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David Hockney's blues and sunshine moments come out in new biography

Author Christopher Simon Sykes given access to Hockney's inner circle for biography detailing artist's life since 1975



David Hockney allowed Christopher Simon Sykes access to his writings and inner circle for the biography *A Pilgrim's Progress*.
Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

By Mark Brown
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Of all the times you don't want your dog to embarrass you, drinks with Dennis Hopper in his stunning, ultra-cool, Frank Gehry-designed house in Venice, California, would rank pretty high.

David Hockney's dachshund did just that, prompting a furious reaction from the actor who, a new book recounts, bore the facial appearance of a "chain-gang murderer".

Hockney was not big on dog discipline and simply responded: "Oah, it'll be dry in the morning, luv, and you can just pick it up."

The story of how Hopper came close to killing Hockney's Little Boogie is told in a much anticipated second volume of a biography on Britain's best-loved artist. A Pilgrim's Progress is to be published in a fortnight.

Its author, Christopher Simon Sykes, had access to Hockney, his artworks, notebooks and diaries, as well as the contacts of friends and family. It is, his publishers say, "the one-and-only, definitive record" of Hockney's life and works. The volume opens in 1975 with Hockney flitting between studios in west London and Los Angeles. The story is told of what lay behind some of his best-known work such as *My Parents*, his affectionate 1977 portrait of his mother and father, Laura and Kenneth, which this summer came top of a public poll on British art that should be seen on billboards.

The book recalls the time Hockney reluctantly agreed to a White House invitation to a dinner held in honour of Prince Charles and Princess Diana hosted by the Reagans. To his horror he found himself on the top table along with Diana, Ronald Reagan and guests including Jacques Cousteau and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Hockney's many rows are recounted in the book, including the day he felt compelled to sack Rudolph Nureyev from a ballet collaboration – "Well, Rudi, it's obvious that we are not going to be able to work together, so I'm afraid it's all finished," – and his falling out with the then director of the Tate, Sir Norman Reid.

In 1976 Reid caused outrage by buying Carl Andre's pile of bricks, then two years later declining to buy one of Hockney's double-sized pictures of Gregory Evans, one of the true loves of Hockney's life. It meant the Tate only had two Hockneys. The artist was furious, later telling Sykes: "I went to see them. I told Norman Reid he's just a pathetic little shit. I said it to his face actually, and I found myself enjoying it!"

The book takes in Hockney's more recent return to the UK when he settled in Bridlington. It does not cover the death of an assistant, Dominic Elliott, in 2013. A coroner last August recorded a verdict of misadventure after hearing evidence of how, high on drugs and alcohol, he had drunk drain cleaner. The book is dedicated, though, to "the memory of Dominic Elliott, who died far too young".

The biography describes an artist relentlessly working and traveling, and being touchingly close to his mother to whom he always sent red roses on her birthday. She always enjoyed her visits to see Hockney but was mystified by her first visit to Los Angeles. "With all this sunshine," she told her son, "it's wonderful drying weather, but nobody seems to hang their washing out."

Sykes, a writer and photographer, said he had approached Hockney directly. "I have to say everybody said, 'you're mad, he'll never say yes', because he hadn't enjoyed a previous book that had been done."

Because of Hockney's big Royal Academy show in 2012 the artist was under a lot of pressure to do a book. "I think he decided it wasn't going to go away and he chose me, I think, because he thought I'd be less of a nuisance than others. I was in the right place at the right time. It put an immense opportunity my way ... I was quite scared."

Hockney is a fascinating, difficult subject. "The secret with working with David is not to, what he calls, natter him," said Sykes. "You've got to be very, very patient and just grab an interview when you can and when he's willing. There were a couple of times when I drove to Bridlington and he told me to bugger off."