

# Kenneth Hudson, OBE, MA, FSA

Social historian with forward-looking ideas on museum presentation

Kenneth Hudson had a vision of museums should be, “Why do we have to stand and worship the objects?” he asked recently. “Why can’t we sit among them in comfortable armchairs, drink coffee if we want to, talk to friends, content in the presence of these things which we learn to love as companions?”

As a lover and student of museums, he once told Ann Nicholls, his collaborator on many books, what he wanted on his gravestone: “Social historian and museologist”.

“In that case,” said the ever-practical Nicholls, “we had better make sure it’s properly proof-read. You know what happened last time”. On his passport application in the 1970s he had put his occupation as “museologist”, but a bureaucrat at Petty France presumed an error and changed it to “musicologist”.

That confrontation with bureaucracy was typical of Hudson’s life. He was always an antinomian, questioning the accepted way, and though his authority in museum development has been profound, this was not his only area of influence.

He wrote 54 books, at one point producing them at the rate of four a year. One of them, *Men and Women: Feminism and Anti-*



Courtesy Robert Letts

*Feminism Today* (1968), is widely thought to have been an inspiration for Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* a couple of years later. Recently Ann Nicholls found herself in another bureaucratic office, in Iasi in Romania, where she was intrigued to see a folded piece of paper lodged in the frame of a painting on the office wall. It was an extract from Hudson’s 1987 book, *Museums of Influence*.

Kenneth Hudson was born in Harlesden north-west London, and read English at University College London, with teaching diplomas in German and Italian. He was later to become fluent in five European languages.

He spent the war working on the land, but after an MA in 1945 he answered a call for German speakers to go out to help to begin the healing process in the shattered cities of Europe.

In 1947 he became a tutor at Bristol University, but seven years later joined the BBC as a producer and industrial correspondent. His 12 years there were never entirely comfortable, and when he announced at his leaving party that he had all along been working as an MI5 mole at BBC West, no-one was quite convinced by the joke.

Hudson had already written two books, one on English letter-writers and the other about teaching Shakespeare. The title of his third, in 1963, coined a new phrase – *Industrial Archaeology* – and in 1965 he became the first editor of *The Journal of Industrial Archaeology*. As well as writing prolifically on industrial and modern social history, he set up an educational television service at what was to become Bath University.

Late one evening during a fireside talk with Jacob Bronowski, later the author of *The Ascent of Man*, the conversation turned to money. “He said that’s the one thing you must never worry about,” Hudson recalled. “Do what you want to do and if you need more money just go out and earn it. It seemed to be simple.” Hudson decided to devote his time to museums – “because no-one else was doing it”.

In 1971 Unesco commissioned

him to travel the world investigating “forward-looking ideas in museums”. The result was *Museums of the Eighties*, published in 1977. Two years earlier he and Nicholls had published *The Directory of Museums and Living Displays*, which they updated in 1980 and 1985. In his travels he was always alert for new ideas in museum presentation, such as the open-air museums he saw in Scandinavia and encouraged in Britain.

In 1973, with his friend John Letts, he founded the annual Museum of the Year Award with television coverage on the BBC’s *Chronicle* programme, and in 1977 he launched the European Museum Forum and its European Museum of the Year Award: he remained its director until November 1999 when ill-health forced him to stand down. In 1993 he was appointed OBE for his services to museums.

Hudson was the mentor of many successful museum directors, including Sir Neil Cossons, who is now Director of the Science Museum and who becomes chairman of English Heritage in April. “He practically invented industrial archaeology,” said Cossons, “and was passionate about the eco-museum concept. He changed the view of a world dominated by art museums to one

where museums were for ordinary people, their lives and work.”

Kenneth Hudson was married to his wife, Hope, for 61 years, and for more than 40 years they lived in the Somerset village of Ditcheat. She survives him as do their son and two daughters.

Written by Simon Tait in 2000

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Kenneth Hudson, OBE, social historian and museologist, was born in London on July 4, 1916. He died at home in Ditcheat, Somerset, on 28 December 1999 aged 83.

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