



SIR RONALD SYME

The solemn expressions which usually mark the seventieth birthday of a great scholar seem merely absurd in the case of Sir Ronald Syme, who retains not only more vitality and intellectual energy, but more irreverence and humour than most men half his age. Yet the occasion may serve for us to congratulate him, and also to remind ourselves that when *The Roman Revolution* was given to the Clarendon Press in 1938 its author was thirty-five, and had sat the Final Honour School of Literae Humaniores a mere eleven years before. Its publication on the 25th of September 1939 marked one of the minor but very real tragedies of the war. For what would in other years have been instantly recognized everywhere as a brilliant *tour de force*, a demonstration of massive scholarship and a classic of historiography had to wait a decade or more before the world had time to give it the attention it deserved.

The Roman Revolution might be described as the first great step in a long campaign to free Roman history from the domination of a faction of abstract nouns. Syme substituted for the abstractions and generalizations essential to a long-established school of Roman history an acute awareness of the language and concepts actually used in Roman society; a sensitivity to those movements, aspirations and fortunes of innumerable individuals and families, which actually constituted the reality of a great historical change; a careful and precise yet illuminating use of epigraphic evidence; and a wider awareness of the geographical background, and in particular of the local origins of those *domi nobiles* who moved unceasingly into the Roman governing class.

All these features re-appear in the great work on Tacitus, which not so much corrects or amplifies existing conceptions of the early Imperial period as suddenly reveals for the first time a whole society, that of educated senators of the end of the first century, their outlook on the contemporary world, their reactions to the regime of Domitian which they had survived, and the terms in which they saw the Julio-Claudian period which old men still living had experienced.

For all his military and geographical interests and for all his immense learning in epigraphy and prosopography, Syme has, more than any other great ancient historian, written essentially as someone deeply immersed in classical literature. It is just this quality which gives such distinction to his *Sallust*, and which he has carried with him in his recent brilliant foray into the late fourth century, entirely re-creating our conception of the *Historia Augusta* simply by seeing it as a literary work written by someone steeped in the classical tradition—and possessed of a sense of humour.

It is right to emphasize the profoundly individual nature of his achievement—the fruit, as it is too easy to forget to-day, of decades of intensely arduous, detailed and solitary work. His influence on a whole generation of Roman historians

has been exerted by setting a style and a standard, not by chairing committees or exercising patronage. Nonetheless it is proper to recall his crucially important Presidency of our Society in 1948-52, which laid the foundations of its present establishment within the Institute of Classical Studies of London University, and also his long, active and vigilant association with the editorial committee of the *Journal*. In a wider sphere, he long held the position within Unesco of Secretary-General of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies, and since 1971 has been its President. Less well known has been his help and encouragement as Camden Professor to a succession of younger historians in Oxford and elsewhere, not by heavy-handed direction but by the hope and expectation of high standards, and a subtly-perceptible aversion to work which was pretentious, second-hand or dull. One may recall his remark after the delivery of a more than usually pedantic paper—‘Things like that should be published as an article. (Pause.) Or perhaps not published.’

His friends all over the world may safely be assured that the generous hospitality of Wolfson College will provide not an impediment to, but a secure base for, continued flights around the globe. We need not make the pointless gesture of wishing him a happy retirement, but rather look forward to the pleasure and stimulation of further explorations of Roman history by its greatest living exponent.

F.M.