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OLIVER MILLAR

Weesop: flesh on a skeleton*

THE figure of Jan or John Weesop casts the faintest of shadows across the field of painting in England in the early Stuart period. Little has been done to correct the legend transmitted to George Vertue by 'Sykes' (presumably the painter William Sykes) and recorded in a notebook containing information assembled by Vertue between 1713 and 1721.[1] Sykes apparently told Vertue that a painter called Wesop or Weesep had come to England in 1641, 'in the time of Vandyke' and had remained until 1649, when he stated that he would never stay in a country which had executed its king 'in the face of all the world & was not asham'd of the Action'. Sykes also stated that many pictures painted by Weesop 'pass for Vandyke' and that he had lived under the same roof as the father of the painter W. Wilson. In February 1723 Vertue found in the Register of Burials in the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields the name of John Weesop whose burial 'at Westminster' was recorded in 1652.[2]

On the basis of a small number of contemporary and near-contemporary documentary references, a little information can be provided on the existence of a man named 'Weesop' and his family in London at this period. Early inventory references also enable us to attach Weesop's name confidently to four pictures around which it is possible to assemble a small group of portraits that are palpably by one hand, though it is not a hand that would 'pass for Van Dyke'. Taken as a whole this group of works shows Weesop to have been a painter of some distinction and marked individuality.

Several references to this name can be found in the Rate Books for the parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields. In 1651 'Mr. Wessopp' and a variant, 'Mr. Wisop', are recorded in Bridges Street, Covent Garden. On 7th January the following year 'Mr John Weesop' appears in St Martin's Lane, on the west side. 'Mr Weesop' was apparently still there in 1653, while in that same year, probably later, 'Mrs Weesop' was living in Duke's Yard nearby. She was still there when rates for repair of highways were collected on 16th May 1654; she was still there later in the year, but in 1655 she appears in St Martin's Lane.[3] This group of references is not easy to reconcile with Sykes's statement that Weesop left England in 1649, but this had already been thrown into question by Vertue's note of the burial of John Weesop in London in 1652, which is also slightly inconsistent with the rate-book evidence.

The basis for the construction of an *œuvre* for Weesop rests at the present time on a group of four pictures to which there are references in two early documents: the 'Estimate' of the pictures at Ham House, drawn up c.1679,[4] and the list, in the archives at Boughton House (a reference kindly brought to

37. *Lady Elizabeth Murray, Lady Tollemache and subsequently Countess of Dysart and Duchess of Lauderdale*, by J. Weesop. 124.5 by 99.1 cm. (The Tollemache Collection, Ham House, The National Trust).

my attention by Malcolm Rogers), of pictures lent in 1730 by the 3rd Earl of Cardigan to his son Lord Brudenell. These four portraits are clearly by the same hand.

In the 'Estimate' of the pictures at Ham, no.179 is listed as 'The Dutchess of Lauderdale, of Wesop', valued at £5 (portraits by Lely of the same size are valued in the 'Estimate' at between £15 and £30). It was among those hanging, then as now, in the Long Gallery, where they had presumably originally been placed by the Duchess herself. Their fine 'Sunderland' frames had been provided in 1672 and 1679.[5] Many of the portraits in this splendid series were inscribed later with incorrect identifications. The portrait of the Duchess of Lauderdale (Fig.37) was misidentified as 'Lady Doune', the duchess's youngest daughter who married, in 1677, Lord Doune, son of the 5th Earl of Moray. The sitter, however, is incontestably the lady with the flaming golden hair familiar

*The genesis of this article developed in enjoyable discussions, some years ago, with Malcolm Rogers. I am very grateful, as always, to Dr Rogers for having shared his thoughts with me, and I hope that he will agree with the conclusions I have put forward. I am much indebted to the owners of the pictures I have discussed in this article for the patience with which they have answered questions and made the portraits available for study. I am particularly grateful to Mr Michael Dormer for enabling me to have photographs made of his picture. Alastair Laing has been very helpful to me in the compiling of this notice.

[1] *Vertue Notebooks*, I (*Walpole Society*, XVIII), Oxford [1930], p.49. The information provided by Vertue was repeated in H. WALPOLE: *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, [1762–71], London [1888], II, p.15, reprinted in G.H. COLLINS BAKER: *Lely & the Stuart Portrait Painters*, London [1912], II, p.224 and repeated without comment in E. WATERHOUSE: *Painting in Britain 1530 to 1790*, 5th ed., London [1994], p.77.

[2] VERTUE, *vol. cit.* above, p.115. I have been unable to find the name in the Burial Registers of St Margaret's Church, Westminster, or St Martin's. Fred G. Meijer has kindly informed me that there is no trace of Weesop's name or origins in the records at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in The Hague.

[3] London, City of Westminster Archives Centre, vols. H2, F 3332, 1072, 381, 3644, 1075, 382.

[4] London, Victoria and Albert Museum, National Art Library, MS HH 1 1974.

[5] P. THORNTON and M. TOMLIN: *The Furnishing and Decoration of Ham House*, London [1980], pp.132–37.

The heads are, again, very carefully painted, with the generous use of pigment that is noticeable in all the portraits attributable to Weesop; the figures are rather limply drawn; and the colours are striking, especially the man's gold-laced sleeves and his companion's very strong red dress. By now the weak hands of the startled young wife have almost become part of a signature.

Before discussing the third, and most important, of the pictures given to Weesop in the Cardigan list, it is logical to group with the last two works four more martial portraits which share very clearly, in composition, character and execution, the qualities that we can, it is to be hoped, associate with Weesop. Two of them are at three-quarter-length. A portrait of a young man (Fig.46) in the National Portrait Gallery, London,[15] was inscribed later as a likeness of Sir Henry Gage, the Governor of Oxford during the Civil War, but the dates do not fit as he was born in 1597 and was killed on 11th January 1645. Again, the loosely handled background and above all the details of the military costume, most obviously the lovingly rendered enrichments on the sleeve, link this work and the three next ones to be discussed, with the two double portraits. The second martial three-quarter-length (Fig.44) passed briefly through the art market in London in July 1987, but did not come under the hammer. The (by now) familiar swagger is perhaps a little misunderstood in this example, and the whites in the sleeves and cuffs are extremely soft in contrast with the very conscientious treatment of the rest of the costume. A reduced variant of the finely painted head is at Lacock Abbey.

Two head-and-shoulders portraits of young men in military dress may also be attributed to Weesop, revealing his quality as a painter and his feeling for character: a certain melancholy – even insecurity – is clearly felt. The first (Fig.45) was at one stage said to be of the 1st (Capel) Earl of Essex.[16] The other (Fig.47) may have been a member of the Belasyse or Holdernesse families.[17] The two portraits are virtually identical in design, arguing, perhaps, a certain poverty of invention in Weesop's repertoire. They are handled with some delicacy and the second portrait, which shows Weesop working in a Dobson-like mood, is particularly well drawn and painted in the head (there is a characteristic flatly applied dark silhouette round the head) and, again, very richly and crisply painted in the dress. In both portraits the head and upper part of the body are rather awkwardly drawn and slightly thrust forward, suggesting something of movement outside the confines of the frame; and the sitter's chest in each case is too narrow: a confusion partly concealed by the very big blue sash. The second portrait contains a very good example of Weesop's obvious enjoyment in painting elaborate embroidery on the sleeves of an officer's uniform. It is unfortunate that so many of the portraits in Weesop's small *œuvre* remain unidentified.

The largest, most important and most ambitious work in Weesop's *œuvre* is the last of the three pictures noted as by him in the Cardigan list of 1730, where it figures as no.3, 'Lady Sussex & three Children by Weessop'. This is the big family group at Deene Park (Fig.48) of Anne Villiers, Countess of Sussex with her children.[18] The mother was yet another

42. *John Villiers, 3rd Viscount Grandison, with his brother George, later 4th Viscount Grandison*, by J. Weesop. 130.8 by 170.2 cm. (The Duke of Buccleuch K.T., on loan to the Government Art Collection).

43. *Portrait of a man and his wife*, attributed to J. Weesop. 125 by 174 cm. (Michael Dormer, Esq).

member of the Villiers family, daughter of Buckingham's younger brother, the Earl of Anglesey. She had married the 1st Earl of Sussex, as his second wife, soon after November 1640. The family group was probably painted c.1650. The eldest surviving child, Frances, had been born c.1645 (she married Francis, Lord Brudenell, in 1668). Her brother, James, born in 1647, stands at his mother's side. The infant, supported by his little sister, is unidentified; and there are presumably allusions to two deceased children in the sky above her. After Lord Cardigan's death in 1732 the picture passed to his younger son, John Brudenell, 5th Earl of Cardigan, Lord Brudenell of Deene and great-uncle of the celebrated Crimean commander.

The composition is one of the most impressively staged and accomplished examples to be painted in the years after Van Dyck's death. The background is enriched with a column, a red curtain and richly handled foliage. Within the group, which could not have been conceived without absorbing substantial draughts of Van Dyck (apart from direct

[15]D. PIPER: *Catalogue of Seventeenth-Century Portraits in the National Portrait Gallery*, Cambridge [1963], pp.132–33, no.2279. The attribution to Weesop was first made by Malcolm Rogers, who also drew attention to the portrait at Knole, inscribed early as a portrait of the 3rd Earl of Middlesex (1612–51) (see COLLINS BAKER, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, I, p.92). In pose and in its rather eccentric setting it is strikingly close to the portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, but it is perhaps too loosely and thinly painted and lacks Weesop's customary rather sticky texture.

[16]Sold at Sotheby's, London, 10th April 1991, lot 63.

[17]Sold at Christie's, London, 1st December 2000, lot 2. Recorded in *Historical and Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures belonging to . . . the Duke of Leeds*, London [1902], no.40.

[18]It was formerly thought to represent the (closely related) wife of the 2nd Earl of Cardigan with her children (J. WAKE: *The Brudenells of Deene*, London [1953], p.80).

44. *Portrait of a man*, attributed to J. Weesop. 127 by 101.6 cm. (Present whereabouts unknown).

46. *Portrait of a young man*, attributed to J. Weesop. 127. 6 by 99.1 cm. (National Portrait Gallery, London).

45. *Portrait of a young man*, attributed to J. Weesop. 73 by 60 cm. (Private collection).

47. *Portrait of a young man*, attributed to J. Weesop. 74.2 by 59.6 cm. (The Weiss Gallery, London).

quotation in the spaniel at the foot of the eldest child), the colour is, again, typically striking: the rich deep gold of the daughter's dress, the blue-grey cloak over the mother's white dress lined with fawn, the blue in the child's dress on the right. The fall of draperies is in places rather misconceived, but the impasto is characteristic in the laboured way in which it is worked up. Parts of the figures are rather feebly drawn, and some of the forms are defined with a thick, flat patterning of dark paint.

A single portrait at Deene Park comes from the same circle of patronage: a three-quarter-length (Fig.50) of a young woman bearing an early inscription identifying her as Anne, daughter of Viscount Savage. She married the 2nd Earl of Cardigan (grandfather of the 3rd Earl, whose list we are unlikely to forget) and her son Francis, Lord Brudenell, married the little girl, Frances, in the family group with which this single portrait presumably shares its provenance. Anne Savage was a sister of Viscountess Andover and Lady

48. *Anne Villiers, Countess of Sussex, with her children*, by J. Weesop. 209.6 by 200.7 cm. (Edmund Brudenell, Esq, Deene Park).

50. *Anne Savage, Countess of Cardigan*, attributed to J. Weesop. 109.2 by 78.7 cm. (Edmund Brudenell, Esq, Deene Park).

49. *Portrait of a girl*, attributed to J. Weesop. Panel, 38.1 by 30.5 cm. (The Powis Collection, Powis Castle, The National Trust).

Thimbleby who appear in Van Dyck's well-known double portrait in the National Gallery.

There is in the portrait something of the same flamboyant air to which we have become accustomed in Weesop's work, the same rich, almost over-involved, drapery, in this instance a warm brown cloak over a whiteish-blue dress, and the same feeble hands and boneless fingers. Again, there is considerable charm in the sitter's expression.

Finally, although it is on the small scale usually associated with such painters as Leemput or Russell, a portrait of a girl (Fig.49) at Powis Castle can be attributed to Weesop with some confidence, from the handling of the head and drapery, the original rich yellow of the dress, and the attractive open character of the face. The sitter remains unidentified, and suggestions that she may be Elizabeth Craven, Lady Powis (1599/1600–62), or Elizabeth Spencer, Lady Craven (1618–72),[19] are obviously untenable.

There is no doubt that more pictures will be shown to have been painted by the insubstantial painter whose *œuvre* has been tentatively reconstructed here. No signatures or dates are recorded on these portraits, but the qualities in the core group of four for which there are early attributions are clear and consistent enough to enable this group of portraits to be put together as the work of a single painter, who emerges as a figure of some stature and strong individuality in the way in which he assembled a composition, drew his figures and laid on his paint. He appears to have been active just before and just after 1650 and to have had at least some patrons of royalist sympathies – notably members of the Villiers family. He may not, indeed, have wanted to stay in a country in which the king had been killed,[20] even if he stayed for longer than Vertue claimed. It is not certain whether his career in London was ended by death or by a decision to leave England. With the qualities he took from Van Dyck and his evocation of a slightly Dobson-like mood, in addition to his own not inconsiderable, if rather limited, abilities – chiefly evident perhaps in his idiosyncratic range of colour – he could for a brief period have presented something of a challenge to Lely, Hayls or Soest, and clearly enjoyed the patronage of a number of influential patrons.

[19] J. STEEGMAN: *A Survey of Portraits in Welsh Houses*, I, Cardiff [1957], p.263, no.13; *Powis Castle. Catalogue of Pictures*, The National Trust, London [1987], no.49.

[20] The tradition that he left England in disgust after the execution of Charles I may have led to the attribution to Weesop of the painting of that event, on loan to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (no.PG L 208) from the collection of the Earl of Rosebery. It bears no resemblance whatever, in quality, to any work that can be attributed to Weesop, and remains of a false signature which could have been read as Weesop's were removed in 1972. On the other hand, there are certain reminiscences of Weesop in the famous problem picture in the National Portrait Gallery of Charles I dictating despatches to Sir Edward Walker (no.1961; PIPER, *op. cit.* at note 15 above, pp.63–64).