

A. N. SHERWIN-WHITE
1911–1994*



A. N. Sherwin-White, during his term as President of the Roman Society (1974–7)

‘A Roman public law and administration man’: Nicholas Sherwin-White on himself in 1961 (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, vi).

This was not simple modesty: these were then the central domains of Roman history, and Sherwin’s proficiency in them — ‘Sherwin’ was his colleagues’ familiar usage — a legitimate source of pride. But the truly modest apology here (for not being equally competent in New Testament studies), introduces two salient features of his *oeuvre*: the courtesy, good-humour and gentleness of his scholarship and the real breadth of his vision. Of course this book (the Sarum Lectures for 1960–1) was about Roman administration. But as the *recusatio* suggests, Sherwin here displayed an extensive curiosity about the working of the Roman world. His talent for constructive historiography went far beyond the technicalities of the Roman public

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law (note also the enthusiasm of biblical specialists for *Roman Society and Roman Law*: e.g. F. Grant, *Journ. Theol. Sts.* 15 (1964), 352–8).

This control of detail within a wider frame had made his D.Phil. thesis (1937, published as *The Roman Citizenship* (Oxford, 1939)) brilliantly successful. The examiners (M. Cary and R. Syme) saw clearly how hard and creative the work had been:

In approaching the subject from a less formal and more genuinely historical standpoint than most of his predecessors, Mr Sherwin-White inevitably added to the difficulties of studying it,

but the work showed

a maturity of judgement such as one hardly dares to expect from a young scholar.

The continuing familiarity, at least in this country, of this vision of the Roman world derives in part from the influence of Hugh Last (1894–1957), Sherwin's tutor at St John's (where he had arrived as an undergraduate from Merchant Taylors' in 1930), his supervisor, and a lasting influence (as on so many others) — 'throughout I owe a great deal to Professor Last on points of detail and doctrine' (from the important article on imperial procurators, *PBSR* 15 (1939), 26) — and of vision. Last was a passionate defender of the place of ancient history in a general undergraduate education (see *Oxford Magazine* 48, no. 22 (1930), 814–18), and insisted, sometimes intemperately, on the advantage — over Greek history, for example — that the obvious relevance to the present of Roman governmental organization gave to late Republican and imperial history. The development of a world-state, which forms the climax of *Roman Citizenship* ('the order of events or impulses by which the Orbis not only became but was recognized to be the Urbs', last words of 1973 edn., 468, already there in the thesis) is one of the strongest foundations for this view.

Last's election as Camden Professor (1936), freed the Fellowship which he had held at St John's since 1919. The selectors identified three outstanding candidates, and St John's Governing Body elected Sherwin over R. L. Beaumont (ob. 1938) and A. H. M. Jones. The wide-ranging and adventurous — and rather geographical — pre-War Oxford ancient history of Blakeway and Myres (1869–1954), which produced Russell Meiggs (1902–89) and Tom Dunbabin (1911–55), a co-eval of Sherwin, though he long predeceased him, made its mark on him too. President Norwood of St John's wrote to the Director of Naval Intelligence in 1941 to commend his young Fellow, Sherwin, whose poor sight kept him from active service (and to offer him congratulations, in a lordly way, on the naval war effort). Employment on the Admiralty Handbooks followed (hence the article on the historical geography of Algeria, *JRS* 34 (1944), 1–10), confirming his broad perspective. The acute geographical focus which makes the assessment of the Armenian wars telling in his last book *Roman Foreign Policy in the East* (London, 1984) went back to this war-work.

The dissertation behind *Roman Citizenship* had concerned the cohesion of the Roman Empire as much as the institutional history of the Republican *politeia*: as Cary and Syme put it, he 'has contributed a penetrating chapter to the topic of Roman imperial patriotism'. This wider sense of the subject stimulated him all his life. Another volume on a connected theme, the Cambridge Gray Lectures for 1965–6, was published as *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome* (Cambridge, 1967). By 1970 he was contemplating a new volume, *Modern Problems about the Roman Citizenship*, to appear with a reprint; in *ANRW* in 1972, he produced a masterly summary of his view of the subject and of recent scholarship (I. 2, 23–58); the second edition of *Roman Citizenship* (1973) was a synthesis of these projects, a quite new book (saluted by T. R. S. Broughton in *JRS* 65 (1975), 189–91).

Another key to his scholarship was his sensitivity, which the place of ancient history in *Literae Humaniores* at Oxford fostered, to the problems of using literary texts for history. In St John's itself he found congenial and helpful company in Gilbert Highet and Colin Roberts: and he was not the only Fellow to benefit greatly from having Donald Russell (with whom he worked in great harmony for many years) as a colleague. Sherwin's mastery of this other foundation of early imperial history is clear from his review of Syme's *Tacitus* (*JRS* 69 (1959), 140–6), in which there is much else characteristic of his acuity and style.

The Camden Professor has written a tremendous book, fantastically fertile in ideas and constructions, at times outrageously provocative, always with immense learning shrewdly and economically applied,

he enthuses, and those who remember him will hear again in these words his authentic excitement and the slight squeak in the voice that accompanied it, and see the wry and infectious smile. But he could see problems, and on point after point his insight is precise. Where was Tacitus' geography? 'S[y]me is remarkably impatient of general ideas'. What real basis was there for the 'theory of the marshals'? 'We ought not to be told that the actual bronze text of a *Senatusconsultum* is worth less than the word of a "consular historian"'. Here we find the *mot* 'seldom has so long a book contained so much *brevitas*', and most tellingly, his fear about the possible effect of the literary sources' misrepresentations: 'Has the greatest of the Roman advocates found in S. his most illustrious victim?'

Syme's view of the younger Pliny was another problem. Sherwin complained 'He makes Pliny so absurd that his remarkably successful career is difficult to understand'. His strong feelings were understandable: he was engaged with his own bid to understand a whole text, the great *Commentary* on the *Letters* of the Younger Pliny (Oxford, 1966), on which he worked for at least eighteen years.

The genre of Commentary proved a misleading vehicle for his lively and learned views on the subject. Few episodes in Roman history in the last decades parallel the vituperation with which the scholarly community displayed its most unlikeable side in hunting for this work's errors. An explanation is called for. 'Live by the sword and die by it' is a non-starter: Sherwin was not given to the sharp criticism which had been a vice of Last, and still less to the kind of gleeful abuse which *Pliny* received. Some disciples of Syme felt — unreasonably — that Sherwin belonged to an anti-prosopographical camp hostile to Syme's. The commentary form was losing favour, and in many quarters the 'rigid self-control in avoiding facile but delusive generalisations' which Cary and Syme had so admired in 1937 was less admired, while a new generation of historians was keen to establish that it too could do 'Roman public law and administration', and at the same time to suggest that other newer things were more compelling. This work lacks the precision of the Commentary as it lacks its dryness, but constitutes an imaginative response to the historiographical problems of dealing with Pliny's *Letters*. Let us now recall the statesmanlike summing up, and response to the critics, of Frank Lepper (*Gnomon* 42 (1970), 560–72):

for me the very personal characteristics of the work make it peculiarly stimulating and exciting: it is . . . the record kept, however intermittently, by a well-trained, variously informed and quick (often too quick) mind . . . a work to be perused avidly, yet used advisedly.

It is indeed the range of interests, and, once again, the pointilliste ability to form a large picture out of smaller discussions, that continue to impress in this book.

Pliny, of course, required the further development of the themes of Sherwin's earlier work: the early history of Christianity, naturally, but also the questions of *repetundae* and *maiestas* (on which he had already made significant contributions). In 'Violence in Roman politics', *JRS* 46 (1956), 1–9, aiming to come 'closer to the texture of the ancient world', he had indeed demonstrated a striking independence from (though no animus against) the Münzer/Syme camp, and, in stressing not the breaches of legality but the observance in the last years of the Republic, looked ahead to the radical reassessments of the place in the equation of power at Rome of those outside the élite which have been made in the last decade. He was more interested in persuasions made against a background of order than in the arbitrariness of warlords (in his lucid summary 'The imperialism of Caesar', *Greece and Rome* 4 (1957), 36–45, he located the conquest of Gaul in a 'tradition of restrained exploitation', investigation of which was to lead him to disagree with William Harris' radical restatement of the aggressiveness of Rome in *JRS* 70 (1980), 177–81). The maturity of a number of these currents of thought may be seen in his late article 'The Lex Repetundarum and the political ideas of Gaius Gracchus', *JRS* 72 (1982), 18–31.

This well-balanced academic career was an example of how much may be achieved by the maturing of the ideas of productive scholars in conditions of mutual influence. He was fully

involved in this Society, as a member of Council, and from 1963 a Vice-President. Teaching was very important to him: in his case there can be no doubt of the cross-fertilization between teaching and research. Sherwin settled in to his College, where he had the same rooms for forty-two years, and was a devoted Tutor, and very popular with his students (not least for his unconventional enthusiasm for the turf).

There were rewards for this diligently spent career and its important contributions to the scholarly debate and to liberal education: FBA (1956), and Reader in Roman History (1966: his case was made to the University on his 'personal distinction as a scholar', as much as the practical needs of the time), but not the *gloria* of the Camden chair; but he was no less integral to the complex fabric of the study of Roman history than those who held it in his time. Let us conclude with his own generous praise of Syme: 'In his *Tacitus* the School of Literae Humaniores may salute what in this age of specialisation is the most remarkable and successful of its products'. *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*.

N.P.