

Lambert, (Charles) Gordon

by Terry Clavin

Lambert, (Charles) Gordon (1919–2005), businessman and art collector, was born 9 April 1919 in the family home at Highfield Road, Rathmines, Dublin, the youngest of four sons of Bob (Robert James Hamilton) Lambert (qv), veterinarian and renowned cricketer, and his wife Nora (née Mitchell). His eldest brother, Ham Lambert (qv), was a versatile sportsman and noted veterinary practitioner. Born into a hyper-competitive and sports-obsessed family, Gordon played golf, badminton, tennis and hockey, winning numerous badminton trophies. His sporting achievements, though, paled in comparison with those of his father and brothers, instilling a determination to succeed in other aspects of his life.

Educated at Sandford Park School, Dublin, and at Rossall School, Lancashire, he was steered by his mother towards a career in accountancy for which he prepared by studying commerce at TCD. Graduating BA and B.Comm. in 1940, he joined the accounting firm Stokes Brothers and Pim, qualifying Associate Chartered Accountant in 1943. In 1944, after auditing biscuit manufacturers W & R Jacob and Co Ltd, one of Ireland's largest and most prestigious industrial companies, he was offered and accepted a £300 a year job in Jacobs as assistant accountant. To Lambert's dismay, in 1948 the Irish government's export restrictions induced Jacobs to relinquish the rights to the Jacobs brand outside the state and its large export trade to its sister company in Liverpool (both companies were owned by the Jacob and Bewley families but from 1948 were separate entities).

From 1951 he resided with his parents at Hillside Drive, Rathfarnham, in a house that he designed. In 1953 he became Jacobs' chief accountant as the management groomed him for an executive career. During 1948–56, Jacobs suffered from profit and price controls, lack of capital investment and complacency brought about by the absence of competition. The entry of bakers Bolands into the Irish biscuit market in 1957 was exploited by Lambert who urged the alarmed board, which had long regarded advertising as vulgar, to market its products more vigorously. This assertiveness yielded his advancement to the position of commercial manager in 1958; a year later he became the first non-member of the Bewley and Jacob families to be appointed to the board.

**Marketing guru** Between 1959 and 1970, biscuit consumption in Ireland doubled for which Lambert can claim much credit. Recognising that the advent of self-service stores meant that manufacturers could no longer rely on retailers to sell their products, he pioneered advanced promotional techniques in Ireland, particularly the use of marketing surveys and of mass advertising in newspapers, on radio and on the emerging medium of television. To further accord with retailers' preferences, Jacobs drove the widespread packaging of biscuits in airtight packets (instead of

tins), also introducing a striking red flash logo for its packets. Lambert's interest in contemporary art enabled him to contribute directly to Jacobs' packaging designs.

Previously negligible, advertising spending rose in the 1960s to comprise some 5 per cent of turnover and the company's sales organisation was greatly expanded. Lambert introduced individual product advertising with particular success for the cream crackers and fig rolls ranges, most memorably with a long running and ubiquitous campaign based around the search for Jim Figgerty who alone knew the answer to Jacobs' most enduring catchphrase: 'How do Jacobs get the figs into the fig rolls?'

His most striking innovations were the fruits of a long collaboration with Frankie Byrne (qv), Jacobs' public relations consultant from 1961. That year they secured their first coup – Jacobs' sponsoring of the inaugural flight to the newly opened Cork airport. Jacobs further sponsored popular programmes on Radio Éireann: *Women's page*, hosted by Byrne, and *Come fly with me*. Their most successful initiative was devised in 1962: the Jacobs TV (later TV and radio) awards, an annual ceremony held in the Jacobs factory and broadcast on RTÉ television, in which the winners were chosen by a panel of critics in the national press. Invitations to this event were restricted to prominent politicians and media figures who appreciated the ensuing revels (wheelchairs were provided to accommodate inebriated guests).

**Politics** These efforts chimed with the progressive economic policies of Seán Lemass's (qv) government, which Lambert supported even though he recognised that the intended move towards free trade posed problems for Jacobs. He was appointed to the board of the ESB in 1964 (continuing until 1977) and served as president of the National Agricultural and Industrial Development Association (NAIDA) in 1964–5, spearheading a 'Buy Irish' campaign. His involvement with NAIDA dated to the mid 1950s and led to his friendship with Jack Lynch (qv), minister for industry and commerce (1959–65). This relationship and his admiration for Lemass inclined him towards Fianna Fáil: he also believed the party was the one most likely to deliver economic growth. During the 1960s he was involved in the burgeoning chambers of commerce movement and acted variously as council member of the Association of Advertisers, council member of the Irish Management Institute, member of the executive committee of the TCD Trust and director of the Dublin Regional Tourist Organisation; later he served as a director of the Hibernian Insurance Company and of Mitchel & Son (wine merchants).

Avowedly anti-partitionist (though in a fraternal rather than in an irredentist sense), he utilised his political and business connections as well as his protestantism to assist Lemass's policy of fostering amity with Northern Ireland. He organised joint meetings of the Dublin and Belfast chambers of commerce in 1962 and between the ministers for industry of the North and South, Brian Faulkner (qv) and Patrick Hillery (1923–2008), in 1966; the latter event was overshadowed by the bombing of Nelson's Pillar in Dublin on the same day. A regular visitor to Northern Ireland,

he promoted contact between the two communities there, and between North and South, through sporting, cultural and business activities, while avoiding politics as the Troubles worsened during the 1970s.

In 1977–81 he served in the seanad having been appointed by Lynch as a taoiseach's nominee. He sat as an independent but assured Lynch he would broadly support the government. Dismayed by Ireland's economic uncompetitiveness, he used this platform to bemoan the state's financial profligacy and failure to control inflation, and the indifference of Irish politicians towards the business community, contending that Irish industrialists suffered and needed to learn from the expert lobbying of the indigenous agricultural sector and of large multi-national companies based in Ireland. He also articulated his social liberalism, desire for peaceful reconciliation in Northern Ireland and support for cultural and environmental causes. But his commitment to the seanad waned as he grasped its irrelevance. When Lynch resigned in December 1979 Lambert joined the Fianna Fáil party in a futile bid to preserve his political influence.

**Jacobs supremo** Following Jacobs' takeover of Bolands' biscuits in 1966, Lambert became joint (from 1968 sole) managing director of a new entity, Irish Biscuits Ltd, the manufacturing and trading company for the Bolands' and Jacobs' biscuits operations; W & R Jacob and Co. Ltd became a holding company. He still had to contend with the Jacob and Bewley dynasties whose determination to uphold the spirit of the restrictive export agreement with the Liverpool Jacobs factory, restrained him from developing Bolands' pre-existing UK markets. Therefore, Jacobs remained dependent on its monopoly of an Irish market that larger, highly automated British industrial concerns were poised to invade as import barriers fell in the late 1960s.

In response, Jacobs decided in 1968 to transfer operations from its cramped city centre premises, and Bolands' Deansgrange factory, to a green-field site in Tallaght, Co. Dublin. The complications and production disruptions associated with this phased move were aggravated by a loss of market share to imports, sparking a financial crisis within the Jacobs group, which was temporarily resolved in 1971 with the raising of a £4.7 million loan from financial institutions to pay for the new factory. Under this agreement, the Bewley and Jacob families relinquished control by enfranchising the holders of the company's publicly traded shares, and Lambert emerged as W & R Jacob and Co. Ltd's managing director and undisputed authority.

Despite his reservations about some of the two founding families' policies, he had always admired the Quaker philanthropic ethic that shaped their dealings with employees. His attempts to perpetuate this benevolent paternalism ill accorded with the ruthlessness required to deal with the ongoing crisis, which provided no scope for his entrepreneurial and marketing flair, instead obliging him to grapple with the logistics and finances of the move to Tallaght, and with overhauling the group's outmoded production control functions.

His credibility was tarnished by the failure of a costly export drive in Britain. In 1971, Jacobs began marketing its range of mallow biscuits there under the Irish Biscuits brand, for the first time competing with the Jacobs factory in Liverpool (by then part of the ABM group). After a promising start the campaign foundered in 1972 as the violence in Northern Ireland produced a reaction by British consumers against Irish products. This initiative antagonised ABM, which joined other British manufacturers in competing with Jacobs in the Irish market. Lambert's strategy of relying on Bolands' low-priced plain biscuit lines to resist these incursions (which relied on price rather than quality) was undermined by domestic wage inflation and a lack of advertising support. Instead of discontinuing unprofitable lines and accelerating the automation of Jacobs' production processes, he maintained the loss-making, but employment-sustaining, policy of seeking to retain as large a share of the market as possible.

**Crisis years and after** Unable to finance the rest of the move to Tallaght, in 1973 Lambert halted the transfer leaving Jacobs straddling two factories and suffering from attendant diseconomies. Meanwhile, the company experienced successive external shocks, including a surge in the price of flour and the government's tardiness in permitting a compensating increase in biscuit prices (1972–4), the subsidisation of British biscuit imports into Ireland by the EEC (1975–7) and the boycott of Jacobs' products by small retailers due to its perceived partiality towards supermarket chains (1978). Staff morale plummeted, labour relations worsened and senior executives departed.

By 1975, Lambert had installed a settled management team and resolved the company's most egregious administrative weaknesses. The move from the city centre was completed in 1977, following a deal whereby twelve acres at Tallaght were sold to Hibernian Insurance, which built a warehouse on the site for leasing back to Jacobs. Pressed by creditors and shareholders, he progressively reduced expenses and the number of product lines causing Jacobs' share of the domestic biscuit market to shrink from 80 per cent to a financially sustainable 50 per cent. This process culminated in 1979 in the wholesale dropping of marginally profitable plain biscuit lines leading to redundancies and a concentration on Jacobs' marquee products. Lambert resisted demands to impose more stringent cuts on marketing expenditure and to compromise on quality, thereby preserving Jacobs' stranglehold on the upper end of the market.

Jacobs survived but at a price – its subordination to ABM. In 1976 and 1979, ABM provided a financial lifeline for Jacobs by purchasing its shares in rights issues, accumulating just under 30 per cent of Jacobs' shareholding. Thanks to EEC regulations, Lambert was not obliged to respect the export restriction agreement, but continued to do so in return for exclusive rights to the Jacobs brand in Northern Ireland; thereafter, although exports grew, they were sold under retailers' labels and were barely profitable. In 1979 the Dublin and Liverpool factories ceased duplicating production and swapped outputs to fill in their product range.

From 1977 Lambert began withdrawing from the active administration of the company, relinquishing his managing directorship in 1979 to become chairman. During the 1980s Jacobs further reduced costs. When he became managing director in 1971 Jacobs employed 3,000 workers; on his retirement as chairman in 1986 it employed 830. Jacobs weathered the 1980s fairly well, and by Lambert's retirement had returned to profitability and substantially reduced its debts. Nonetheless, it was a much-diminished company.

His stewardship of Jacobs was criticised for his conservatism and reluctance to seek a foreign purchaser or partner. In turn he condemned the state and domestic finance for forsaking indigenous industry, and was scathing of a younger generation of Irish businessmen for prospering through quick, but less socially beneficial, returns from financial speculation, property development and distribution. While slow to accept the harsh logic of free trade, he was not responsible for the cardinal errors that crippled Jacobs: the forfeiting of worldwide rights to the Jacobs brand and the failure to move to a new factory during more propitious times. Moreover, his reinforcement of the company's brand was crucial to its ultimate survival; so too was the underlying realism that tempered his habitual optimism in the turbulent 1970s.

**Personal background** From an early age he developed a reputation as a dandy, typically sporting a cravat or a blazer. Kind, naturally extroverted and possessing an urbane and companionable exterior, he was also fastidious and intensely private, taking great care in how he presented himself in private and in public. This reserve was partly due to insecurity over his homosexuality, which he divulged only to intimates. From 1952 he pursued a relationship with David Hendriks, a sophisticated, debonair Jamaican. They never lived together due to Lambert's unwillingness to flout social norms and he conducted a very private bereavement following Hendriks's death in 1983. Soon after he experienced a spiritual crisis and ceased attending church services. But he continued to identify with the Church of Ireland, subsequently becoming friendly with the local vicar and leaving the church a bequest in his will.

Though in certain respects he was a conservative product of the Anglo-Irish professional class, his sexuality made him open to the unconventional. In the late 1940s, his daily lunches at Robert Roberts's café on Grafton Street kindled a lasting friendship with Cecil King (qv), then a publisher, later a painter. King drew him into his circle of artist friends including Henry Robertson Craig, Patrick Hennessy (qv), Micheal Farrell (qv) and Barbara Warren. Having no background in art, he was attracted initially by the tolerance this bohemian milieu afforded his sexuality.

**Art collector** His love of art flowered in 1954 when he accompanied King on a hiking holiday in France where they visited Paris and viewed a number of galleries. That year he bought his first painting, a small cubist-influenced oil, 'Pont du Carousel' by Warren for £12. Many of his subsequent pieces were bought through Hendriks who in 1956 established the Ritchie Hendriks Art Gallery on St Stephens

Green. Hendriks played an important role in the subsequent evolution of Lambert's collection by introducing the Dublin public to developments in international art.

Due to financial constraints, Lambert eschewed established artists, instead focusing on promising but as yet unheralded modernists, many of whom he knew. He liked to relate a work to its creator and revelled in the company of artists, admiring their dynamism, adaptability and lack of materialism. Maintaining an open-minded attitude to artistic innovation, he never dictated the terms of his patronage. With almost all his surplus cash going into art, he bought according to his means and, accepting that certain artists were beyond his reach, acquired limited print editions of the works of masters such as Picasso, Braque and Miro.

After a hesitant start, in which he accumulated relatively conventional works by Irish artists, his collecting gathered momentum and became more cosmopolitan in the 1960s as his financial resources and confidence grew. Under King's influence he favoured first semi-abstract and then more austere nonfigurative works. By 1966 he had surpassed the tentative modernism of the local scene and plunged into the manic avant-gardism emanating from abroad.

Inspired by a kinetic art exhibition in the Hendriks Gallery, he serially purchased kinetic and op art works by renowned international artists such as Bridget Riley, Carlos Cruz Diaz, Peter Sedgley, Jesus Raphael Soto, Josef Albers and Victor Vasarely. His most cherished pieces were bought at this time: 'Curvas inmateriales' (a work of thin strips of light-weight metal suspended on a thread against a striped black and white background) by Soto in 1966, and 'Lant' (a huge acrylic canvas divided into small square units of varying colours, which shimmered in the light and glowed in the dark) by Vasarely in 1968.

He adopted a rational rather than emotional attitude towards art and believed that his background in figures determined his enjoyment of the manner in which the kinetic artists employed a repetition of simple forms and colours in intricate, geometrically derived combinations to create ingenious visual effects. The irreverence and playfulness of these works appealed to his sense of humour while also exposing him to charges of triviality and superficiality about which he was entirely indifferent. Op and kinetic artworks subsequently fared poorly in critical appreciations, but Lambert's pieces aged well and are strong representatives of these genres.

In the 1970s he moved back towards Irish art and more figurative artworks, having a particular fondness for the sardonic hyperrealism of Robert Ballagh. He bought seventeen Ballagh works, the largest number of any artist in the collection. Other notable Irish artists represented included Camille Souter, Anne Madden, Barrie Cooke, Patrick Collins (qv), Micheal Farrell, Cecil King, Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland, TP Flanagan (1929–2011), Louis Le Brocquy and Brian Maguire. He began buying sculpture at a time when it was unusual to do so in Ireland and acquired

impressive pieces by Edward Delaney (1930–2009), Michael Bulfin and Deborah Brown.

Emerging by the late 1970s as Ireland's foremost collector of contemporary art, between 1954 and 2000 Lambert accumulated some 500 paintings, prints, drawings, posters, watercolours and sculptures, which were displayed in the Jacobs factory and in his house where his sculptures overflowed onto his landscaped garden. Not all were bought on merit; some purchases were made to assist struggling artists. His judgement proved financially shrewd: his collection was worth over €20 million at his death. He bought for appreciation, not profit, and lamented the existence of collectors who viewed art in narrowly financial terms.

**Art advocate and donor** At first he viewed art as a hobby but he came to see it as a calling, drawing inspiration from Sir (William) Basil Goulding (qv), his predecessor as Ireland's leading collector and advocate of modern art. He willingly lent his collection to interested galleries and was involved in the staging of the first ROSC exhibition in 1967. From the late 1970s he served as head of the Contemporary Irish Art Society and on the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the advisory committee of the Dublin Municipal Gallery, the board of the NGI, the editorial board of the *Irish Arts Review* and the international council of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

The business and artistic spheres of his life were kept apart as many of his non-artistic acquaintances were dismissive of his esoteric hobby. Nonetheless he regarded his dual roles as mutually enhancing. Certainly his artistic hinterland informed the creativity and visual sophistication that characterised his marketing and public relations exploits. Similarly, his business background and political associations made him an effective agent for the advancement of the previously much neglected visual arts in Ireland, by encouraging corporate patronage and the state's provision of tax incentives and funding.

Horrified at the manner in which Goulding's collection was dispersed abroad after his death, he determined on granting his collection to the state. This intention coalesced with his lobbying for the creation of a specialised modern art gallery in Ireland. With the government contemplating a modern art museum at the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, Lambert invited the international council of MoMA to view his collection at this venue in 1988. The prestige thus incurred and Lambert's pledge to donate his collection to the proposed museum persuaded the taoiseach, Charles Haughey (1925–2006), to proceed with the project. The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) opened in 1991 and received through the medium of the Gordon Lambert Trust some 212 works, which formed the centrepiece of its collection. Thereafter he gifted another 100 works to IMMA. He sat on IMMA's board from 1991, and the west wing of the museum was named after him in 1999.

**Final years** Despite being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1988, he remained relatively active and played golf into his 80s. In 1999 he received an honorary LLD

from TCD. From 1997, he relied increasingly on Anthony Lyons, an acquaintance of longstanding, to care for him. His last years were overshadowed by the collapse in autumn 2002 of his close but complex relationship with his family. Thereafter he shunned his relations and changed his will, granting Lyons a substantial portion of his estate while curtailing the amount to be received by his family. He died in a Dublin hospital on 27 January 2005. Relatives challenged his final will in the high court in 2009 but it was upheld.

Lambert commissioned five portraits: by Robert Ballagh (1972), Clifford Rainey (1975), Adrian Hall (1979), Pat Harris (1980) and Brian Maguire (1982); they are kept at IMMA. He is also depicted prominently in Robertson Craig's 'The regatta' (1958–9), which is in the NGL.

**Assessment** Lyons claimed Lambert contrived his persona as patron of the arts. If so, an affectation became an all-consuming passion, providing respite from the strains of his business career and the fading of the heady economic and political aspirations of the 1960s. He had been in the vanguard of the Lemass revolution, which sought to overcome a deeply-rooted societal torpor and to break down the barriers with the protestant North by prioritising economic growth over cultural and spiritual purity and by repackaging Ireland as outward-looking and modern. Progress proved halting and subject to devastating reverses, impelling his escape into the ultra-modernist whimsy of kinetic and op art. Yet for all his unease and frustration with aspects of Irish society, he remained deeply engaged with it, his pragmatic public-spiritedness flowing from loyalty (albeit at times conflicted) towards his family, friends, co-workers and compatriots, and manifesting itself most obviously in a generous donation from a comfortably, but by no means extravagantly, wealthy man.

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*Ir. Times*, 31 May 1961; 1 Mar., 9 May 1962; 22 Oct. 1963; 22 Dec. 1966; 3 May, 7 Nov. 1967; 19 Dec. 1968; 9 Apr. 1970; 28 June 1971; 2 Feb., 26 May 1972; 12 May 1973; 4 Jan., 7, 31 May 1974; 3 Jan., 22 May 1975; 26 June, 14 Aug., 30 Dec. 1976; 12 Mar., 28 June 1977; 17 Mar., 4, 26 July, 21 Nov. 1979; 13 Mar., 16 May, 17 Oct. 1981; 19 Mar. 1983; 9 Aug. 1984; 27 Mar., 8 Apr., 13 Aug. 1986; 3 Aug. 1989; 24 Feb. 1990; 27 May, 26 June 1991; 22 July 1992; 26 Jan. 1999; 13 Jan. 2000; 30 Jan. 2002; 5 Feb. 2005; 6 Jan., 19 Aug., 30 Sept. 2006; 19 June 2008; 21–23, 28 July, 7–10 Oct. 2009; *Ir. Independent*, 2 May 1940; 4 Mar. 1966; 5 June 1972; 4 Jan. 1974; 7 July 1979; 22 Sept., 20 Oct. 1986; 13 Jan. 1987; 18 July 1991; 3 Aug. 1992; *Sunday Independent*, 23 Oct. 1966; 30 June 1968; 8 Aug. 1976; 20 Aug., 5 Nov. 1978; 22 June 2008; 7 Mar. 2010; *Business and Finance*, 28 Feb. 1969; 26 June 1970; 2 July 1971; 8 Feb. 1973; 9 May, 19 Sept. 1974; 24 Sept. 1981; 22 Mar. 1990; *Hibernia*, 6 Aug. 1971; 16 Feb., 25 May, 14 Dec. 1973; 7 June 1974; 30 May 1975; 13 Feb., 7 May 1976; 23 Dec. 1977; 29 June 1978; 31 May 1979; 29 May 1980; *The Gordon Lambert Collection* (1972); *Sunday Press*, 25



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