

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Summerson, Sir John Newenham (1904–1992), *museum curator and architectural historian*

by Mark Girouard

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Summerson, Sir John Newenham (1904–1992), museum curator and architectural historian, was born at Barnstead, Coniscliffe Road, Darlington, co. Durham, on 25 November 1904, the only surviving child of Samuel James Summerson (*d.* 1907) and Dorothea Worth Newenham (*d.* 1963), and the grandson of Thomas Summerson, the self-made founder of a railway works in Darlington. His mother belonged to a branch of an Anglo-Irish family of some distinction. His father, who worked in the family firm, died in 1907. His widow concentrated a small private income and all her love on her son.

After a lonely childhood moving with his mother round England and the continent Summerson spent contented years at a preparatory school at Riber Castle, near Matlock, the crazy architecture of which immediately appealed to him. At Harrow School from 1918 he was moderately happy, achieved little distinction in work or games, but became an organist of outstanding quality. Organs led to an interest in church architecture, and when P. C. Buck, the school's distinguished music master, dissuaded him from embarking on the limited life of a professional organist, he chose instead to train as an architect. In 1922 he enrolled in the Bartlett School at University College, London. Over the next eleven years it may have seemed that he had taken a wrong turning. He made little mark at the Bartlett, at a succession of architect's offices, or teaching at the College of Art in Edinburgh in 1929–30. He could not bring himself to hurt his mother by ceasing to live with her. A feeling of failure led, as he put it, to 'grinding and consuming unhappiness' (Summerson, typescript autobiography, chap. 5, p. 10). On the other hand in these years he made many friends, had the first of many affairs, travelled extensively in Europe visiting buildings old and new, became a campaigning member of the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) Group, and began to make a mark as an architectural journalist.

In 1934 Summerson steeled himself to the necessary but painful break with his mother. Meanwhile 10s. spent in 1933 on a folder of drawings from the bargain bin of a Bloomsbury shop had at last set him on the road to success. Identification of the drawings as by John Nash and Humphry Repton encouraged him to embark on a biography of Nash. It was published in 1935 and was outstandingly successful. The declaration of war put work on a projected book on Georgian London to one side, while he concentrated his energies on founding what became the National Buildings Record, originally set up to record buildings threatened by bombardment. He became assistant director early in 1941. In 1945 he was appointed curator of Sir John Soane's Museum, and remained there until 1984. During his long curatorship he changed an agreeable, if largely inaccessible, curiosity into a small museum of international repute. Its inadequate private endowment was replaced by public funding, though it preserved independence

under its own trustees, and it expanded into the adjacent no. 12, also designed by Soane, which was purchased in 1968. Summerson's conducted tour of the museum, open to all comers every Saturday afternoon, became famous. His first years at the museum saw the publication of a book of essays, *Heavenly Mansions* (1949), and of his two most important books: *Georgian London*, finally published in 1946, and *Architecture in Britain, 1550–1850* (1953). Both went into numerous revised editions.

Summerson was knighted in 1958, received the Royal Institute of British Architects royal gold medal in 1976, and was created a Companion of Honour in 1987. He sat with distinction on many committees and public bodies. As chairman of the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design he presided over a controversial reduction in the number and composition of art schools. Although he was an effective advocate of listing and state support for historic buildings, his commitment to contemporary architecture prevented him from ever becoming an out-and-out conservationist. He caused dismay in some quarters by supporting a new building in Dublin in 1961, and new designs by Mies van de Rohe and James Stirling in the City of London in 1984 and 1988, as of higher quality than the Georgian and Victorian buildings which they would replace. But after the mid-1950s he wrote little about contemporary architecture; a degree of disillusionment had set in. His posthumous reputation must rest less on his career as a public man or on his advocacy of the modern movement than on his brilliance as an architectural historian.

Summerson led the way in changing English architectural history from an agreeable recreation for practising architects to a serious academic discipline. Although he had no academic training, he acquired with impressive ease the skills of a professional historian. He was influenced by the continental art and architectural historians who had taken refuge in England, but was an innovator, not a disciple. *Georgian London* broke new ground in analysing the influence of landownership and building regulations on the architecture of a great city. *Architecture in Britain, 1550–1850* laid the foundations on which all subsequent architectural historians have built. Summerson saw 'curiosity' as his driving impulse; he had the gift of asking worthwhile and sometimes unexpected questions, finding convincing answers, and embodying them in prose of outstanding ease and distinction, enriched by the occasional memorable phrase.

Although Summerson produced no subsequent books of the stature of his two masterpieces, a steady output of articles, short books, reviews, lectures, and programmes on radio and television, all marked with the same distinction of thought and form, maintained his position at the head of his profession. In essays collected in *The Unromantic Castle* (1990) he documented the previously amorphous figure of John Thorpe, brilliantly reconstructed Wren's second design for St Paul's Cathedral, established the villa as one of the dominant types in Georgian architecture, and illuminated aspects of Soane and the Victorians. His short *The Classical Language of Architecture* (1964), written for a general readership, deservedly went into many editions and translations. His essay on

Thorpe led to a catalogue of his drawings, published as volume 40 of the Walpole Society in 1966. Two meticulously researched volumes (1976, 1982) covering the period 1485–1660 in the *History of the King's Works* took up perhaps too much of his time. *The Life and Work of John Nash Architect* (1980) was a virtual rewriting of his first book. An unfinished and unpublished autobiography tails off after an illuminating account of his first forty years.

Tall, elegant, assured, courteous, and outstandingly handsome, Summerson was by no means as aloof or unapproachable as he could seem on first contact. To serious scholars he was unfailingly helpful. When relaxing with congenial friends he could be gay and delightful company. He had a soft spot for rakes and eccentrics, and many friends among artists, writers, and creative people. On 31 March 1938 he married Elizabeth Alison, daughter of H. R. Hepworth; she had trained as a dancer and was the sister of Barbara Hepworth, the sculptor. They had triplet sons, born in 1946. In the 1970s a long affair with the artist Nancy Culliford Spender (1909–2001), widow of Michael Spender and former wife of William Coldstream, nearly destroyed his marriage. He broke off the relationship, and lived peacefully with his wife until her death in 1991. By then he was in the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease. He died on 10 November 1992 at 1 Eton Villas, the house near Chalk Farm into which he and his family had moved in 1949.

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Sources RIBA BAL, Summerson MSS [incl. typescript of unpublished autobiography] · H. Colvin, 'John Newenham Summerson, 1904–92', *PBA*, 90 (1996), 467–95 · *The Times* (12 Nov 1992) · *The Independent* (13 Nov 1992) · *The Independent* (17 Nov 1992) · *The Independent* (12 Dec 1992) · Burke, *Peerage* · WWW · personal knowledge (2004) · private information (2004) · b. cert. · d. cert.

Archives Durham RO, family corresp. and papers · RIBA, corresp., literary and research papers

Likenesses S. Hyde, photograph, 1984, NPG [see *illus.*] · N. Sharp, portrait, Sir John Soane's Museum, London · photograph, repro. in *The Times*

Wealth at death £1,428,688: probate, 4 March 1993, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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Mark Girouard, 'Summerson, Sir John Newenham (1904–1992)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47466, accessed 14 Sept 2011]

Sir John Newenham Summerson (1904–1992): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/47466