

# Art and skeletons

Robertson Davies, **WHAT'S BRED IN THE BONE**. Viking Press. 436 pages. \$17.95.

By IFAN PAYNE

There has been considerable controversy in Wales recently concerning the art collection in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.

The first issue concerns the fact that the pride of the collection, a world renowned series of French Impressionist paintings, has been shipped to Japan for display there at what is thought by some to have been an absurdly low price, while at the same time denuding the gallery walls in Cardiff.

The second issue concerns the authenticity of four large cartoons (preparatory drawings for tapestries) which are considered to either be among the ugliest pictures ever to cross Offa's Dyke or, it's to be hoped, very fine drawings by that great master, Rubens.

Finally, the museum has recently brought at a large cost a painting which is either by the renowned Italian artist Francesco Guardi, or is by an unknown minor French artist and not worth the price paid for it.

IT HAS BEEN most timely, then, for those who follow the vicissitudes of the seemingly accident-prone art department of the museum, that Robertson Davies' latest novel, *What's Bred in the Bone* lays bare the absurdities and pretensions of the world of art expertise.

Davies has one of his characters put the problem in a nutshell. "Some of these (apprentices) you know, painted copies of masterworks for people who wanted them, but the master did not emphasize that when he presented his bill. And today it is hard to tell some of these copies from originals. Who painted them? The master or the assistant? The experts quarrel all the time."

It is also of more than passing interest that this great Canadian novelist has a Welsh heritage; his father was Welsh, and a section of the book is set in Cardiff.

THE NOVEL appears on the surface to be a fictitious biography of Francis Cornish, a serious dabbler in both art and the secret service. The book relates his upbringing in Canada and schooling at Oxford. In a typically pointed observation, Davies has one of his characters say, "Do you notice the 'Times' obituary says he went to school in Canada but he was 'educated' in Oxford."

There follows Cornish's apprenticeship in Europe with an enigmatic art expert and restorer; his wartime work with M15 first in a German Schloss and then in Cardiff and, finally, his retirement back in Canada, where he dies surrounded by the expensive bric-a-brac of the art collection which has consumed his living quarters just as painting consumed his whole life.

The novel is fascinating enough at this level, but *What's Bred in the Bone* is equally as concerned with the nature of art and with the so-called expertise, fakery and pretensions of the experts.

A MAJOR THEME of the novel is the meaning of meaning, the ways in which meaning changes with context, the difference between perception and reality and the parallel development of personal myth to explain it all.

Davies himself poses the central question, "You have used words like masterpiece, and transporting beauty. At what were they directed? Towards what you saw, or merely toward what you thought you saw?"

Don't get the wrong idea. Far from being a dry treatise, the book is witty and thoroughly

*Continued on next page*

## Art and skeletons

*Continued from Page 19*

engrossing, filled with penetrating observations and aphorisms as in: "The British have odd talents, and writing obituaries is one of them". Robertson Davies is equally free with his biases towards modern art: "Frank could draw, which was something not required in Art."

Whatever the uncertainty in Wales at the moment concerning the authenticity of some of its most valuable paintings, there can be no doubt at all about Robertson Davies. He has followed his Deptford trilogy with a new book that reaffirms that as a novelist he is a great artist. His work continues to be a joy to read.