



In this, one of the last photographs taken of Sir Ronald Syme OM, he is shown with Sir Isaiah Berlin OM and Lord Franks OM on 16 June 1989 before the Foundation Dinner at Wolfson College, Oxford, of which he was an Extraordinary Fellow from his retirement from the Camden Chair in 1970 until his death on 4 September 1989.

Copyright, Times Newspapers

SIR RONALD SYME

1903–1989

... *non illud culpa senectae*
sed labor intendens animique in membra vigentis
imperium vigilesque suo pro Caesare curae
dulce opus (Staius, *Silvae* 1.4, cf. *RP* v, 514)

The death of Sir Ronald Syme on 4 September 1989 has deprived the Roman Society of its most distinguished member and the world of classical scholarship of its foremost historian. Elected to life membership of the Society in 1929 when he became a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, Syme joined the Editorial Committee in 1931, became a Vice-President in 1938, and served an extended term as President from 1948 to 1952. This was a crucial period during which the arrangements were made for housing the Hellenic and Roman Societies and their Joint Library in the new Institute of Classical Studies in Gordon Square. Thereafter Syme remained an active member of the Society, whose secretaries, as Patricia Gilbert attests, valued him as a wise and accessible counsellor. He also lectured for the Society and advised Editors of this Journal, in which many articles of his continued to appear.

Ronald Syme died three days before the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the *Roman Revolution*, at the age of eighty-six. The second founder of Roman History as the modern scholarly enterprise we know had exceeded by six months the age attained by the first. Both he and Theodor Mommsen wrote, travelled, and continued to relish new work by themselves and others until the very end. Those who marvel at such things will also note that, like his great predecessor, Syme produced his most successful work in terms of popularity and literary quality in his mid-thirties and went on to set himself more and more difficult tasks of technical scholarship and detailed exposition. The *prudentes* or 'men of understanding', however, will be more interested to observe that the scholarly revolution Syme effected, like the transition from the Roman Republic to the Principate so brilliantly depicted in his last masterpiece as in his first, was in part a disruption, in part a continuation. While his work undermined 'the obsession with the *Staatsrecht*' and with the personality cult of men like Caesar, the historical potential of the collections of evidence that Mommsen had created or instigated, *CIL* and *PIR*, was at last fulfilled. Moreover, Syme aimed to continue this process of providing evidence for others: *History in Ovid* (1978) he described as 'a kind of manual', a substitute for the still unsupplied commentary on Ovid's later poems; while his last book, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (1986), he styled 'an incomplete work of reference', designed to be useful to students both of literature and of history.

By 1980 Syme could note with satisfaction in *Some Arval Brethren* that 'fervour for the study of the Roman constitution abates'. His next task was to reduce the prestige and value still attached to civic administration: 'in any age public office entails less of exertion or ability than the ingenuous opine'. That characteristic irony of thought and expression, what a German admirer called 'das Debunking', went with a rejection of theory and doctrine, which he regarded as the great enemies of truth, in scholarship as in politics. He did not wish to be 'a thinker'. Social history, not sociology; politics, not political science; the study of life and letters, not intellectual history, were what he claimed to practise: similarly he studied not 'religion', but ceremony and ritual, not 'ideology' but propaganda and apologia. The lawyer's son knew the details of Roman public law and despised ignorance of them in others, but he sympathized with the 'Roman distrust of theory' and shared the preference for facts over words, for reality over appearance, of those Latin writers whom he took as models for his own work: Pollio, Sallust and Tacitus—not Velleius or Livy. It is not surprising that the one Greek historian he treated in print was Thucydides.

The fact that Syme was born and educated in New Zealand, to which his paternal grandfather had emigrated, undoubtedly helps to explain his particular sympathy with Tacitus, the provincial *novus homo*, with whom he shared the outsider's keen eye for social structures. Syme's pragmatism and a Scottish taste for hard work led him to concentrate his efforts where there was abundant evidence, on the Roman governing class and on extant Latin authors, and this material enabled him to demonstrate the contribution made to the vitality of Rome by outsiders of the 'better sort' from Italy and the provinces. He was hurt by suggestions that he had no concern for the lower levels of society, 'slaves and serfs and the voiceless earth-coloured rustics', and in the year before his death he intimated that modern studies of social history might ultimately allow a narrative history that would include them. Nor did his irony amount to cynicism. While sympathetic to Tacitus' essentially dark view of human nature, he too 'nonetheless believed in human dignity and freedom of speech'. He would have been more delighted than surprised had he lived to see Eastern Europe, whose terrain and languages he knew so well, demonstrate that a generation of oppression cannot destroy the passion for *libertas*.

In scholarship Syme put his belief in freedom into practice in the tolerance he showed towards new and different approaches. His prejudices were only indirectly expressed in feline footnotes or in ironic suggestions for thesis topics like 'Subsistence Farming in Lusitania' or 'Human Rights in Carthage'. He expected and welcomed correction, particularly if new evidence was the cause. Conjecture he felt to be necessary but fallible, and he found amusement in citing examples from his own work of 'premature assumptions annulled rapidly' by new inscriptions. It suited his own dislike of dogmatism to believe that history itself was flexible and open, ultimately governed, as the ancient historians themselves thought, by chance or accident combined with human decisions and mistakes. Delighting in the notion that 'anything can happen', he avoided oversystematization in prosopography and the search for grand explanations and parallels. Indeed he became increasingly intrigued by the role of disease and death, natural disasters and unpremeditated behaviour, in determining events.

For all his technical expertise, he proceeded more by imagination than by method, more by flair than by logic. In the end imagination even overcame his lack of interest in architecture and art, an almost literal blind spot, for his sight had been badly damaged by measles in youth. Yet while peering at new photographs of the Ara Pacis, Syme, childless himself, discerned the correct age of two children and thereby added neglected progeny to the stemma of the Julio-Claudian emperors.

In the service of historical knowledge Syme deployed a unique combination of skills, embracing epigraphy, geography, military strategy, textual emendation, poetic exegesis and literary criticism, but he was also a gifted writer who believed that a work of history, while making no compromise with truth, must have style and structure. He did not so much study his favoured authors as digest and assimilate them. Just as Tacitus was, in his view, not only an exponent of change in the governing order, but a personal document of that change, so Syme himself exemplified the techniques of the writers he understood so well. By way of paraphrase, allusion, even parody, his works took on the resonance of the Latin, as Tacitus echoes Sallust. He expounded ancient attitudes with an empathy that sometimes leaves his readers in doubt as to his personal views. And on occasion he deliberately and recognizably enriched his narrative with allusions to personal experience, a practice that he perhaps too readily ascribed to his Roman forerunners. *The Roman Revolution* echoes the language of Mussolini in treating Octavian's regime; the *Tacitus* at once celebrates and illustrates the union of diligent research in primary records with splendour of style and ingenuity of structure, the ingredients, in his view, of literary renown. *History in Ovid*, his first work written from Wolfson College, which gave him his first and last home after retirement, may be thought to exemplify what it argues, namely that 'late products may happen to be among the best': it was not only Ovid who 'kept

going', put 'removal to the northern outskirts' to good use, 'disdaining sloth or idle recreation' and thereby ensured that 'industry, tenacity and style prevailed'. There is even more mischief in *Some Arval Brethren* (1980) which conveys in the Preface gratitude to his three traditional Oxford Colleges: Oriol, where he won his undergraduate prizes, Trinity, where he was a tutor for twenty years, and Brasenose, where he held the Camden Chair from 1949 to 1970. Likened to a 'college or a club' where 'mediocrity embellished by survival and seniority gains respect among colleagues, although not always in the wider world', the Arval fraternity is credited with affording its members 'endowed feasting and decorous revelry', rituals characterized by the 'assiduous presence' of the less distinguished. Syme himself was a well-known Missing Person from Oxford, travelling abroad even in term.

Characteristic of his implicit style of scholarship, as of his humour, is the last item of the last volume of *Roman Papers*—a spoof fragment of Tacitus' *Histories* recounting the Titus-Berenice episode in the later style of the *Annals*. It is accompanied by a learned commentary exposing the forgery and indirectly conveying Syme's final attack on the authenticity of the early works ascribed to Sallust.

In Syme, not only were scholar and scholarship one: the man and the scholar exhibited an unusual and literal integrity. His pragmatism, his linguistic skills, and his personal contacts in Europe made him effective as President of FIEC (1951-4) and Secretary General of a branch of UNESCO, the International Council for Philosophy and the Social Sciences (1952-71). Another qualification, dislike of the bogus, served him well as Vice-President of the Prize Committee of the Balzan Foundation.

As an outsider to the British university system, Syme had no resistance to the post-war novelty of graduate degrees, and he trained with great success a series of young scholars, including the current President of the Roman Society. Right to the end his imagination never failed him in suggesting areas of fruitful research, though he never imposed his ideas, his views or his methods. When, in his sixties, he became fascinated with exposing the techniques of the 'hoaxer' biographer who composed the *Historia Augusta*, a large number of gifted young scholars followed him into research in the Later Roman Empire, not so much directed as infected by his enthusiasm, which gave even the most hesitant students the confidence to work in their own way. He did not overburden with bibliography or overawe with erudition, and if he sometimes read drafts in a cursory way, he always read them at once. His own experience gave him a sympathy with overseas students, and, up until his death, he was still making new friends among younger scholars in this country and abroad, many of whom he drew to the attention of the Editorial Committee as potential reviewers or contributors.

The affection ('indulgence' as he called it) of his pupils and other scholarly progeny surprised him, for he had cherished independence and privacy even at the cost of loneliness, and he underestimated the value others set on his tolerance and other social gifts. Syme rarely went beyond 'They will do it', as a verdict on the follies of others. Despite his instinctive formality, he first accepted, then relished, life in an informal graduate college and enjoyed all kind of social occasions from family gatherings to grand entertainments. He had a natural sympathy and liking for women, treating them socially with old-fashioned courtesy, and finding no difficulty in taking them seriously as scholars according to their merits. Though he disliked pretension, often remarking 'There is less here than meets the eye', he never concealed his pleasure in the high honours he received, the knighthood in 1959 and the Order of Merit in 1976. He would recall with delight that, on enquiring how he would know when his royal audience was at an end, he was told that Her Majesty would 'imperceptibly rise'.

In his last two years, Syme, now weak and ill, was able to draw on all his qualities of self-discipline, courage, realism and humour to set an example of perseverance and independence as impressive as his scholarship. The extreme personal reticence that led

him to keep his family relationships entirely separate from his scholarly ones and to eschew personal revelation except when otherwise amusing or instructive, offers this consolation to those who knew him and to those who did not: he revealed almost more of himself on the page than in person. The reader who is engaged by the energy and imagination of his narrative, and amused by his aphorisms and insights into human nature, is in the presence of the man himself.

M.T.G.