of “the great and the affluent”.

## **Downfall**

In his gallery, Davison sought to create the perfect stage for self-promotion but, before it was even complete, his ability to play the part of the munificent patron upon this stage suffered a crushing blow. In January 1807, the Parliamentary Commissioners of Military Enquiry published a report highlighting major financial irregularities in his military supply contracts. <sup>106</sup> Accused of embezzling thousands of pounds from the government, he was

put on trial in December 1808. Three months later, he was convicted and sentenced to twenty-one months in prison, his second prison term in five years. <sup>107</sup>

After Davison's dishonest dealings came to light, satirists and political commentators assaulted the claims to respectability and liberality upon which he had staked his reputation. As one newspaper quipped, "Col. Davison", the supposedly patriotic commander of the Loyal Britons volunteers, deserved to be rechristened "Coal Davison", a soubriquet that referred to his blackened name and to his abuse of his contract to supply the Army with coal. <sup>108</sup> Davison's coal fraud was the subject of a scathing satirical print titled *The Coal Contractor, or a New Way of Supplying Government Wholesale by the Bushel* (Fig. 7). Dorothy George attributes this caricature to the engraver Charles Williams and his publisher Samuel Fores but the print itself states only that it was published "by an Honest Scotch man" in "Feb. 1806". <sup>109</sup> This date is erroneous: the print cannot have been published before January 1807, since it refers to details from the report of the Commissioners of Military Enquiry. The print shows Davison writing in a ledger. He looks over his shoulder at two soldiers as they collect a delivery of coal from a pair of labourers, one of whom metes out the order using a bushel. References to bushels and chaldrons, the measures used in the sale of coal, are littered throughout the print, alluding to Davison's deceitful manipulation of this measuring system. <sup>110</sup> One of the soldiers suggests that "we shall have [the coal] by the Snob's Chaldron next." Davison's status as a "snob", meaning an individual of low breeding or bad taste who seeks, through superficial and ostentatious displays, to associate with his social superiors, is thus drawn into the print's attack upon his corruption. <sup>111</sup>



**Figure 7.**

Attributed to Charles Williams, he Coal Contractor, or a New Way of Supplying Government Wholesale by the Bushel, 1807, hand-coloured etching on paper, 25.1 × 35.3 cm. Collection the British Museum (Inv. 1868,0808.7424). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

The caricature plays off Davison's criminal activity against his attempts at self-promotion, including his gallery project. In his letter rack is a missive addressed to "[Alexander Davison] Esq., Patron [of] the Arts" and behind him is a door inscribed "Pictu[re] Gall[ery]", through which can be glimpsed several large paintings in gilded frames. Hanging beside this door are an admiral's hat and sword, a reference to the way in which Davison traded upon his friendship with Nelson to enhance his social credit.<sup>112</sup> Meanwhile, on the shelf above his desk is a book of "Subjects for British Artists", together with a log of "Expences [*sic*] of raising my Corps", referring to the founding of the Loyal Britons, and volumes highlighting official responsibilities financially abused by Davison, including his prize agency for the Navy, his appointment as Treasurer of the Ordnance, and his victualling contracts. On the floor, books of "Cash reciev'd in advance" and "Profits by Contract £1000,000" are piled atop a page of "Expences [*sic*] of the Entertainment given to his Royal [Highness]", alluding to the Prince of Wales's frequent attendance at Davison's dinners. This extended juxtaposition of the merchant's fraudulent enterprise with his efforts to cultivate a respectable public persona makes his pursuit of social status appear sordid and superficial.

Similar attacks on Davison appeared in the press. *The Times* joked that, while “the DAVISON Gallery of Historical Paintings” had been begun by “Copley and other eminent Artists”, it would be finished by “those equally eminent designers in their own way, Sir ARTHUR PIGOTT [the attorney general], Sir SAMUEL ROMILLY [the solicitor general], and others,” who, in prosecuting the merchant for his crimes, would paint a more accurate picture of his character.<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile, *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register* argued that the claims of “*the Davison Gallery!!*” to “liberality” and “public-spirit” were belied by its “enormous price”, which revealed the patron’s greed.<sup>114</sup> Together with *The Coal Contractor*, these comments highlight the gamble that Davison had taken in attempting to exploit history painting for personal gain. The effectiveness of his scheme hinged upon his patronage being perceived as genuinely patriotic, an image that the exposure of his corruption compromised his ability to maintain.

### ***Magna Charta***

Despite his distress, Davison did not give up on the idea of using his paintings to his advantage. It is a testament to how well he had positioned his project to speak to the art world’s anxieties concerning the patronage of history painting that his gallery continued to attract praise in spite of his disgrace. A particularly powerful tribute appeared in the second issue of the *Annals of the Fine Arts*, a periodical launched by the architect James Elmes in 1816.<sup>115</sup> Elmes dedicated the first instalment in a series of “Descriptive and Critical Catalogues of the Most Splendid Collections of Works of Art in Great Britain” to Davison’s gallery, arguing that it most fully embodied the ideal of patriotic patronage: it contained, he noted, “nothing but works of native artists; all but one of which . . . were commissions from that liberal patron of his countrymen.”<sup>116</sup> Elmes’s account of the gallery quotes extensively from the *Descriptive Catalogue* and comments on the arrangement of the pictures in the room, indicating that he had been granted access to the gallery.<sup>117</sup> This suggests that Davison supported the production of the article and remained committed to publicizing his patronage.

Published in October 1816, Elmes’s tribute appeared in the midst of a desperate period for the patron. Despite the fines and loss of business that followed his release from prison in 1811, Davison had initially managed to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. However, in June 1816, his banking business collapsed, plunging him into debt and forcing him to sell his house in St James’s Square, together with most of the contents.<sup>118</sup> Held in April 1817, the house sale featured the bulk of Davison’s art collection, including his genre paintings, his Dutch landscapes, and his two Claudes.<sup>119</sup> Davison refused, however, to sell his historical commissions, suggesting that, even in

his indebted state, he continued to prize their value as symbolic capital over their monetary worth. Copley's *Chatham* was offered for sale but it was bought back for Davison by his friend the second Duke of Northumberland, who also purchased the house.<sup>120</sup> Confusingly, it seems that the merchant's history paintings remained in the dining room in St James's Square and continued to belong to Davison even though the house was inhabited by the second Duke's son, who inherited his father's title shortly after the sale.<sup>121</sup> This bizarre situation encapsulates the widening gulf between Davison's diminishing social position and the dignified self-image that he persisted in attempting to cultivate using his paintings.

Remarkably, Davison added a new painting to the gallery during this period, despite no longer owning the room in which the collection hung. This latest work was Arthur William Devis's *Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, shewing to the Barons of England, in the Abbey of St Edmund at Bury, the Charter of Liberties that had been granted by King Henry I, and on which the Great Charter of King John was subsequently founded* (Fig. 8), often known simply as *Magna Charta*.<sup>122</sup> Davison had commissioned this painting, which cost four hundred guineas, in 1808, after the exposure of his corruption but before his trial, imprisonment, and financial difficulties.<sup>123</sup> However, the work was not completed until late 1817, whereupon, as the *Annals of the Fine Arts* reported, it was installed "among the other British pictures" in the dining room of the house in St James's Square "at present inhabited by his Grace the [third] Duke of Northumberland."<sup>124</sup>



**Figure 8.**

Arthur William Devis, *Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, shewing to the Barons of England, in the Abbey of St Edmund at Bury, the Charter of Liberties that had been granted by King Henry I, and on which the Great Charter of King John was subsequently founded*, 1816-17, oil on canvas, 115 × 150 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Although considerably smaller in size, *Magna Charta* emulates Copley's *Death of Chatham* in composition, featuring a frieze-like band of standing figures. This compositional parallel underscores a thematic link between the two paintings, both of which represent peers of the realm acting as statesmen, albeit in different historical eras. The new painting reprised the focus upon the Medieval period that characterized the first set of paintings commissioned by Davison. <sup>125</sup>

In other ways, however, *Magna Charta* stood apart from the patron's earlier commissions. Whereas they included only a single contemporary likeness—the self-portrait of the artist—it was crammed with present-day portraits. A key was produced to identify the depicted individuals (Fig. 9). It reveals that the naval author James Stanier Clarke, the physician Martin Tupper, and the engraver Thomas Cheesman appeared as clerics attending Archbishop Langton. <sup>126</sup> More significantly, the medieval barons were represented by portraits of modern-day nobles supposed to have been their descendants. <sup>127</sup> Other artists of the time, including James Barry,

incorporated contemporary portraits within history paintings but *Magna Charta* was unique in claiming that the present-day individuals were *descended* from the historical characters in question. <sup>128</sup>



**Figure 9.**

Arthur William Devis, *Magna Charta*, (*Reference-Plate of the Portraits*) from *Catalogue of the Works of British Artists placed in the Gallery of The British Institution, Pall-Mall, for Exhibition and Sale*, 1819 (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1819). Collection National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (200.B.20). Digital image courtesy of National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

By linking contemporary nobles with their ancient families and showing, in the words of the *Literary Gazette*, “*young heads upon old shoulders*”, *Magna Charta* celebrated the core aristocratic values of inherited authority and venerable ancestry. <sup>129</sup> This in turn enabled Davison to make claims for his own status, suggesting that, although he was a self-made man, he had support from the “*old shoulders*” of the British elite. Significantly, most of the peers depicted were his friends. The Duke of Northumberland is positioned at the head of the barons. To his right is Francis Rawdon-Hastings, first Marquess of Hastings, who was a character witness at Davison’s trial in 1809. <sup>130</sup> Beside the zigzag column stands the barrister Thomas Erskine, first Baron Erskine, who defended the merchant during his electoral fraud trial in 1804. <sup>131</sup> The painting as a whole could be viewed acting in Davison’s defence, providing proof that, although condemned by the courts of law, he still carried favour in aristocratic society.

*Magna Charta* was sent to the British Institution’s annual exhibition of contemporary artworks in 1819. <sup>132</sup> Davison had not previously exhibited his commissions in public, apart from allowing Wilkie and Westall to include their paintings in their one-man shows of 1812 and 1814 respectively. <sup>133</sup> However, by 1819, the dining room in St James’s Square had lost its value as a display space: Davison’s society dinners had ceased and visitors to the gallery were presented with the ambiguous spectacle of one man’s paintings in another man’s house. Given his long-standing connection to the British

Institution, it is not surprising that the merchant turned to its exhibition—an annual event frequented by members of the social elite—as an alternative arena in which to promote his patronage.

However, although Davison remained intent upon using his history paintings to enhance his reputation, his debts eventually rendered their sale unavoidable. On 28 June 1823, his eight original commissions, plus the *Death of Chatham* and *Magna Charta*, were put up for auction.<sup>134</sup> After the sale, Davison withdrew to his Northumberland estate, acknowledging in a letter to his son that he had failed to secure the place he desired in metropolitan society: “no one”, he wrote, “was ever more sick of a place than I am of London and [I] care not were I never to see it again.”<sup>135</sup> He died in December 1829, his laconic obituary in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* simply noting the death of “Alexander Davison, esq. of Swarlard Park, co. Northumberland, and formerly of St James’s-square, London.”<sup>136</sup> Yet, to the bitter end, he and his family still sought publicity for the artworks that manifested his grand ambitions. Having failed to sell in 1823, Devis’s *Babington Conspiracy* and *Magna Charta* remained in Davison’s possession. Within four years of his death, large-scale mezzotints of both paintings were published (Fig. 4, Fig. 10), presumably authorized by the patron in the final months of his life or by his son, who inherited the works.<sup>137</sup>



**Figure 10.**

John George Murray after Arthur William Devis, *The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, presenting to the assembled barons the old charter of Henry 1st as the foundation for the Magna Charta in the Abbey of St Edmund at Bury*, 1833, mezzotint and stipple engraving on paper. 65.8 × 93.3 cm. Collection the British Museum (Inv. 1893,0612.88). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

## Conclusion

From the inception of his project through his ignominious downfall to his dying day, Davison's actions evince a steadfast commitment to the idea that history painting could serve as a powerful vehicle for the pursuit of personal advancement. Featuring contemporary portraits embedded within historical compositions and obfuscating the pursuit of private gain with a gloss of patriotism, the merchant's gallery underscores the necessity, asserted by Lippincott, of looking beyond the traditional opposition between history painting and public virtue, on the one hand, and portraiture and private interest, on the other, and considering instead "the 'life' of eighteenth-century paintings first as commodities, then as property".<sup>138</sup> History painting is often characterized as a burden that the British art world perpetually struggled to accommodate, financially and ideologically. However, for certain individuals, it was a useful and surprisingly flexible tool, the uncertainty surrounding the genre generating opportunities as well as alarm. Davison's story may be one of failure, his ambitions ultimately thwarted by his corruption, but it invites us to ask an important question: what could history painting actually do for patrons in this period?

## Footnotes

- 1 Benjamin West to Alexander Davison, 25 July 1806, in [Alexander Davison and others], *Descriptive Catalogue of the Series of Pictures, formed on subjects selected from the History of England, painted by British Artists for Alexander Davison, Esquire, MDCCCVI. In the order in which they are arranged, at his house in St. James's-square, London* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co., 1807), 32.
- 2 Benjamin West served as President of the Royal Academy from 1792 to December 1805 and then from December 1806 until his death in 1820. For West in 1806, see Robert C. Alberts, *Benjamin West: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 306-35.
- 3 For the launch of this project, see Kenneth Garlick, Angus D. Macintyre, and Kathryn Cave (eds), *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, 16 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1978-84), 7: 2799 (28 June 1806), 8: 2833 (25 July 1806), 2835 (9 August 1806). For Davison's collection of rural genre scenes, see [Mr. Farebrother] *The Entire Property of Alexander Davison, Esq. . . . Which will be Sold by Auction, by Mr Farebrother, on the premises, On Monday, 21st of April, 1817, and Fifteen following Days* (London: Smith and Davy, 1817), 44-48.
- 4 Held on 27 June 1806, the lottery was an attempt by Copley to unload a work that he had been attempting unsuccessfully to sell for the last twenty-five years. Garlick et al. (eds), *Farington*, 7: 2799 (28 June 1806).
- 5 Alexander Davison and others, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Series of Pictures, formed on subjects selected from the History of England, painted by British Artists for Alexander Davison, Esquire, MDCCCVI. In the order in which they are arranged, at his house in St. James's-square, London* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co., 1807). Hereafter cited as *Davison Catalogue*. For the completion of the gallery, see Garlick et al. (eds), *Farington*, 8: 3004 (5 April 1807); Martha Babcock Amory, *The Domestic and Artistic Life of John Singleton Copley*, R. A. (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882), 286.
- 6 [Mr. Stanley], *A Catalogue of a Splendid Collection of Pictures, by British Artists, The Subjects taken from English History: Painted expressly for Alexander Davison, Esq. which Will be Sold by Auction, By Mr Stanley, at his Great Room, Maddox-Street, Hanover-Square, On Saturday the 28th of June, 1823, at One O'clock* (London: Gold and Walton, 1823).
- 7 Copley also produced a copy of this painting in 1808, which is now in the Somerset Club, Boston. In the Boston version, Copley has changed the figures in the background and omitted the self-portrait. See Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley in England, 1774-1815* (Cambridge, MA: Published for the National Gallery of Art, Washington, by Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), 445.
- 8 The catalogue is extremely rare and only two copies are presently known to exist: one is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the other is in the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.
- 9 For Davison's life and wide varied business interests, see Martin Downer, *Nelson's Purse: The Mystery of Lord Nelson's Lost Treasures* (London: Corgi Books, 2005; original ed., 2004); H. T. Dickinson, "Davison, Alexander (1750-1829)," in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), online ed., January 2016, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/7298; and Leslie W. Hepple, "Nelson's Obelisk: Alexander Davison, Lord Nelson and the Northumberland Landscape," *Archaeologia Aeliana* 34 (2005): 129-50.
- 10 Holger Hoock, "'Struggling against a Vulgar Prejudice': Patriotism and the Collecting of British Art at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 3 (July 2010): 566-91, esp. 580-84. Very brief mentions of Davison's gallery also occur in Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class: Money and the Making of Cultural Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 46; and Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2013), 165.
- 11 Prince Hoare, "Galleries of English Paintings," *The Artist* 1, no. 21 (1807): 3-14; Stephen Deuchar, *Paintings, Politics and Porter: Samuel Whitbread II (1764-1815) and British Art* (London: Whitbread & Co., 1984); Selby Whittingham, "A Most Liberal Parton: Sir John Fleming Leicester, Bart., 1st Baron de Tabley, 1762-1827," *Turner Studies* 6, no. 2 (1986): 24-36; Peter Cannon-Brookes (ed.), *Paintings from Tabley: An Exhibition of Paintings from Tabley House* (London: Heim Gallery, 1989).
- 12 Hoock, "'Struggling against a Vulgar Prejudice,'" 572. For the distinction between collecting and patronage in this period, see Deuchar, *Paintings, Politics and Porter*, 11-12.
- 13 Hoock, "'Struggling against a Vulgar Prejudice,'" 572.
- 14 Hoock, "'Struggling against a Vulgar Prejudice,'" 588 and 590.
- 15 Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), 56-96.
- 16 See, for example, Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art 1750-1810* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2006); Kay Dian Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 9-32; John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: The Body of the Public* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1986); David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), esp. 157-213; Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*.
- 17 Louise Lippincott, "Expanding on Portraiture: The Market, the Public, and the Hierarchy of Genres in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1995), 75.

- 18 For Davison's family background and business career, see Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 59–132, and Hepple, "Nelson's Obelisk", 132–33.
- 19 Davison's country estate was Swarland House, near Felton in Northumberland. See Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 128–31 and 166–7, and Hepple, "Nelson's Obelisk", 133.
- 20 Downer's *Nelson's Purse* provides a detailed account of the friendship between Davison and Nelson, which began in 1782 when Nelson was a young captain stationed in Quebec. See also James Saunders, "A Portrait of Alexander Davison and his Friendship with Nelson," *The Nelson Dispatch* 8, no. 2 (2003): 81–105, and Hepple, "Nelson's Obelisk," 134–35.
- 21 Nicholas Penny, "'Amor Publicus Posuit': Monuments for the People and of the People," *The Burlington Magazine* 129, no. 1017 (Dec. 1987): 795–96. For the Nile medal, see J. G. Pollard, "Matthew Boulton and Conrad Heinrich Küchler," *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th ser., 10 (1970): 284–86, no. 15. In the naval monument project, Davison was in charge of raising funds for the project through a public subscription scheme; see Garlick et al. (eds), *Farington*, 4: 1266 (12 Aug. 1799). For the Loyal Britons, see Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 311–16.
- 22 "Chronicle," *The Annual Register* 46 (1804): 383. See also Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 266–73, 276–80, and 325–8, and Hepple, "Nelson's Obelisk," 137–8.
- 23 The scandal caused George III to reject Nelson's nomination of Davison as his proxy for his installation as a Knight of the Bath, a role that would have involved the award of a knighthood. See Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 295.
- 24 For the cultural and artistic geography of Pall Mall and the surrounding area, see Rosie Dias, "'A World of Pictures': Pall Mall and the Topography of Display, 1780–99," in Miles Ogborn and Charles W. J. Withers (eds), *Georgian Geographies: Essays on Space, Place and Landscape in the Eighteenth Century*, 92–110 (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2004).
- 25 *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 17 Dec. 1808. For Davison's reputation for hosting "fashionable parties", see also *Morning Post*, 14 Feb. 1801.
- 26 For the Cleveland House collection, which was begun by Francis Egerton, third Duke of Bridgewater, see Peter Humfrey, "The 3rd Duke of Bridgewater as a Collector of Old Master Paintings," *Journal of the History of Collections* 27, no. 2 (2015): 211–25; and Peter Humfrey, "The Stafford Gallery at Cleveland House and the 2nd Marquess of Stafford as a Collector," *Journal of the History of Collections* 28, no. 1 (2016): 43–55. For townhouse displays in this period, see Giles Waterfield, "The Town House as Gallery of Art," *London Journal* 20, no. 1 (1995): 47–66.
- 27 For Davison's Old Master collection, see [Farebrother,] *Entire Property*, 44–48.
- 28 Douglas Fordham, "George Stubbs's Zoon Politikon," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 1 (2010): 3–23; Nicholas Penny, "Lord Rockingham's Sculpture Collection and 'The Judgement of Paris' by Nollekens," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 19 (1991): 5–34; H. F. Constantine, "Lord Rockingham and Stubbs: Some New Documents," *The Burlington Magazine* 95, no. 604 (1953): 236–39. Rockingham may be the "gentleman of rank" whom John Gwynn described in 1766 as having "appropriated a room in his house for the reception of English merit"; see John Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved* (London: Printed for the Author, 1766), 56.
- 29 Fordham, "George Stubbs's Zoon Politikon", 10.
- 30 Douglas Fordham suggests that at least two of the pictures—Stubbs's *Lion Attacking a Horse* and *Lion Attacking a Stag*—held specific political meanings for Rockingham and his associates. Fordham, "George Stubbs's Zoon Politikon," 15–23.
- 31 *Morning Herald*, 18 June 1805. For Leicester's Hill Street gallery, see Dongho Chun, "Public Display, Private Glory: Sir John Fleming Leicester's Gallery of British Art in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Journal of the History of Collections* 13, no. 2 (2001): 175–89; and Cannon-Brookes (ed.), *Paintings from Tabley*, 14–15.
- 32 Garlick et al. (eds), *Farington*, 8: 2803 (2 July 1806).
- 33 One exception was the banker Thomas Hope, who commissioned two history paintings of mythological subjects from Richard Westall in 1804 and a further three from Benjamin West in the following year. David Watkin, *Thomas Hope, 1769–1831, and the Neo-Classical Idea* (London: John Murray, 1968), 44; Jeannie Chapel, "Thomas Hope's Contemporary Picture Collection," in David Watkin and Philip Hewat-Jaboor (eds), *Thomas Hope: Regency Designer* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 155.
- 34 Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 19; Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 93 and 192–203, nos. 56, 58, 61, 64, 67, 72, 74. George III also commissioned West to produce thirty-six works on the theme of "the progress of revealed religion" but only twenty-eight of these were executed before the king abruptly terminated the project in 1801.
- 35 Martin Myrone, "The Sublime as Spectacle: The Transformation of Ideal Art at Somerset House," in David H. Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780–1836* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery, 2001), 77–91; Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 104–105.
- 36 Kaylin Haverstock Weber, "The Studio and Art Collection of the 'American Raphael': Benjamin West, P.R.A. (1738–1820)," (PhD diss., Univ. of Glasgow, 2013); Alberts, *Benjamin West*, 161–78.
- 37 Famous examples include Joshua Reynolds's house in Leicester Fields and Richard and Maria Cosway's residence in Stratford Place. See Richard Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Painter in Society* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1996), 103–104; and Stephen Lloyd, "The Cosway Inventory of 1820: Listing Unpaid Commissions and the Contents of 20 Stratford Place, Oxford Street, London," *The Walpole Society* 66 (2004): 163–217.

- 38 For contemporary accounts of visiting West's studio, see Sophie von la Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786: being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche*, eds. Clare Williams and G. M. Trevelyan (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), 152-53; and Samuel I. Prime, *The Life of S. F. B. Morse* (New York: Appleton, 1875), 35-36.
- 39 This was intended by West as a protest against his perceived ill-treatment by the Academy, having been forced to resign as its president the previous December. Von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 220-22, no. 108; Garlick et al. (eds.), *Farington*, 7: 2757 (11 May 1806).
- 40 *La Belle Assemblée*, 1 May 1806; *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 4 June 1806; Garlick et al. (eds.), *Farington*, 8: 2802 (2 July 1806), 2806 (8 July 1806).
- 41 Weber, "The Studio and Art Collection of the 'American Raphael,'" 1.
- 42 For the Shakespeare Gallery, see Sven H. A. Bruntjen, *John Boydell, 1719-1804: A Study of Art Patronage and Publishing in Georgian London* (New York: Garland, 1985), 69-158; and Rosie Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness: John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and the Formation of a National Aesthetic* (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale Univ. Press, 2013). For the Historic Gallery, see Robert Bowyer, *General Design for a Complete History of England, Superbly Ornamented* (London: R. Bowyer, 1792); and T. S. R. Boase, "Macklin and Bowyer," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26, no. 1/2 (1963): 169-77.
- 43 They also collected subscriptions for new, illustrated editions of their chosen texts and Bowyer charged an admission fee at his exhibition rooms.
- 44 For the collapse of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, see *Morning Chronicle*, 15 Feb. 1804.
- 45 For Bowyer's application to Parliament, see "Proceedings in . . . Parliament," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 75, no. 1 (1805): 361; and *London Gazette*, 9 March 1805. For the dispersal of the Historic Gallery in 1807, see John Ashton, *A History of English Lotteries* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1893), 139-43.
- 46 For Macklin's Poets' Gallery, see Boase, "Macklin and Bowyer," 148-69.
- 47 Thomas Macklin's Poets' Gallery was also situated on Pall Mall. See Dias, "'A World of Pictures'", 94-5; and Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness*, 43-8.
- 48 See *Morning Chronicle*, 24 Dec. 1805; and *The Times*, 11 Jan. 1806.
- 49 Martin Archer Shee, *Rhymes on Art; or, The Remonstrance of A Painter: In Two Parts. With Notes, and a Preface, including Strictures on the State of the Arts, Criticism, Patronage, and Public Taste*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for John Murray and John Harding, 1805), 94. See also Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, 56-96.
- 50 John Boydell, *A Catalogue of the Pictures in the Shakspeare [sic] Gallery, Pall-Mall* (London: J. Boydell, 1789), v; Robert Bowyer, *Elucidation of Mr Bowyer's Plan for a Magnificent Edition of Hume's History of England, with a Continuation by G. Gregory, D. D. &c.* (London: R. Bowyer, 1795), 8-9. See also Lippincott, "Expanding on Portraiture," 79.
- 51 "Maecenas" is Gaius Maecenas, Roman statesman and patron of Horace and Virgil. The description of Boydell as the "commercial Maecenas" is attributed to the Prince of Wales, though the comment is thought to have been written for him by Edmund Burke and approved by Joshua Reynolds, see *London Chronicle*, 25-28 April 1789; and Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, 34. For Boydell's comments, see Boydell, *Catalogue*, vi.
- 52 Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, 56-96.
- 53 Shee, *Rhymes on Art*, xxi, lvii.
- 54 Shee, *Rhymes on Art*, lvii.
- 55 Prince Hoare, *An Inquiry into the Requisite Cultivation and Present State of the Arts of Design in England* (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1806), 230-31.
- 56 [British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts,] *An Account of the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, containing a Copy of the By Laws, a List of the Subscribers, together with Extracts from the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committees, and General Meetings* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co., 1805); Peter Fullerton, "Patronage and Pedagogy: The British Institution in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Art History* 5, no. 1 (March 1982): 59-72; Ann Pullan, "Public Goods or Private Interests?: The British Institution in the Early Nineteenth Century," in Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughan (eds), *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1998), 27-40.
- 57 [British Institution,] *Account*, 3.
- 58 [British Institution,] *Account*, 23.
- 59 Shee, *Rhymes on Art*, xlv. See also Hoare, *Inquiry*, 232; and *Morning Post*, 24 March 1806.
- 60 For the Institution's governorships, see [British Institution,] *Account*, 5.
- 61 *The Artist* 1, no. 5 (1807): 15. See also Hoare, "Galleries of English Paintings," 3.
- 62 *The Examiner*, 22 May 1808.
- 63 Hope opened his gallery to the public in 1804, and Stafford in 1806. See Waterfield, "The Town House as Gallery of Art," 56-7, and Chapel, "Thomas Hope's Contemporary Picture Collection," 163.
- 64 *Morning Post*, 25 Feb. 1806.

- 65 My thanks to Martyn Downer for his thoughts on the possible location of the gallery. The house in St James's Square is now number 11, rather than number 9, as it was in the early nineteenth century. For the property, see "St. James's Square: Nos 9, 10 & 11," in F. H. W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London: Volumes 29 and 30, St James Westminster, Part 1* (London: London County Council, 1960), 118-34. British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vols29-30/pt1/pp118-134>.
- 66 The following account is based upon James Elmes, "*Descriptive and Critical Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures painted by British Artists, from Subjects selected from the History of Great Britain, for, and in the possession of, Alexander Davison, Esq.*" *Annals of the Fine Arts* 1, no. 2 (1816): 245; [Farebrother,] *Entire Property*, 46; and *Davison Catalogue*, [ii].
- 67 Elmes, "*Descriptive and Critical Catalogue*," 245.
- 68 A hand-written note on the title page of the Bodleian copy of the catalogue states that it was "Printed for private distribution". The catalogue's limited circulation is also suggested by the fact that copies are now extremely rare.
- 69 See, for example, Robert Bowyer, *Exhibition of Pictures, Painted for Bowyer's Magnificent Edition of the History of England* (London: R. Bowyer, 1793).
- 70 For a descriptive catalogue that focused upon British artworks, see George Perry, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Pictures in the Collection of the Marquis of Stafford in London* (London: J. Walker, 1807). For the use of the term "descriptive catalogue" in this period, see Martin Myrone, "Introduction: *The Great Style of Art Restored*," in Martin Myrone (ed.), *Seen in My Visions: A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures*, by William Blake (London: Tate, 2009), 20-2.
- 71 Daniel Daulby, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Works of Rembrandt* (Liverpool: Printed by J. M'Creery, 1796); Noel Desenfans, *A Descriptive Catalogue (with remarks and anecdotes never before published in English) of some Pictures, of the Different Schools, Purchased, For His Majesty, the Late King of Poland, Which will be exhibited early in 1802, At the Great Room, no. 3, in Berners-street* (London: Exton, 1802).
- 72 Valentine Green and Rupert Green, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures, from the Dusseldorf Gallery, exhibited at the Great Room, Spring-Gardens, London* (London: Printed by H. Reynell, 1793), 3.
- 73 *Davison Catalogue*, [i].
- 74 Wilkie's debut exhibit at the Royal Academy was *The Village Politicians*, a Scottish tavern scene. See Nicholas Tromans, *David Wilkie: The People's Painter* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007), 8; and David H. Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 7-33.
- 75 Hepple, "Nelson's Obelisk," 129-50.
- 76 Garlick et al. (eds.), *Farington*, 8: 2833 (25 July 1806).
- 77 *Davison Catalogue*, [ii].
- 78 *Davison Catalogue*, [ii].
- 79 Northcote appears to have submitted at least three choices: his letter begins with the assertion that, having already sent "my list of subjects for painting", which is not included in the catalogue, he would like to add another subject for the patron's consideration. See *Davison Catalogue*, 39.
- 80 Copley names his subject only in a postscript. See *Davison Catalogue*, 47.
- 81 Garlick et al. (eds.), *Farington*, 8: 2835 (9 Aug. 1806).
- 82 *Davison Catalogue*, [ii]. In the catalogue entries, the painters identified the figures within their respective compositions which bore their likenesses.
- 83 The Medici collection of self-portraits was frequently discussed in travel guides in this period, for example, Peter Beckford, *Familiar Letters from Italy, to a Friend in England*, 2 vols. (Salisbury: J. Easton, 1805), 1: 169-70; Thomas Martyn, *The Gentleman's Guide in his Tour through Italy: With a Correct Map, and Directions for Travelling in that Country* (London: Printed for, and sold by, G. Kearsley, 1787), 338.
- 84 For Barry's self-portrait as Timanthes, see Anon., *A Description of the Series of Pictures Painted by James Barry, Esq. and Preserved in the Great Room of the Society Instituted at London, for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* (London: Printed by W. and C. Spilsbury, 1800), 16.
- 85 The king's instruction to West was reported in the press and mentioned in many Windsor guidebooks. See *Public Advertiser*, 3 Aug. 1787; and John Britton and others, *The Beauties of England and Wales; or, Delineations, Topographical, Historical and Descriptive, of Each County*, 18 vols. (London: Vernor and Hood, 1801-15), 1: 223.
- 86 See David Hume, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (London: Robert Bowyer, 1806). Westall's subject—Mary, Queen of Scots, fleeing by boat after her defeat at the Battle of Langside—was not included in Bowyer's *History* but it was very similar to another episode from the life of the Scottish queen—her escape from Lochleven Castle in a fishing boat—which was painted for the publisher by Robert Smirke.
- 87 A. D. Harvey, "Alfred in the Neatherd's Cottage: History Painting and Epic Poetry in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Philology Quarterly* 86, nos. 1-2 (2007), 143-62. See also Simon Keynes, "The Cult of King Alfred the Great," *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999): 225-356; and Oliver Cox, "'Rule, Britannia!': King Alfred the Great and the Creation of a National Hero in England and America, 1640-1800," (DPhil diss., Univ. of Oxford, 2014), I am grateful to the author for allowing me access to this work.
- 88 *Davison Catalogue*, 39.

- 89 Davison exploited his relationship with the duke to enhance his own social status. Most notably, he made Northumberland godfather to his first-born son in 1788, and named the boy Hugh Percy Davison in his honour. See the Davison family papers in the British Library, Add. MS 79200/109.
- 90 Devis wrote in his catalogue entry that "the picture . . . is supported by the Artist himself"; see *Davison Catalogue*, 21. Landseer recorded that Devis had represented himself "in the . . . character of Babington's portrait painter"; see John Landseer, *A Short Account of the Detection of Babington's Conspiracy against Queen Elizabeth intended to accompany Mr John Bromley's mezzotint engraving of that subject after a picture by Arthur William Devis, Esq. in the collection of Colonel Davison* (London: Bowyer and Parkes, 1830), quoted in Sydney Herbert Pavière, *The Devis Family of Painters* (Leigh-on-Sea: F. Lewis, 1950), 108.
- 91 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 147. See also Girouard, *Return to Camelot*, 19-24; Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 34-37.
- 92 Hoock, "'Struggling Against a Vulgar Prejudice,'" 583-84.
- 93 David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688 in Eight Volumes, A New Edition, with the Author's Corrections and Improvements*, 8 vols. (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1778), 4: 366-69, 5: 319-20. See also, Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 65-71; Cynthia E. Roman, "Robert Bowyer's Historic Gallery and the Feminization of the 'Nation,'" in Dana Arnold (ed.), *Cultural Identities and the Aesthetics of Britishness* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2004), 21-26.
- 94 Hume, *The History of England*, 5: 448-49.
- 95 *Davison Catalogue*, 3-4.
- 96 "Mrs Davison's fashionable parties are expected to commence in the course of a fortnight." *Morning Post*, 14 Feb. 1801.
- 97 *Davison Catalogue*, [ii].
- 98 Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness*, 77-8; William Vaughan, "The Englishness of British Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 11-23.
- 99 James Barry, *A Letter to the Dilettanti Society, Respecting The Obtention of certain Matters essentially necessary for the Improvement of Public Taste, and for accomplishing the original Views of the Royal Academy of Great Britain* (London: J. Walker, 1798), 34-5.
- 100 *Morning Chronicle*, 4 May 1781; *Davison Catalogue*, 26. See also Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 275-91.
- 101 Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 288; Garlick et al. (eds), *Farington*, 7: 2721 (16 April 1806), 2788 (18 June 1806), 2799 (28 June 1806).
- 102 *Davison Catalogue*, 24.
- 103 *Davison Catalogue*, 39 and 44.
- 104 Deuchar, *Painting, Politics and Porter*, 22. For example, writing to Sir John Leicester in 1808, West suggested that the landowner's support for British art entitled him "to the first claim of its Patronage in this country", see Benjamin West to Sir John Leicester, 25 March 1808, in Douglas Hall, "The Tabley House Papers," *The Walpole Society* 38 (1960-62): 100, no. 217.
- 105 *Davison Catalogue*, 49.
- 106 J. Drinkwater, "The Third Report of the Commissioners of Military Enquiry. Appointed by ACT of 45 GEO. III. Cap. 47. Office of the Barrack Master General. Stores and Supplies. Order to be printed 22d December 1806," *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online*.
- 107 "The whole Proceedings, before the Court of the King's-Bench, in the Case of Alexander Davison, Esq., for defrauding his Majesty of various Sums of Money, by means of false and fraudulent Vouches: 49 George III. A. D. 1808-9," in *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and other Crimes and Misdemeanours from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, comp. T. B. Howell and Thomas Jones Howell, 33 vols (London: Printed by T. C. Hansard, 1809-26), 31: 99-250. Davison publicly protested his innocence but his efforts were in vain; see Alexander Davison, *Observations on the Third Report of the Commissioners of Military Enquiry* (London: Henry Reynell, 1807); and Alexander Davison, *Syphax's letters on the trial by jury, illustrated in the case of Alexander Davison, Esq., as they recently appeared in the British Guardian* (London: Chapple, 1809).
- 108 *Morning Post*, 3 April 1807. For the details of Davison's coal fraud, see Drinkwater, "Third Report," 14-28.
- 109 Charles Williams usually signed himself "Ansell" in this period and this pseudonym has been noted in pencil on the British Museum copy of the print. Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, 10 vols (London: British Museum, 1870-1952), 8: 414-15, no. 10538.
- 110 Drinkwater, "Third Report," 18-20.
- 111 For the meaning of "snob" in the early nineteenth century, see *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, June 2017), s.v. "snob," <http://www.oed.com/>.
- 112 The sword may refer specifically to the "Turkish scimitar" that Nelson bequeathed to Davison in his will. See *Morning Post*, 26 Dec. 1805; and Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 45.
- 113 *The Times*, 4 Feb. 1807.

- 114 *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 31 Jan. 1807.
- 115 James Elmes, "Descriptive and Critical Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures painted by British Artists, from Subjects selected from the History of Great Britain, for, and in the possession of, Alexander Davison, Esq." *Annals of the Fine Arts* 1, no. 2 (1816): iii-iv, 242-54.
- 116 Elmes, "Descriptive and Critical Catalogue," iii-iv.
- 117 Elmes suggested that the inferior quality of Copley's *Lady Jane Grey* was unfavourably highlighted by its hanging opposite the same artist's "excellent" *Death of Chatham*. Elmes, "Descriptive and Critical Catalogue," 250.
- 118 For the collapse of Davison's bank—Davison, Noel, Templer, Middleton & Wedgwood of Pall Mall—see Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 448-51; and F. G. Hilton Price, *A Handbook of London Bankers: With Some Account of their Predecessors, the Early Goldsmiths* (London: Catto & Windus, 1876), 47.
- 119 [Farebrother], *Entire Property*, 45-48.
- 120 *Morning Chronicle*, 12 April 1817; Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 453. See also Denys Mostyn Forrest, *St James's Square: People, Houses, Happenings* (London: Quiller Press, 1986), 99.
- 121 "Works in Hand," *Annals of the Fine Arts* 2, no. 5 (1817): 289. The second Duke of Northumberland died on 10 July 1817.
- 122 Pavière, *Devis Family*, 132, no. 114; Stephen Whittle, *Arthur William Devis, 1762-1822* (Preston: Harris Museum & Art Gallery, 2000), 22, 59, no. 34.
- 123 *The Examiner*, 1 May 1808. For the cost of the commission, see *The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Politics, etc.*, 6 March 1819.
- 124 "Works in Hand," *Annals of the Fine Arts* 2, no. 5 (1817): 289. The *Annals* had reported in October the previous year that Devis was at work on the painting: "Works in Hand," *Annals of the Fine Arts* 1, no. 2 (1816): 258. It is difficult to see where exactly *Magna Charta* would have fitted within the carefully organized dining room hang. It is the same size as Wilkie's *Alfred*, suggesting that it may have been intended to replace that painting over the door. I am grateful to Martyn Downer for ascertaining the dimensions of the work for me.
- 125 Devis's source for the subject was Hume. See Hume, *The History of England*, 2: 79.
- 126 While Clarke was well known to Davison, Tupper and Cheesman were friends of the artist and do not appear to have had any connection to the patron, suggesting that Devis may have been allowed some creative leeway in whom he included. Davison gave substantial support to Clarke's biography of Nelson; see James Stanier Clarke and John McArthur, *The Life of Admiral Lord Nelson, K. B. from his Lordship's Manuscripts*, 2 vols (London: Printed by T. Bensley for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1809). For Devis's friendships with Tupper and Cheesman, see Sydney Herbert Pavière, "Biographical Notes on the Devis Family of Painters," *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 25 (1936-37): 116, 163.
- 127 Devis's key gives both the name of the Medieval baron (above) and the modern-day noble (below). In 1822, presumably in response to a commission from Davison, Thomas Willement, "Heraldic Artist to the King", produced a manuscript "to explain in what way the affinity [between the Medieval barons and the living nobles] exists; and to trace the authorities on which such armorial bearings have been given." See Thomas Willement, "Explanation of a picture painted by the late Arthur William Devis for Alexander Davison Esqr. representing Stephen Langton Archbishop of Canterbury shewing to the Barons of England in the Abbey Church of Saint Edmund at Bury the charter of liberties that had been granted by King Henry the 1st and on which the Great Charter of King John was subsequently founded," Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Yale Center for British Art, D497.D48 W5 1822.
- 128 James Barry, *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture: A Description of the Paintings by James Barry in the Lecture Hall or "Great Room" of the RSA in London written by the Artist*, ed. David G. C. Allan (London: Calder Walker Associates, 2005), 55 and 62.
- 129 *The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Politics, etc.*, 13 March 1819.
- 130 For Hastings's role in Davison's trial, see "The Whole Proceedings", 186-88; and Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 438.
- 131 Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 327.
- 132 [British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts,] *Catalogue of the Works of British Artists placed in the Gallery of The British Institution, Pall-Mall, for Exhibition and Sale. 1819.* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co., 1819), 14, no. 92.
- 133 For Wilkie's exhibition in 1812, see Allan Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie; With His Journals, Tours, and Critical Remarks on Works of Art; and A Selection from his Correspondence*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1843), 1: 351-52. For Westall's exhibition in 1814, see Richard Westall, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of a Selection of Works of Richard Westall, R. A. including Two Hundred and Forty Pictures and Drawings, which have never before been exhibited* (London: Joyce Gold, 1814), 3, no. 7.
- 134 [Mr. Stanley], *A Catalogue of a Splendid Collection of Pictures, by British Artists, The Subjects taken from English History: Painted expressly for Alexander Davison, Esq. which Will be Sold by Auction, By Mr Stanley, at his Great Room, Maddox-Street, Hanover-Square, On Saturday the 28th of June, 1823, at One O'clock* (London: Gold and Walton, 1823). For the results of the auction, see "Mr Alexander Davison's Pictures," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 93, no. 2 (1823): 64-65, and Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 453.
- 135 Alexander Davison to William Davison, June 1823, in Downer, *Nelson's Purse*, 453.
- 136 "Deaths," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 100, no. 1 (1830): 93.

- 137 *The Conspiracy of Babington* was published on 1 March 1830, and *Magna Charta* was published on 1 July 1833, accompanied by a key identifying the portraits. For these prints, see Pavière, *Devis Family*, 121, 132, nos. 11, 114. Although *The Conspiracy of Babington* has been lost, the painting of *Magna Charta* remains in the possession of Davison's descendants; my thanks to Martyn Downer for this information.
- 138 Lippincott, "Expanding on Portraiture", 75.

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