

Profile: Philip Grierson





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Philip Grierson, medieval historian and numismatist, benefactor and the Fitzwilliam Museum's Honorary Keeper of Coins since 1949, died on 15 January 2006, aged 95.

In more than sixty years of avid collecting, Professor Grierson formed the most representative collection of the coinage of Continental medieval Europe that exists, which he has bequeathed to the Museum. A bachelor don, he remained a resident of his college – Gonville & Caius – for 76 years, yet he was acclaimed internationally, holding posts in Brussels and Washington simultaneously with those in Cambridge and receiving accolades from academies and learned societies around the world. He has been called ‘the foremost medieval numismatist of our time, or indeed perhaps of any time’. His life was one of contrasts – of stability and energy, of frugality and generosity, of erudition and frivolity.

Philip Grierson was born in Dublin, and brought up in a Protestant family that had fallen on hard times as a result of the agricultural depressions of 1875-84 and other circumstances. His father, Philip Henry Grierson (1859-1952), had been a land surveyor and a member of the Irish Land Commission, a post that he lost with the change of Government in 1906. As a result, he and his wife, Roberta Ellen Jane (1875-1970), moved to Clondalkin, near Dublin, to manage a small family farm and it was here that Philip Grierson spent the first years of his life. His father, then in his 50s, acquired a reputation for financial acumen, and was appointed to the boards of several companies, establishing him in a new career which enabled them to leave the farm and move to the coast at Bray in 1914.

He described his parents as ‘deeply and rather austere religious’, and he and his two sisters – an elder brother had died in infancy – were never taken to the theatre and agreed to abstain from alcohol until they were 21. Although he later rejected the Christian faith, he admired and was very fond of his parents, and visited them regularly until his mother's death in 1970. From the age of ten he was sent to boarding school, first locally in Bray, and then to Marlborough College, where he was very homesick.

At school Philip Grierson was fascinated by science, and he resolved to become a doctor. In 1929 he was accepted by Caius to read medicine, but as soon as he came up he changed to history. He took a double first and was awarded the University's



LEFT
Philip Grierson on his father's shoulders, c.1913

FAR LEFT
Philip Grierson in the Fitzwilliam Coin Room 2004



Philip Grierson as a young Fellow of Caius

Lightfoot scholarship and the College's top prize, the Schuldham Plate. In 1932 he began work as a research student on Carolingian history, but having been offered a Fellowship at Caius in his third year of research, as was the custom at that time, he thought it unnecessary to submit for a PhD.

His early interest in science subsisted throughout his life, and later manifested itself in a taste for science fiction, and also for new technology. He enjoyed flying, and trained as a pilot in his early 20s, though curiously he never learnt to drive. On the evening of his admission as a Fellow of Caius in October 1935, he left high table promptly so that a friend could fly him from Cambridge airport to drop him at Rugby where he could pick up the Post Train to Holyhead, to catch the ferry to Dublin and attend a family party the next day. He relished the challenge such a journey posed. He greatly enjoyed walking and on one occasion in 1932 or '33, after seeing a play in London, he decided to walk home, arriving in Cambridge at lunchtime the next day. In 1934 he walked the length of Hadrian's Wall, returning to Cambridge riding pillion on a motorbike. He always took pride in his health and fitness, and,

although not an avid sportsman, he regularly played squash as a way of both keeping fit and staying in contact with the young, continuing to play until his eightieth birthday.

He was adventurous, and loved foreign travel – a taste he probably inherited from his father, who in the 1920s had travelled a lot in Europe, including Central Europe and the Balkans. In the long vacation of 1932, just after he had graduated, Philip Grierson and a friend from Trinity joined a tour of Russia organised by Intourist, visiting Leningrad, Moscow, Rostov, Gorky, Stalingrad and Kiev. There they left the party and headed south to Odessa, where they boarded a ship for Istanbul, and then wended their way back via Greece and Italy using a combination of ships, planes and trains. In a letter written home to his mother he reflects 'the Ukraine and South Russia generally have imbibed far less of the pure milk of communism than Northern Russia, which makes it more pleasant to our eyes'. The following year he explored the Rhineland on foot, in 1936 he was in Finland and in 1937 he walked on glaciers in the mountains of central Norway.

Philip Grierson later described himself as a 'rather unpolitical person', though he admitted that in the 1920s and '30s among students there had been a great deal of interest in foreign affairs, and in Russia in particular, as well as some sympathy for Germany which it was felt had been harshly treated in the Treaty of Versailles. The trip to Soviet Russia led him to collect books on the subject, which in 1943 he used as the basis for a well-received bibliography, *Books on Soviet Russia, 1917-1942*, followed by annual supplements until 1950. But 'benevolent scepticism' was the way he characterised his approach to life, and this might aptly describe his view of politics and the establishment.

Six years after his Russian trip, he went on a far more daring venture. Five young Fellows of Caius – David Daube, Guy Griffith, Michael Oakeshott, Alec Parker and Philip Grierson, all of whom became Fellows of the British Academy – would play Mah-Jongg together as a group. David Daube, a German Jew who had come to Cambridge as a PhD student in 1933, heard news that his father and father-in-law,



Medieval coins from the Grierson collection

Jakob Daube and Hugo Aufseesser, had both been among the 30,000 Jewish men rounded up after *Kristallnacht* and they had been imprisoned in Dachau Concentration Camp on 11 November 1938. Daube wanted to get them out, and Philip Grierson, the only other member of the group who spoke German, volunteered to go over to negotiate on their behalf. He moved rapidly, obtaining a German visa on 14 November, and armed with British entry permits for the families, expedited by the University's MP Kenneth Pickthorn, he flew to Frankfurt on the 18th. During his few days there, he travelled to Freiburg (Daube's home town), Basel (where there were family friends) and perhaps Munich (where the Aufseessers lived and close to Dachau), returning on 23 November. The men were released from Dachau on 20 and 26 November, and left with their wives to arrive in England where they lived into old age. Daube subsequently became Regius Professor of Civil Law in Oxford.

At the outbreak of War Philip Grierson tried to enlist, but to his chagrin was turned down because of his eyesight and a childhood injury to his feet. He also failed an interview to work at Bletchley Park on the grounds that his German was not up to scratch!

He, therefore, remained in Cambridge as one of a reduced team of dons teaching the History Tripos.

He had already built a reputation as a medieval historian, and it was a chance event that kindled his interest in coinage. While spending Christmas 1944 with his parents, he came across in his father's desk a Byzantine bronze coin that intrigued him. He brought it back to Cambridge, and sought out Charles Seltman at Queens' College, who identified it as a follis of the Byzantine emperor Phocas (602-10), and said that such coins were readily available in London. A week or two later, Philip Grierson visited Spinks, and said that he wished to buy a few medieval coins to show to his students and would spend up to £5, but he was 'not a collector and had no intention of becoming one'. However, two weeks later he was back for more – the bug had bitten. By the end of 1945 he had bought over 1,500 medieval coins and a year later his collection numbered some 3,500. He had come to the field at an unprecedented time, when the London dealers were awash with coins from the late Lord Grantley's collection, sold in eleven auctions during the War. From this he was able to lay down the foundations

for a systematic collection of Continental medieval coinage, which he then built on and developed over the next sixty years, and which eventually would number more than 20,000 coins.

He realised that ‘medieval historians had not in general made nearly as much use of coins, either as illustrative matter or as first-hand evidence, as they might have done’. Initially, he saw his coins as supplementing his undergraduate teaching, a course of some 64 lectures covering ‘European’ history – the British Isles excepted – from 284 to 1492. Former students remember these lectures for the trays of coins he would pass around the crowded lecture theatre. But it was an invitation from Brussels in 1947 to apply for their vacant Chair in Numismatics that prompted him to make this his main subject of research and publication. Fortunately the Cambridge and Brussels terms did not coincide, and for 33 years he managed his teaching load by spending part of the Christmas and Easter vacations in Brussels.

He also impressed colleagues at the Fitzwilliam, and in 1949 Sydney Grose, the Museum’s Honorary Keeper of Coins intermittently since 1922, resigned the post in order that Philip Grierson, who was still only 38, might succeed him. It was a sound decision, for after 56 years Philip Grierson became the longest serving Honorary Keeper, and one of the Museum’s most outstanding benefactors, not only for his generous lifetime gifts and munificent bequest, but also for the support and advice he gave to the Coin Room staff.

Philip Grierson had taken medieval numismatics by storm, and in just a few years he had become an

authority in the field. Invitations poured in, to lecture in Europe and America, and to become the honorary ‘adviser’ or curator for the coins at Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard’s institute for Byzantine research in Washington. His brief was to build the world’s finest collection of Byzantine coins and publish it. A task which by the time he relinquished that role in 1997 he could proudly say he had achieved. Cambridge appointed him Reader, later Professor of Numismatics, and awarded him an Honorary doctorate, a distinction it rarely confers on its resident members.

Despite his erudition and intellect, which at times could be intimidating, Philip Grierson was innately sociable and enjoyed a mischievous sense of humour. Professor Christopher Brooke recalled that in the 1940s ‘We visited his rooms to read essays and to listen to his gramophone records and read his books: in a natural informal way his room was one of the most active social centres of the College.’ Later generations came to watch some of his 2,000 videos and DVDs. He had long had a reputation for being a film buff. As a student he was Secretary of the University Film Society, and when an eighth cinema opened in Cambridge the local newspaper could report: ‘Now Mr Grierson of Caius will be able to go to a different cinema every day, and two on Sundays.’ Ever popular with students, on his ninety-fifth birthday, two months before his death, he gave a speech at dinner that was met with a rousing applause from the undergraduates. Their respect and friendship he valued most of all.

Mark Blackburn

Keeper of Coins and Medals, University Reader in Numismatics and Monetary History, and President of the British Numismatic Society

Sources

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