



Ronald Syme (March 11, 1903–September 4, 1989)

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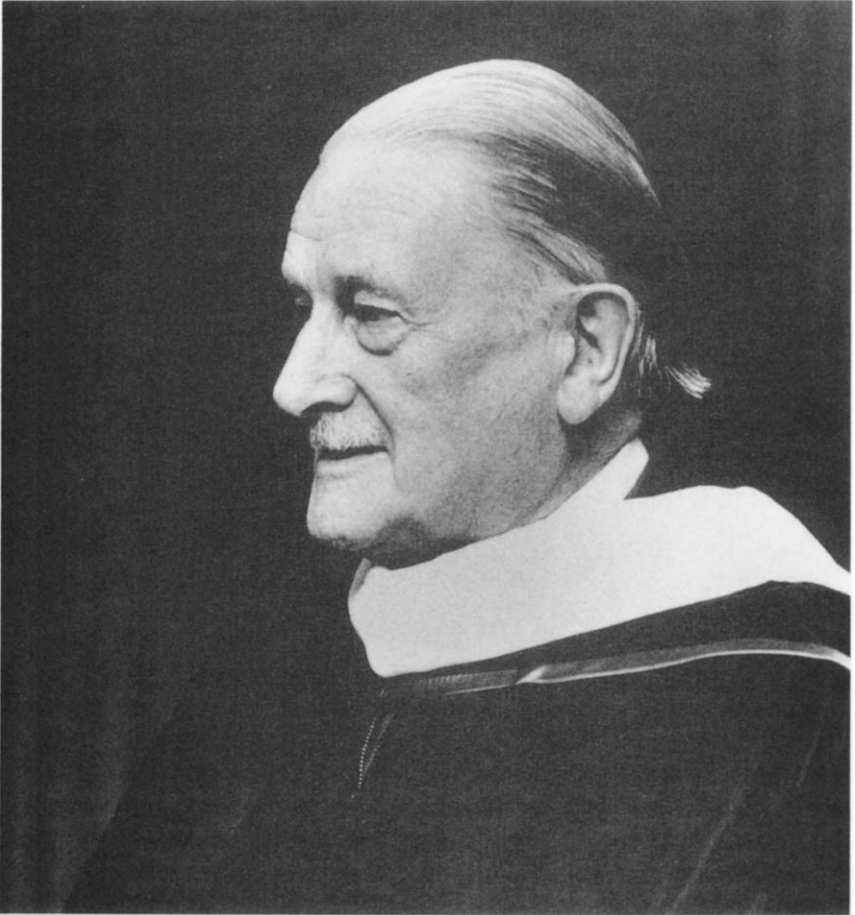
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RONALD SYME
(March 11, 1903–September 4, 1989)

With the death of Sir Ronald Syme we have lost the greatest historian of ancient Rome since Theodor Mommsen and the most brilliant exponent of the history of the Roman Empire since Edward Gibbon. Syme's authority far transcended that of most scholars. He became a knight in 1959, and in 1976 he received the Order of Merit. Bernard Bailyn called him "one of the most creative and influential forces in twentieth-century historiography." His dazzling mastery of intricate detail and his phenomenal memory were united with an instinct for Roman antiquity that often allowed him to speak naturally of the ancient Romans in the first person plural. Syme wrote tirelessly until the day that he collapsed, less than a week before his death. To the end he continued planning a schedule of travel and lecturing that would have exhausted a far younger man.

Although best known as the Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford University from 1949 to 1970, Syme was a New Zealander by birth and a citizen of the world. Born in Eltham ("a good tranquil place"), he pursued advanced studies in French language and literature as well as the classics during his years at the University of Auckland. His knowledge of the works of Balzac was legendary, and his ability to speak fluently in many foreign languages made him a welcome guest at international gatherings throughout the world. As a student in Oxford's School of Literae Humaniores between 1925 and 1927, Syme carried off several prizes in classical philology as well as his First Class degree in ancient history and philosophy. He was soon elected a Fellow of Trinity College at Oxford and rapidly became recognized for a series of incisive articles on the Roman army and the organization of the imperial frontier. During those years he continued to stun his colleagues with his literary and philological expertise. His highly original account of the Moral Re-armament Movement, published in the *Oxford Magazine* in Tacitean Latin, is still worth reading. It begins: *funestam inopia et cladibus urbem perculit novus pavor, gliscente in dies Buchmanitorum secta. auctor nominis Buchmannus, originis transmarinae . . .*

Few historians outside Oxford in the thirties could have realized that Syme was bringing to completion a book that would undermine the constitutional interpretation of Roman history that Mommsen had made into orthodoxy. Syme replaced it with a new, intense analysis of the Roman state in terms of the political ambitions of its leading families. *The Roman Revolution* appeared in the early autumn of 1939. Those who had time to read it in that troubled period recognized at once the powerful impact of contemporary events in both Italy and Germany on Syme's portrayal of the emperor Augustus. Taking his lead from dark insinuations in the work of Tacitus and forging an extraordinary English style that



Courtesy of G. W. Bowersock

echoed Tacitean brevity with Gibbonian phrases, Syme outlined the ruthless and brutal manipulation by which the emperor Augustus established a monarchy under the guise of restoring the old Republic. Generations of historians, brought up in the shadow of Mommsen, were almost scandalized to read, "The Roman constitution was a screen and a sham."

Syme's exact knowledge of the careers of hundreds of eminent Romans allowed him to practice what is now known as prosopography at the highest level. His greatest debt was to Friedrich Münzer, whose *Römische Adelsparteien und Adelsfamilien* (1920) he generously acknowledged in the preface to *The Roman Revolution*. The prosopography of Syme has often been wrongly attributed to the influence of Sir Lewis Namier in Oxford in the 1930s, but Syme had not even read Namier when he wrote his first book. The real impact of *The Roman Revolution* came after the close of the Second World War, when scholars could once more return to their labors.

In the war years Syme himself left Oxford to take up a position as press attaché in Belgrade, where he renewed close contacts with Yugoslavian and other Balkan scholars whom he had met in the course of his studies of the Roman army and frontier. Syme became one of the few Roman historians with a working knowledge of Serbo-Croatian. From Belgrade he passed briefly to Ankara and then took up a professorship of classical philology at the University of Istanbul. Ardent Turkophile that he was, he nonetheless cannot be assumed to have devoted all his time in Istanbul to teaching the Greek and Roman classics. Yet he resolutely never divulged the nature of his work in those years. One may suspect that his contribution to the intelligence network of the Allies was substantial, perhaps even reflected in the Order of Merit that he received long afterward.

It was inevitable that Syme would dedicate an entire work to the ancient author who was clearly most important to him. His *Tacitus* appeared in two fat volumes in 1958. With its forty-five chapters and ninety-five appendixes it still constitutes the most thorough and reliable treatment of the early Roman Empire ever produced by a single hand. Syme's capacity for hard work, as demonstrated in those two volumes, was no less prodigious than his erudition and memory. Like most great humanistic scholars, he worked entirely alone—apart from the solace of a cheap cigar. He had no interest in collaborative research projects and specious programs for which funding could easily be raised. It was more with pride than bitterness that he wrote in the preface to his *Tacitus*,

The task has been long and laborious (for all that ostensible drudgery can be sheer delight). It has been hampered by various delays and vexations. Nor, in making the written text fit for publication and compiling the vast index, can aid or alleviation be recorded from any academic body, from any fund or foundation dedicated to the promotion of research in history and letters.

In his later years Syme both led and joined the revival of interest in

late antiquity through a series of books and articles on the imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*. Despite carping opposition he has prevailed in his view that these biographies, ascribed to six different writers, were all the work of a single man writing three-quarters of a century later than alleged in the text. Syme seems to have discovered in the *Historia Augusta* the same kind of scholarly mischief that he himself had enjoyed perpetrating in the *Oxford Magazine* several decades earlier. Toward the end of his life, Syme's papers were collected in a series published by the Oxford University Press, *Roman Papers*, of which five volumes have appeared and two more are on the way. His papers on Tacitus, the Balkans, and the *Historia Augusta* were likewise gathered in three separate volumes. Original books on Ovid and the Arval Brothers were followed by a massive and long-awaited work, *The Augustan Aristocracy*, published in 1986.

Like all truly great scholars, Syme was never satisfied. He was quick to examine promptly every new inscription and papyrus, and he read the scholarly literature impatiently and perceptively. He expected disagreement, joined debates with vigor and economy of expression, and always believed that there was such a thing as an historical truth that could, with honesty, acuteness, and enough evidence, be revealed. Many a time when Syme launched a new idea, he would say to his friends, in a throaty voice that recalled the turn-of-the-century Oxford historian Grundy (whom he loved to imitate), "Aaah, they won't like it, but I had to say it."

As a teacher Syme had an uncanny ability to encourage his students to develop individually in their own way. He communicated more easily with the young than with many of his colleagues, but he never imposed his views. He neither formed nor wanted any school, and this characteristic made him almost incomprehensible to some European scholars. In an introduction to the Italian translation of *The Roman Revolution*, Arnaldo Momigliano confessed, "His intellectual development remains obscure to me." Syme revealed little of himself in his books or in his conversation. There is no great scholar of modern times of whom we know so little in personal terms—nothing of consequence about teachers, private life, excesses, or peccadillos. As he said himself, "One uses what one has, and there is work to be done. If there be place for censure, it is better visited upon the ignorant and the incompetent." And, as he said elsewhere, "Style abides."

This great man loved words with a childlike passion. He loved their music so much that he seems to have felt no need whatever for real music, which (paradoxically for those of us who cannot live without it) he hated: "Noise," he said, "and they do it deliberately." But to hear him recite Swinburne from memory after wine and a good dinner was to share for an evanescent moment that inner life he kept so secret. There is no doubt that among his particular pleasures in later years he cherished his membership in the American Philosophical Society, to which he always referred affectionately as "the B. Franklin gang." He believed

in the value of obituaries as the only means of entering into history. He need hardly have worried, but a commemoration in the annals of the American Philosophical Society would have delighted him as it honors us.

G. W. BOWERSOCK

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