

ERIC BIRLEY

1906–1995

THE DEATH of Eric Birley on October 20th, 1995, Past President of this society, and a member since 1929, marks the end of an era in the study of Hadrian's Wall. His name will be associated with those of F. G. Simpson, who died in 1955, and Sir Ian Richmond, who died in 1965, in connection with the great work of elucidation of the monument from the excavation of Haltwhistle Burn in 1907–08 to the Second World War. That is however only part of Birley's contribution to scholarship, as it was for Richmond.

He was born at Eccles in Lancashire, and although he lived the greater part of his life in the north-east, his first allegiance was always to the Cumberland and Westmorland Society. It was Robin Collingwood who first sent him to Hadrian's Wall, as an undergraduate. His first publication in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, to which he was to contribute regularly for over thirty years, was in 1930 on excavations west of Newcastle, on turret 7b (Denton Hall) and Milecastle 9 (Chapel House). In the fourth section of that report he proposed a new dating for the four main periods of occupation of Hadrian's Wall, based on the inscriptions found at Birdoswald in the previous year. This preceded the publication of that excavation with Ian Richmond in C and W, also in 1930, Birley reporting on the pottery and the inscriptions, as he was already a specialist in both. Birley's new interpretation of the dating of the Wall periods was to win wide acceptance and be the basis of all work on the Wall and other sites for over fifty years, so he established himself as a formidable scholar in his early twenties.

In 1929 he had also made a momentous personal decision. The Chesters estate had come

on the market, and Birley, advised by Thomas Hepple, his excavator, selected Vindolanda as the fort with most potential to acquire with a view to excavation. The decision cast long shadows. Birley as an afterthought took up residence at Chesterholm in Anthony Hedley's old house. There he brought his bride Margaret Isobel Goodlet, whom he married in 1934, known to all his pupils and friends as Peggy. They lived there till 1950, and there Robin, named for Collingwood, and Tony, named for Anthony Hedley, were born. In 1970 the Vindolanda Trust was set up, with Robin, who had never lost sight of the site, as Director and Birley himself as Chairman till his death 25 years later. His old home became the centre of the museum, and his ashes lie in the garden.

In 1931 he was appointed lecturer in the University of Durham, originally at Armstrong College, Newcastle, then part of Durham, and then in 1935 when Richmond was appointed to the post in Newcastle he transferred to Durham. Apart from wartime service, he was to remain with the University of Durham till his retirement in 1971.

Throughout this pre-war decade 1929–39 Eric was digging and regularly publishing in AA and C and W. The sites were Vindolanda, Housesteads, Corbridge, Birrens, and Carzield, the last two necessitating publication in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* and in *Dumfriesshire and Galloway*.

Inscriptions also occupied him, notably in his paper on the garrisoning of Hadrian's Wall in C and W 1939, though he continued with his publications on pottery, engaging in a notable argument with Sir George Macdonald in the

pages of the *Journal of Roman Studies* on the date of the first Roman withdrawal from Scotland. But his interests beyond Britain grew, with visits to Germany and Switzerland to look at pottery, sites, and frontiers. A notable review of the volume on diplomas of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* helped to establish a European reputation. He had also produced guides to Corbridge and Housesteads, the former in particular notably re-interpreting the evidence of the pre-First World War excavations in the light of the Wall periods as dated by Birley.

Birley's early mastery of German had the unexpected result of propelling him into Military Intelligence during the Second World War. He was summoned back from a congress in Berlin by a telegram apparently from Peggy but in reality from the War Office. His achievements in Military Intelligence have been given perhaps insufficient credit. He applied his understanding of the Roman army and German thinking upon it so successfully to the study of the number and location of German divisions in the Second World War that he was able to confirm at the end of it that his total was correct; there had been one added he did not know of and one destroyed, also unknown to him. Milton Shulman in an article in the *Evening Standard*, on 24.11.95, prompted by obituaries of Birley which neglected this side of his activities, observed that "Eric Birley was pre-eminent among those who gave our commanders the information needed to defeat Hitler". He himself had been studying the dispositions of German divisions on the eve of D-day, with information supplied by the division of Military Intelligence headed by Birley.

Returning from the war, Birley took on new responsibilities as first Vice-Master and then Master of Hatfield College, Durham. He virtually recreated the college, which had been in danger of merger with another college, but this in no way absorbed all his energies. A notable series of articles on the history of Roman Britain flowed from his pen, as on the Roman army, his first love. His study of the promotions and transfers of officers in the German

army seemed to give him fresh insights into these processes in the Roman army. He largely turned away from excavation, except at Corbridge where he directed the training course in excavation, at first with Ian Richmond, later with John Gillam.

He had in no way lost his interest in the Wall, and produced the *Handbook of the Centenary Pilgrimage* in 1949. In that same year he conceived and carried out a scheme for the creation of an International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies. By his tireless efforts it was instituted in 1949, at Newcastle, conveniently timed so that members could also attend the Pilgrimage. These Congresses have continued, the sixteenth meeting being in 1995, and have made an immense contribution to promoting contacts between frontier scholars and knowledge of each other's work. In 1959, 1969, 1979, and 1989 a Congress was held in Britain, so timed that again members of the Congress could attend the Pilgrimage if they so wished. This has given the pilgrims a peculiarly enriching experience, with international scholars plodding alongside local amateurs.

The papers published in Durham and Newcastle had to be made available to a wider audience, so in 1953 many were re-printed in *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*. There were fewer appearing in *AA*, but between 1947 and 1963 there was a most notable series of papers in *C* and *W* summarizing the state of knowledge on Roman forts in the north-west. In 1959 both societies, ours and *C* and *W*, had Eric as President at the time of the Pilgrimage. An unfortunate accident prevented him presiding over much of the Pilgrimage itself, but he turned the delayed *Handbook* for that pilgrimage into *Research on Hadrian's Wall*, published in 1961. This was not simply an account of modern research, but drew on Eric's unrivalled knowledge of the antiquaries. The remaining years of his academic teaching and his life were taken up largely by his Roman army studies, of which a volume appeared in 1988 as *Roman Army Papers 1929-1986*, and his chairmanship of the Vindolanda Trust.

No account of Birley's life would be complete that did not refer to his pupils. From the

beginning Eric gave himself to his pupils, his time, his energy, his library and his files and collections of material were fully at their disposal. Although he never taught on a first degree course in archaeology, so the undergraduates who came to him had not been originally selected by him, he led a number of them to take up archaeology as a career or as a major interest. Before the war his pupils included John Gillam and Professor George Jobey, past presidents of this society, Kenneth Steer, secretary to the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments in Scotland and Peter Wenham, long-time lecturer at St. John's College, York, and excavator of Roman York. After the war he continued to draw undergraduates to him, and graduates from other universities. The former included Iain MacIvor, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments in Scotland, Michael Jarrett, Professor at Cardiff, whose West Whelpington report has appeared in recent issues of *AA*, Dr. Roy Davies, who died so tragically young, David Breeze, also Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments in Scotland, and myself. The latter include Professor John Wilkes of the London Institute of Archaeology and Dr. Valerie Maxfield of the University of Exeter. Corbridge also was a recruiting-ground; Professor Norman McCord, also a past president of this society, regularly appeared as a site supervisor, and has pursued his archaeology through the medium of aerial photography alongside his career as a modern historian. Birley was able through Corbridge, his tireless correspondence, and invitations to scholars from home and abroad to spend a little time in Durham, to give help and advice to a wide circle. Among those who specialized in Roman army studies alone, in which also most of the post-war figures already mentioned took a constructive interest, may be mentioned Dr. Margaret Roxan of the London Institute of

Archaeology, Professor Géza Alfoeldy of Heidelberg, and Professor Hubert Devijver of Louvain. The achievements of Birley's two sons, Robin, Director of the Vindolanda Trust since 1970, and Tony, Professor at Manchester and Dusseldorf, owe much to their father's inspiration and encouragement.

Eric Birley was a long-term member of this society, Vice-President 1950–56, and President 1957–59. He contributed to *Archaeologia Aeliana* nearly 40 items, including in every year from 1930 to 1940. His major publications have been briefly noted. They include two Pilgrimage Handbooks, counting *Research on Hadrian's Wall*, and he gave the Pilgrimage a unique flavour by the association of it with the members of Congresses of Roman Frontier Studies. Individual members of the society learnt much from him, whether academics or amateurs.

To those who had the privilege of being taught by him he had a very special quality. On the one hand he was generous, almost extravagant, with his time, energy, books and collections of evidence, the latter often forming the basis of other people's theses and published works. On the other, he always was a kindly but stern critic, spending much of his time reading typescripts of articles and books ahead of publication. He sent us back to the original evidence, to assemble it methodically and then form our own views before setting them alongside received wisdom. His pupils found a natural affinity with one another, forming a "Birley school" which recognized one another across the generations and frontiers. He for his part firmly believed we were all swans, and followed our careers with interest and encouragement. The words of Hubert Devijver may summarize our feelings: "The sight of E.B. with his pipe, and always in the company of his faithful dog, will stay with me, forever."