

Sir Ronald Syme
11.3.1903 - 4.9.1989

Sir Ronald Syme, the foremost Roman historian of his time, died on September 4, 1989, at the age of 86, just three days before a party, to which he was greatly looking forward, which was to be held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of his most famous work, *The Roman Revolution*.

If the mention of that time-span were to give the impression of a long period of gentle decline, that would be quite misleading. To the very end

he went on publishing a series of articles (collected in his *Roman Papers* I-V, with at least two more volumes to come); and his last book *The Augustan Aristocracy*, came out in 1986 when he was 83.

This book was no mere return to the familiar territory of Augustan Rome, but is a massive, knotty and intensive work, not only packed with detail, but containing important observations on what family histories were like in a world of low life-expectancy, frequent re-marriage and easy divorce. It offers a challenge to his colleagues with which they have yet to come to grips.

Before that there was the great work of his middle years, the two-volume *Tacitus* (1958). It was here, most of all, that there came together nearly all the dominant themes of his work: the Latin language and its vocabulary and style; the writing of history; the social history of the Roman governing class; history as the product and expression of the writer's own time and social milieu; and the view of Tacitus himself as the product of a long process of great historical importance, by which the "open society" of Rome came to give a place first to the upper classes of Italy and then to those of the provinces. For the book leads up, by a long and devious route, to the presentation of Tacitus as having been himself a first-generation senator from Narbonensis, or more precisely from Vaison in Provence.

As the introduction to *Tacitus* confesses, the theme owes much to a book which Syme never completed (a draft, dating to 1934, is to be found in his papers), *The Provincial At Rome*. Instead there was the brilliant tripartite essay on 1958, *Colonial Elites: Rome, Spain and the Americas*, recently reissued in Italian translation with a new preface by the author. This theme is worth emphasis for the obvious reason that Syme himself was, and always remained, a "provincial". He was born at Eltham in the North Island of New Zealand, and always retained his New Zealand citizenship. He was a student at Victoria University College, Wellington, in 1921-23, but then came to Oriel College, Oxford, to read *Literae Humaniores* (Ancient History and Philosophy) in 1925-27. Against the background of the excellent Classics teaching in British Schools in those days, his winning of three of four major Classical prizes in Oxford is not a trivial fact. It demonstrated his extraordinary mastery of both Latin and Greek, in prose and verse, and symbolised the fact that the young provincial had truly established himself at the centre.

The rest followed, as it might seem, automatically: he was a Fellow of Trinity College and Tutor in Ancient History in 1929-1949, with an interruption for war service, spent largely in Turkey; then Camden Professor of Ancient History, and Fellow of Brasenose College, 1949-1970:

he was given a knighthood in 1959 and the OM in 1976; and he gained a long list of honorary degrees and memberships of foreign academies. Notable among his honours was the Orden pour le Mérite conferred on him by the then Federal Republic of Germany. After retirement he was made an Extraordinary Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, and lived and worked there to the end, very happily, more comfortably than ever before, in the pleasant penthouse flat which the College generously provided.

It was in this context that he spent his happiest and most relaxed period. A man of extremely complex personality, private to the point of intense secretiveness, legendarily tight-fisted, sensitive to slights though never aggressive or combative, he had always in truth remained an outsider in Oxford, seeking instead contacts outside, in travelling and visiting restlessly all round the globe. From 1956 onwards, when he first went to North America, his travels, for lectures and conferences, followed a familiar pattern. But for his intellectual development what mattered more was travel, often on foot, through Germany and the Balkans before the war. An excellent linguist, above all in German, and extremely well read in European literature, especially in French novels of the 19th and 20th centuries, he was a person of profoundly international culture and outlook, and was for a long time (1952-1971) Secretary-General of the International Council for Philosophy and the Social Sciences, a branch of UNESCO.

Highly sociable and with an ironic and sometimes mysterious wit, he remained essentially very reserved in relations to colleagues of his own generation or near it. It was only in latter years that he found that he could be "at home" with younger colleagues who were neither rivals nor disciples, but treated him as a friend while respecting his privacy. He certainly had no trace of the professorial fault of wanting the next generation to remain as disciples. For his great contribution to his subject was to prize excellence above all, wherever it might be found, and to set new standards of excellence, in which scholarly precision and linguistic accuracy were brought together with a grasp of history and a mastery of style and composition. It might be said that his central achievement was to combine two different streams in German scholarship, the prosopographical studies of Dessau, Groag and Stein, on the one hand, and *Limesforschung*, with its sensitivity to geography on the other — but then to put these to the service of the writing of history as a branch of literature, in a tradition which is above all at home in England. Given the delay imposed by the war, *The Roman Revolution* transformed at a stroke both the aspirations of Roman history as a branch of historiography, and the place of writing in English within the subject. As a writer of history

it is not too much to say that Syme belongs with Gibbon and Macaulay. The last sentence of his *Tacitus* may serve as his own epitaph: "Men and dynasties pass but style abides".

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