SOME RECENT BOOKS


If one were to record that period in the historiography of the Roman empire in which the artistic and scientific achievements of scholarship combined together in the highest and most felicitous degree, one would without doubt name the forty years which have elapsed between the publication of Syme's Roman Revolution in 1939 and his Roman Papers in 1979.

The months before the outbreak of the Second World War saw the rush to publication of two works: in Cambridge, the last volume of the Cambridge Ancient History, several of whose contributors were scholars of European origin and residence, and, in Oxford, The Roman Revolution, whose expatriate Antipodean author introduced to England the prosopographical methods of the great German scholars Gelzer and Münzer. Both were epoch-making works, but in different ways. The CAH was already venerable by the time it was finished; it condensed within its eight thousand pages the best achievements of ancient historians during the two inter-war decades; it looked to a nostalgically receding past, even while containing in Volumes X and XI some provocative and revolutionary chapters on the frontiers by one Ronald Syme who was then a young scholar of 30 at Oxford. The RR, by contrast, took scholars almost by surprise; it was concentrated, detailed, difficult in content and style, exciting as well as the despair of many of its readers; it pointed the way towards a different but uncomfortable future. One tends to think of Lucan's civil war comparison of Pompey and Caesar, the venerated but aged trophy-tree and the irresistible thunderbolt.

That thunderbolt has blasted and blazed many a new trail and created a world-wide clientela. If one can justly claim Sir Ronald Syme as the greatest living historian of Rome, a strong case as heir-apparent among ancient historians could well be made out for the editor of the present volumes, Ernst Badian, the most distinguished of Sir Ronald's pupils. Badian, like Syme, received his classical training and began his academic career in New Zealand. It is all the more appropriate, therefore, to welcome in the pages of a New Zealand journal this unique and, in retrospect, inevitable collaboration between two principes of their profession, Fellows of the British Academy, easily the two most brilliant ancient historians New Zealand has produced.

We are offered in two handsome volumes of over 800 pages from the Clarendon Press some fifty-nine articles and reviews spanning the period from 1930 to 1970. Not included are a good number of papers in three areas
of especial interest to Syme which have already been published in other collections of his works, in *Ten Studies in Tacitus* (Oxford 1970), *Danubian Papers* (Bucharest 1971) and *Emperors and Biography* (Oxford 1971). *Roman Papers* now includes practically all the rest of Sir Ronald’s writings up to 1970, apart from his major works. The few omissions, selected by the author and editor in concert, either date from the early period before 1937 or have appeared in readily accessible collaborative volumes such as the *CAH*. The papers are not arranged under any preconceived groupings according to subject-matter—who could contain the manifold nature of Syme’s interests within a manageable range of rubrics?—but chronologically according to the year of publication. This makes for fascinating reading for those who like to read sequentially, following the development of a master scholar’s mind with all its essential theme and variation. To aid us in this progress, the editor has added a complete bibliography of Sir Ronald Syme (pp.855-62), again to 1970, with symbols providing a clear guide to the particular collection in which each individual paper has been republished. Nor has the editor confined his role to a minor correction of misprints. As one would expect from Badian, he has done a painstaking job by including a large number of editorial additions, mostly in footnotes to articles and not in reviews, giving quite full cross-references to other and sometimes differing treatments of the same topics elsewhere in Syme himself, but also adding references to fresh evidence, especially inscriptions, where relevant, and—in itself a Herculean task—to selected interpretations of other, mostly subsequent, scholars up to 1974 in confirmation or confutation of Syme’s views.

All of this is most valuable for the many devotees of Sir Ronald who have learned not to rush his writings in the hope of quick and easy returns, but to pace themselves steadily for the long haul if they are really to find the treasure within. And work they will have to, for here a real tragedy dawns. There is no index, hence no ready reference not merely to subject matter, but—the real crux—not to persons either. The same goes too for *Danubian Papers*. As the editor explains, much delay has been caused by a project of an elaborate index of persons to include *Ten Studies in Tacitus* as well as *Danubian Papers* and *Roman Papers*. In one sense, Badian is right. The job has to be done thoroughly and properly, if it is to be done at all. He is right in another sense also. Since 1970 the pen of Sir Ronald has not slackened, much less faltered. A new book, *History in Ovid* (Oxford 1979), has appeared, articles continue unabated, including two in recent numbers of *Antichthon*. We can surely expect *Roman Papers* Vol. III before Sir Ronald’s eightieth birthday. A Syme *Gesamt-Index* is going to be necessary one day as the final volume of his mighty oeuvre.

It is quite impossible to convey in a few words the scope of subject matter
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contained in Roman Papers. These mirror in detail the scholar’s progress from The Roman Revolution through Tacitus (Oxford 1958)—two volumes and ninety-three(!) closely packed appendices—to the beginning of the last decade. His work on Sallust, the Historia Augusta and Ammianus is mostly to be looked for elsewhere (but note No.75: ‘Three Jurists’ (pp.790-804), a contribution to the Bonner Historia—Augusta—Colloquium 1968/69). There is an obvious and proclaimed concern with historians. But one should not be deceived by the bare titles. Tacitus, for example, uses the name of the consular historian as the central support on which is woven a vast prosopographical and statistical web around and over the literary, intellectual, social and political life of the early Empire. Syme, in my view, is essentially a monumental social historian—albeit with a predilection for élites—with a central interest in separating out the individual from the mere statistic, in bringing to life the actions of persons for their own sake as much as a means of explaining group behaviour. Syme is not given to superficial simplification. He will leave Roman history profoundly more complex than he found it. But not more complicated. These pages also reveal a vast unravelling of Roman history’s tangles such as no one since Mommsen has accomplished.

The preface of Tacitus contains an exciting promise, a full-scale work already partly written, which Sir Ronald is uniquely qualified to write, entitled ‘The Provincial at Rome’. Colonial Elites (Oxford 1958) is an appetiser. We may hope for more. 1979, the date of publication of Roman Papers, marks the tenth year since his ‘retirement’, the twentieth year since he was knighted, the thirtieth year since his appointment to the Camden Chair of Ancient History at Oxford, the fortieth year since the publication of The Roman Revolution and the fiftieth year since his first election to a fellowship at Oxford. The contents of these volumes cover most of the activity of this outstanding career and provide a powerful impulse, challenge and standard to those anywhere who would aspire to be called historians.

P. R. C. Weaver


A leading numismatist has provided the text and illustrations for this beautifully produced book from the British Museum; so it is disappointing that it cannot be recommended for any class of reader. The main trouble