SIR RONALD SYME, OM

in piam memoriam

A retrospective appreciation of the most highly honoured alumnus of Auckland University College

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1. Family "Jottings". Kath Beattie

Ronald's phenomenal memory went back to his early years. He could remember (from the age of 4) a black silk gown worn by his grandmother; at the age of 5 he used to read the "N Z Herald" under the dining room table because the long tablecloth gave him the privacy he wanted. At the age of 9 he had a severe attack of measles, which impaired the sight of one eye permanently. During 3 weeks' confinement in a dark room he resolved to memorize everything he read in case he became blind.

His love of languages began at home: at breakfast, his father used to read Latin poetry, mostly Horace; later his brother Terence read Italian, and his sister Geraldine French novels.
In Oxford, he would welcome his N Z relations and friends with warm affection, and obvious pleasure. They found him good company, with an interesting and unexpected sense of humour - not at all the austere man of letters.

After his retirement, Ronald lived at Wolfson College, in a penthouse apartment given him as a Fellow by Special Election, which looked out over Oxford. He broke his hip in a fall, and moved with great reluctance to the ground floor about a year before he died. He had in fact been speaking of a return to his penthouse before his final illness, which was mercifully short. "He would have hated a long illness" his sister has written. At his funeral one of his cousins played some early music, and the Master of Wolfson read some extracts from Ronald's books. A memorial service was held in Oxford on November 11th.

2. Eltham to Oxford.  W F Richardson

Ronald Syme was born in 1903 in the Taranaki township of Eltham, where his father was a solicitor. He began his secondary education in 1915 at the High School in Eltham's larger neighbour, Stratford; in an interview in 1966 he remembered with gratitude the sound basic instruction which he received from his Latin teacher there, Miss Tooman. In three years at the Stratford High School he showed evidence of such academic promise that he transferred for his sixth form year to a more prestigious institution, the New Plymouth Boys' High School, which he attended for the three years 1918-20. At the end of 1918 he sat the New Zealand University Entrance Scholarships Examination and was awarded a Junior Scholarship; but being ineligible to hold this as he had not yet turned 16 he went back to the New Plymouth Boys' High School for two further years (1919 and 1920). In both years he was Dux of the School. At the end of 1920 he sat the University Entrance Scholarships Examination again. He came top in New Zealand in aggregate by a large margin, being top in Latin, French, History and Geography and top equal in Chemistry with his highest individual mark (96% - he scored 95% in Latin). So once again he won a Junior Scholarship, and this time he was eligible to hold it.

In 1921 he began his university education at the Victoria University College of Wellington, enrolling for a BA course with Latin and French as major subjects. During the following year, 1922, an assistant lectureship in Classics at the Auckland University College became vacant, and the vacancy came to Syme's notice. He applied for the position; and so impressive were the credentials of this second-year student at a rival institution that the Auckland University College Council appointed him. At the beginning of 1923, therefore, he moved to Auckland as Assistant Lecturer in Classics, while his name remained on the books of the Victoria University College of Wellington as a third-year student.

The Classics department to which Syme came at the beginning of 1923 had been presided over since 1908 by Professor H S Dettmann, a third generation Australian from Bathurst N S W who was a graduate of the universities of
Sydney and Oxford. Noted especially for the readiness of his wit and the enthusiasm of his teaching he had built up the Latin side of his department to a vigorous and flourishing maturity; but he admitted to finding the Greek language not to his taste, and under him Greek studies had languished. In Latin his interest was largely on the linguistic and literary side: for Horace his enthusiasm was unbounded but for Livy it was more muted. He was famous also for his classes in Latin prose composition, which was then still in its heyday. Syme, himself a confirmed latinist, found his new professor a helpful and stimulating colleague.

Their association, however, lasted only a few months. Late in 1922, at about the time when Syme was applying for the lectureship, the headmastership of the Sydney Grammar School became vacant. If was offered to Dettmann, who accepted it immediately; and early in 1923 he tendered his resignation to the Auckland University College Council, finally departing for Sydney in August of that year. This meant that his assistant lecturer, currently a third-year student of Victoria, became acting head of the Auckland department. He thus became solely responsible for preparing students for the same examination (the annual degree examinations of the University of New Zealand) as he would himself sit at the end of the year (not, however, for setting or marking it: this was done overseas). But Syme took this daunting task in his stride, and in the 1923 degree examinations won Senior Scholarships in Latin, Greek and English (as he could not hold more than one under the regulations he relinquished those in Latin and English).

While all this was going on the Auckland University College Council had been busy choosing Dettmann's successor, and the new Professor of Classics arrived at the beginning of 1924. His name was A C Paterson. A Scotsman by birth and an Oxford graduate, he had been foundation Professor of Classics at the Transvaal University College in Pretoria and (in 1918) first Chairman of the Senate of the University of South Africa; but he had become tired of the political undercurrents of life in South Africa and had decided to move on. He brought with him to Auckland expertise in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and applied himself with vigour to the task of reviving the study of Greek in the Auckland department. Meanwhile Syme was able to sink back into his assistant lectureship and concentrate on his MA examinations at the end of 1924. In these he achieved the rare distinction of Double First Class Honours in Latin and French, on the strength of which performance he was awarded a University of New Zealand Postgraduate Scholarship in Arts. This took him to Oriel College, Oxford, in 1925; henceforth he would return to New Zealand only on occasional visits, particularly to visit his sister who continued to live in Taranaki.


My recollections of Ronald Syme date from 1950 and 1951 when, as a Postgraduate Scholar from the University of New Zealand, I was a student at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford. When the Faculty of Literae Humaniores
published the lecture list for Hilary Term 1950, there was no problem for us students. Both Professors of Ancient History were lecturing at the same time: Professor Wade-Gery in New College on *Athenian Politics, 433-404 BC* and Professor Syme in Brasenose on *Problems of Government: Augustus to Nero*. I do not now recall what advice our tutors gave us, but I certainly have a complete set of notes from Professor Syme’s lectures.

At that time Professor Wade-Gery was approaching retirement and was one of Oxford’s great figures. He had become wonderfully eccentric and his performances were entertaining as well as scholarly. Professor Syme, in contrast, had been appointed Camden Professor only in 1949. He seemed rather staid and not very colourful. Yet it was to Brasenose College that we cycled on Wednesday mornings, all five of the students from LMH and a large number of the hundred or so enrolled in “Greats” at other colleges. At Brasenose we took our places at the dining tables in the Hall, still redolent of last night’s dinner. We soon learned to watch out for gravy on the tables. We soon became aware too of the intellectual stature of our lecturer.

University Lecturers were remote figures, elevated to a level where they had nothing to do with students as individuals. I got the impression that this suited Professor Syme. He seemed a very self-contained person and certainly one who would not suffer fools gladly. If we had expected his lecturing style to be cryptic, scintillating, even obscure, we were disappointed. It was hardly Tacitean at all. But it did have an unmistakable flavour which we quickly recognised - Professor Syme’s “habits of thought and expression” (to quote from "The Roman Revolution") were distinctly his own.

We learned by example to see what was involved in a historical problem and to ask the right questions. His lectures were superbly well-structured. The poorest student couldn’t help taking good notes. The lectures seemed to fall naturally into headings and sub-headings, with lists of points after that; then came the ancient sources, modern opinions and finally the lecturer’s own preference. This was offered with no pressure on us to accept it, and sometimes it represented a deliberately provocative viewpoint. Even the occasional digression was clearly signposted and never irrelevant.

The most memorable of the lecture series I attended was on Tacitus. Professor Syme really warmed to this topic. His analysis of Tacitus’ portrait of Tiberius was unforgettable. I recognised much of it in the two-volume *Tacitus*, which appeared in 1958. The analysis of the defects of the *Annals* as a historical record, and of the merits and demerits of Tacitus as a historian were novel and exciting in 1951. There was even a hint of personal feeling in the plaintive question "How do you write Imperial history? Today it’s either military history or demilitarized political and social history."
The third series I attended was on *Imperium*. This was a study of the use and abuse of power in the last century of the Republic and under Augustus. We were presented with a sort of rogues' gallery of the holders of power both legally and illegally acquired. These lectures began by giving thirteen reasons why Volume IX of the Cambridge Ancient History was unreliable for that period. These tell us as much about Professor Syme as they do about the hapless contributors to that volume. Some of the objections reflect Professor Syme's special interests. He complained that too little was said about the descendants of consular families, about social structure in Rome and particularly throughout Italy, about the power of money in politics. Not enough attention had been paid to political language. There was a lack of political realism, e.g. concerning the so-called conspiracy of 65 BC. Some of the other defects noted have been remedied in later years, e.g. too little attention paid to Crassus, "that master of intrigue", and too much to Cicero. "Cicero," he said, "was seldom a political force, but his behaviour was often an indication of where the greatest power lay." Finally, he gave a general warning, to watch out for any obsession with the idea of a desire for military despotism just because it came in the end. Here he referred especially to Julius Caesar, "an able opportunist rather than a unique man of vision". This view of Caesar he continued to expound - it appeared in an article in the New York Review of Books in 1985.

Professor Syme's way of examining *imperium* was thorough and logical. He dealt in turn with the magistrates and pro-magistrates who exercised it. Then he looked at topics such as "How was *imperium* acquired?", "The subordination of one *imperium* to another", "The beginning and end of provincial commands" and so on. Then there was a detailed examination of the exceptional grants of *imperium* in the last decades of the Republic. Even on a topic such as this, which has been re-examined over many years since then, I still find it stimulating to read again my densely-packed lecture notes. To say that is perhaps a sufficient tribute to Professor Syme from a former student.

4. The Historian: The Major Works. W K Lacey

*The Roman Revolution* (RR) appeared in 1939; it is dedicated Optimis Parentibus Patriaeque. In the atmosphere of Britain in 1939 it was generally taken to be a tribute to Britain, not to New Zealand - quite wrongly; Syme always felt himself very much a New Zealander. RR did not at first excite much attention - or so it seemed to one in Form 6/7 - and Momigliano's lukewarm review (in *JRS*) showed that he at least had not grasped that here was a revolution in the study of Roman History, not just an account of the years 60 BC to AD 14, one hostile alike to Octavian/Augustus and Cicero.

But Syme's revolution was in method, not in interpretation; for Syme prosopography was the tool by which he identified the party with which Octavianus rose to the position of Caesar Augustus Pater Patriae. 'In all ages', he wrote (RR 7), 'whatever the form and name of the government, be it
monarchy, republic or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the facade’. He was right; and oligarchies are his greatest, lifelong interest.

Octavianus’ early supporters are elusive, but the two most prominent men, Agrippa and Maecenas, were both from Etruria, one of the districts most brutally crushed by Sulla and his party, who formed the controlling nucleus of what older historians called "The Senate" of the late Republic. By analysing the Senators, Syme taught us to abandon "Senate", "Equites", "Optimates", "Populares" as meaningful terms, and to write 'Sulla's party', 'Pompeius' party' (Syme never anglicised Roman politicians' names), 'Cato's party' and so on, and showed that there were 'constituencies' as real and as fixed in their loyalties as the safest seats in the N Z Parliament. These were the districts in Italy which supported their (landowning) patron with funds and votes and recruits - even for civil war - until Caesar's march through Italy in 49, when the Italian towns rejected the republican nobility.

Syme also showed that the old obiter dicta about the Res publica being 'dead' or 'rotten' are simply untrue. The Res publica did not decay, it was forcibly destroyed by the generals, but the idea of the 'public business' went on with sufficient force to kill Caesar (Syme agreed with Adcock (CAH IX, 724) that he was slain for what he was not for what he might become, RR 56), and present his heir with a model to which he knew that he had to conform outwardly, and which remained to haunt his successors even when their own circle was addressing them as 'Domine'.

Syme also exploited the literature of revolutionary and Augustan Rome to a degree not previously attempted. His much later book on Ovid contains some marvellous chapters on the light that that poet's works throw on Augustan Rome - as well as warnings against exploiting the Augustan poets as if they were the mouthpieces of imperial policy. His delight in literature is apparent in RR. Was this perhaps why he idealised Antonius? Perhaps he saw Shakespeare's gallant loser, not the randy, chauvinistic boozer of the ancient sources?

Syme's range of modern languages was phenomenal. Felicity Maidment has written how he was at her home on one of his visits to Auckland the night before one of her daughters was due to recite a Latin poem in competition. Syme was shown the piece, and read it like a German Professor, then a French one, then an Italian, a Turk, and so on. It was hilarious, and the sort of fun he enjoyed. He was immensely witty among his friends too, and it was one of his burdens as Camden Professor that he had to leave his old friends in Trinity for a much less friendly society in Brasenose under his predecessor as Camden Professor, Hugh Last, whose ideas on Roman History and its presentation were utterly unsympathetic to him, and vice versa.

Surprisingly, for a bachelor, Syme did not much enjoy academic discussion; perhaps his mind was too acute, his memory too capacious for most
companions. He immediately got to the point, saw any fallacy in his interlocutor's views, and if he did not already have a view on the point at issue, he knew where the evidence was, and if there was any. For Syme was always prepared to return a verdict of *non liquet*. This made him a rather intimidating person for a young don, as I was when I first met him in 1949. He was then visiting Eric Birley in Durham. They shared an interest in Roman frontier studies (the field of Syme's earlier contributions to CAH), and in the personnel of the Roman army, especially in Britain, and Syme was almost part of a very hospitable family.

Syme's abiding interest in families came out again in his last major work 'The Augustan Aristocracy'. In this he traced the descendants of the noble families who destroyed the *Res publica* to their last known appearances. It is not a book for everyone, but it does contain a reconsideration of some of the thorny questions found in RR - such as the identity of the Varro Murena (or Varrones Murenæ) of the consulship and conspiracy of 23BC (they lurk, surprisingly, in a chapter on Horace, 383-4). It also (though this was not, I think, Syme's intention) shows that many noble families probably died out through disease rather than murder by the régime or despair of the sort that Servius Sulpicius foreshadowed in his letter to Cicero (*ad fam.* 4.5). This reverses the implications of RR 5, 'merciless extinction'; and cf 490ff.

Tacitus had the same interest in the descendants of the Roman nobility. Syme modelled his writing on Tacitus; his prose shows the same love of idiosyncratic vocabulary and epigram, the same cryptic sentences, the same allusive references, the same caustic view of human nature. Tacitus was also an orator. Those who have heard Syme give a paper must have recognised the literary tones not of *Annals*, but of *Dialogus*, and the flow of the orotund periods of Cicero. I remember particularly an address to the 'Herodoteans' in Cambridge which he gave, on Tacitus, in this style; the whole was delivered without a single note, and quoting exact books and chapters. He had memorised it all because he feared he was losing his sight. He was then about 60.

In retrospect, Syme's masterly vindication of Tacitus as a great historian is his other truly great work. In particular, Syme demonstrated that Tacitus was a new sort of Roman historian (at least among those who have survived), one who really researched, in the modern sense, by going back to the basic sources, in his case the *acta* of the Senate, whereas previous Roman historians had worked mainly by reshaping the accounts of their predecessors.
Amongst these predecessors, Syme was interested only in Sallust perhaps because Sallust had influenced Tacitus in his approach to history, and in the style in which he chose to write. Syme chose Sallust for his Sather Lectures in 1959. *Sallust*, he tells us in his preface, was rewritten for publication, and with added chapters, 3 years after the lectures. In it he repeats the lesson of RR (16), 'the last epoch of the Roman Republic....was an era of liberty, vitality and innovation', but Syme's main interest was in the historian rather than in the era, his methods, style and interpretation - just those topics which he had studied so intensively for *Tacitus*.

In *Tacitus*, not all of Syme's bold hypotheses have gained general acceptance - the view for example that the *Annals* were written under Hadrian, and that the emperor Hadrian contributes to the interpretation of Tiberius (Chh. 35-37), but Syme changed the scholarly climate in the study of Tacitus as surely as he changed the writing on Augustus. Few scholars nowadays would write without reservations about Tacitus' 'inadequacy as a military historian' and his 'lack of interest in the Empire'. Syme has made us understand the sort of history that Tacitus meant to write, and wrote.

Either of these areas of achievement would have made Syme a great historian. Both of them make him an outstanding one.

5. The Historian: Syme and Late Roman Studies. A D Lee

During the years after *Tacitus* (1958) and *Sallust* (1964), a significant portion of Syme's energies was devoted to the Late Roman period. The focus of his attention was the conundrum of the *Historia Augusta*, a work with obvious attractions to one with a flair for prosopographical analysis. His involvement in the annual gatherings of the 'Historia Augusta Colloquium' at Bonn, which began in 1963, was an important stimulus to his work, which eventually resulted in four volumes - *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* (1968), *Emperors and Biography* and *The Historia Augusta: A call for clarity* (1971), and *Historia Augusta Papers* (1983). If ultimately his achievements in this field were not of the same order as his work on the Principate, this was due in large part to the intractable nature of the problems raised by this enigmatic work.

The imperial biographies which comprise the *HA*, spanning the period from 117 to 284, purport to be the work of six authors writing during the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine. As such, they constitute potentially the most

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1 Velleius he accused of fraudulence (R R 393,n.1, 488,al.). Livy's books on the period which interested Syme are lost (R R 464 for what they might have been). For Syme the loss of Pollio is a major disaster. One cannot help wondering if the verdict of late antiquity was so utterly wide of the mark.
important Latin source for this period, and in particular offer the prospect of
shedding light on the otherwise poorly documented mid-third century. There are,
however, serious objections to taking this source at face value, and it is now the
broad consensus among scholars that the work is an elaborate fraud, the work of
one author writing at the end of the fourth century.

Despite the claim made in one obituary, 1 Syme was not responsible for
exposing this ancient hoax. As he always acknowledged, the credit for this
belongs to the German scholar Hermann Dessau. In a paper published exactly a
century ago, 2 Dessau first argued for a single author working during the reign of
Theodosius I. But Dessau's heretical ideas by no means won widespread
acceptance, either at the time or during the subsequent long-running debate about
the HA inspired by his paper. More than any other scholar, Syme was
responsible for resuscitating Dessau's thesis and restoring it to such robust
health that it now commands widespread assent. He did this above all by
shifting attention away from the historical inadequacies of the work towards a
consideration of its literary and linguistic features, resonating with echoes of the
social and cultural life of the late fourth century. As he was able to observe with
satisfaction in 1980,3 modern technology (in the form of computer analysis of
stylistic features in the HA) has now confirmed that it is the product of one
pen, 4 while debate about its date no longer ranges across the fourth century and
into the fifth, but focuses on the 390s, and in which year or years within that
decade the work should be located.

This is certainly not to say that Syme unravelled all the mysteries surrounding
the HA or that all his refinements of Dessau's thesis met with widespread
acceptance. In particular, his positing of an otherwise unknown 'reliable source'
for the earlier biographies in the HA (his so-called Ignotus), and his argument
that the perpetrator of the work was directly inspired by hearing Ammianus
reading his history in Rome in the early 390s failed to win the credence even of
otherwise sympathetic scholars; 5 while his explanation of the author's motive -
pure delight in a literary hoax - still leaves important questions unanswered. 6
But given the nature of the HA, such questions are probably unanswerable, and
Syme himself was only too well aware of the need for caution when dealing with
it: "Premature certitudes are to be deprecated". 7

2 In Hermes 24 (1889), 337ff.
1983), 212.
4 I. Marriott in JRS 69 (1979), 65ff.
5 A R Birley, Septimius Severus (London 1971), 308ff (on Ignotus ) and A D E Cameron
6 Such as the much less fanciful character of the earlier biographies in the HA.
7 Ammianus and the Historia Augusta (Oxford 1968), 220.
Although Syme's main contribution to Late Roman studies lies in the specific field of the *HA*, his engagement with that text also resulted in work of broader value to the student of the period. For example, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* provides many insights into the social and literary life of the late fourth century, while a paper from 1970 entitled "Toleration and Bigotry", which discusses the religious views of the *HA*, presents perspectives of wider significance on this important fourth-century theme, particularly in relation to Judaism. Nor is his legacy in this field restricted to his own published writings: a number of today's leading Late Roman scholars - notably John Matthews and T D Barnes - have acknowledged their debt to Syme.

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Auckland University greets its own Ronald Syme as he celebrates his 80th birthday.

As a student you were here once, and also as a teacher;

you were in pursuit of knowledge and your own examiner.¹

¹ This was a leg pull. It is in fact untrue, though Syme never explicitly denied it: he expected people to do their own research properly. As he was on the books at Victoria U.C. he sat the 'Terms' examinations in Wellington, and, as W F Richardson points out
You have told the story of Antony's military deeds and the doom of the nobiles,
you have castigated the young Caesar's trickery.
You have succeeded in revealing Cornelius Tacitus' sources.
and in opening to view the concentrated works of Sallust.
The secrets of the Historia Augusta have been exposed by you,
and what Ovid's beguiling poems have to tell us.
And now your age has stretched across four times twenty years
May your birthday bring you many blessings.

(above), the University of New Zealand papers were set and marked overseas. It was a good story all the same, with a very long history.