

Grierson, Philip

by James McGuire

Grierson, Philip (1910–2006), historian and numismatist, was born in Dublin on 15 November 1910, only son and second of three surviving children (another child had died in infancy) of Philip Henry Grierson (1859–1952) and his wife Roberta Ellen Jane (née Pope), a doctor's daughter. Grierson's unbusinesslike grandfather, Philip Grierson (d. 1910), had built a country residence, Baldonnell House (latterly Baldonnell military aerodrome), near Clondalkin, Co. Dublin, which he was forced to sell in 1903. When Grierson was born in 1910 Philip Henry Grierson, who had lost his position with the Irish Land Commission on the change of government in 1906, was an impecunious farmer living in Kilcarberry, a small farm on what had been the Baldonnell estate, but within four years he had embarked on a successful business career in Dublin, investing his savings in stocks and shares and eventually sitting on the board of several companies. In 1914 the Griersons moved to Bray, Co. Wicklow, and in 1922 to a more substantial house in Rathmichael parish in south Co. Dublin. The family was Church of Ireland, deeply religious, strictly teetotal and eschewed the theatre.

Having attended Aravon School in Bray, which he disliked, Grierson was sent to Marlborough College in Wiltshire which he found intellectually stimulating, though he was deeply unhappy at being away from home. Science was his chief subject at school, as both he and his parents had assumed that he was intended for a career in medicine. However by the time he went up to Cambridge he had decided to read history. In October 1929 he matriculated at Gonville and Caius College, of which he was to be a resident member for the rest of his life. He obtained a first in both parts of the history tripos and graduated BA (1932) and MA (1936). After graduation he became a research student at Caius, working in early Flemish history under C. W. Previté-Orton of St John's College. On the strength of a dissertation on the development of the county of Flanders, 965–1070, he was elected as a research or 'unofficial' fellow of Caius in 1935. An 'official' fellow from 1945, he was college librarian (1944–69), director of studies in history, president (1966–76) at a time when the sinologist Joseph Needham was master, life fellow and latterly senior fellow. In the university he was appointed assistant lecturer in 1938, university lecturer in 1945, reader in medieval numismatics in 1959, and from 1971 professor of medieval numismatics, retiring in 1978. Regularly appointed a syndic of Cambridge University Library, he served as chairman of the library syndicate from 1977 to 1980.

During the second world war he served in the Home Guard, having been turned down for military service on physical grounds (bad eyesight and an old foot injury from his school days). He had been keen to join up and commented ruefully years later: 'was it not Dr Johnson who said that a man is always somewhat ashamed of never having been a soldier' ('A numismatic career').

Despite his later eminence in numismatic history, medieval European history, ranging in time from the accession of Diocletian in 284 to Columbus's discovery of America in 1492, remained his primary teaching responsibility throughout his university career. In 1952 he edited for publication Previt -Orton's *Shorter Cambridge medieval history*, a two-volume abridgement of the monumental eight-volume edition (1911–36), for which in the late 1930s he had compiled genealogical tables for a projected, but never published, supplementary volume. From this work he gained an encyclopedic knowledge of the family relationships of the ruling dynasties of medieval Europe: 'I have never been at a loss over references to Peter the Ceremonious or Charles of Anjou: I know when they lived, to whom they were related, and how they came to be where they were' ('A numismatic career'). This familiarity with medieval rulers, their families and institutions provided Grierson with an indispensable basis for his work as numismatist.

Grierson's interest in numismatics was aroused by chance. Staying with his parents in January 1945, he found in a box of coins kept by his father a medieval copper coin he could not identify. Back in Cambridge an expert in Greek coins told him it was a Byzantine coin from the reign of the emperor Phocas. Grierson immediately saw the educational potential. He told Spink's of London, the collectables auction house, that he was prepared to spend  5 to buy some coins to show students but that he had no intention of becoming a collector. But collecting was, as he would later put it, 'in my blood' (his father had built up a meticulously catalogued collection of natural history phenomena, especially freshwater snails), and the time was propitious for a collector. Postwar austerity meant that he had little on which to spend his modest salary and so he used his savings to start collecting at a time when the London market was awash with medieval European coins from the breakup of Lord Grantley's collection. He had soon acquired what he later called 'an uneven but quite interesting medieval collection'; within five years it amounted to over 7,000 coins.

In 1947, when asked by the British Council to lecture at the universities of Brussels, Li ge and Amsterdam, he used his new-found interest in numismatics to lecture on the changes of Roman coinage in the fourth and fifth centuries and the light they threw on the decline of Rome. The day after his Brussels lecture he was invited to be a candidate for the chair of numismatics and the history of coinage at the University of Brussels, to which he was duly elected and which he held on a part-time basis, giving fifteen lectures annually, till his retirement in 1981. As he admitted later, this appointment compelled him to take up the study of numismatics seriously. When the Historical Association published the English translation of his Brussels inaugural lecture as *Numismatics and history* (1951), the American Numismatic Society in New York raised funds for an annual seminar in numismatics, to which Grierson was invited in 1953. While in America Grierson was shown the coin collection at Harvard University's Center of Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, and asked, along with Professor Alfred R. Bellinger of Yale, to report on the collection. The outcome for Grierson was the creation in 1955 of the honorary post of advisor in Byzantine numismatics at Dumbarton Oaks, with the objective of making the

Center as far as possible the best in the world. He held this post until 1997, usually spending two months each summer in America, at Washington and at Cornell University, where he was a visiting professor. He had two main responsibilities. The first of these was to build up the collection with funds supplied by the Center, which involved him travelling around Europe. To avoid any conflict of interest he ceased collecting Byzantine coins himself and sold most of his Byzantine coins to the Center at an independent valuation. His second responsibility was to catalogue with Bellinger the entire collection; this was published as *Catalogue of the Byzantine coins in the Dumbarton Oaks collection and in the Whittemore collections* (5 vols, 1966–99). Grierson provided substantial introductions to volumes ii, iii, and v; after Bellinger's death in 1978, he was joined by Michael Hendy, who catalogued vol. iv.

Parallel with his work for the Dumbarton Oaks collection, Grierson continued to collect coins for his already considerable collection in Cambridge. Having disposed of his Byzantine coins, he focused now on the coins of western Europe from the fall of the Roman empire to the late fifteenth century. His purpose over the following four decades was to put together a representative collection of types and denominations. While he found it a pleasure to acquire beautiful and expensive coins, he was more interested in common coins than in rarities, for they would have been the ordinary coins in circulation. In 1991 he estimated the number of coins in his collection as being between 16,000 and 17,000, adding that he was still buying 'perhaps 200 or 300 coins a year' ('A numismatic career'). At the time of his death his collection was estimated at around 20,000 pieces. He kept his collection in his rooms at Caius up to 1979, when it was moved to a special room at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, where he had been honorary keeper of coins since 1949. He bequeathed the collection to the museum but maintained ownership in his own lifetime; this allowed him to sell duplicates and to replace individual coins with better examples. He paid for the coins he collected out of his own resources, mostly from his salary and latterly pension, though he also used part of a small inheritance received on the death of his mother in 1970. In the early 2000s he estimated the market value at between £5 and £10 million.

In the 1960s, as it grew in size and importance, Grierson began to think of publishing his collection, but it was not until 1982 that plans for a multi-volume work on western European coinage took shape. His Cambridge colleague, the historian Christopher Brooke, secured funding from the Leverhulme Trust, the British Academy and Caius College to finance a survey of the coinage of medieval Europe, to be published serially in a multi-volume edition by Cambridge University Press under the general title *Medieval European coinage (MEC)*. Mark Blackburn (1953–2011), who later became keeper of coins and medals at the Fitzwilliam, was initially Grierson's research assistant but soon became his collaborator and joint editor of volume 1: *The early middle ages (5th–10th centuries)* (1986); Lucia Travaini was his joint editor for volume 14: *Italy III: south Italy, Sicily, Sardinia* (1998); volume 6 (2012), on the Iberian peninsula, also bears his name alongside Miquel Crusafont and Anna M. Balaguer. When the *MEC* scheme was put in place in 1982 Grierson was already 72;

by the mid-1990s it was clear that the original plan to have him as principal author of all volumes was no longer realistic, a view with which Grierson was happy to concur, and a new strategy to commission leading authorities to prepare individual volumes was put in place. Grierson himself now concentrated on the Low Countries, and at the time of his death had written over one thousand pages of typescript for MEC's projected volume 7.

Grierson published several books and papers arising from his work on Byzantine and medieval European coins; these included *Bibliographie numismatique* (1966; 2nd ed. 1979), *Byzantine coins* (1982), *The coins of medieval Europe* (1991) (originally published in 1976 as *Monnaies du moyen age*), and in 1992, with Melinda Mays, *Catalogue of late Roman coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection: from Arcadius and Honorius to the accession of Anastasius*. But he did not confine himself to his own specialist fields. In 1956–7 he delivered the Ford Lectures at Oxford on 'Coinage and society in early Anglo-Saxon England', soon after publishing *Ancient British and Anglo-Saxon coins* (1958), the first of sixty volumes in the *Sylloge of coins of the British Isles series*. Many of his numerous articles were republished as collections: *Dark Age numismatics* (1979), *Later medieval numismatics* (1979) and *Philip Grierson: scritti storici e numismatici* (2001).

Described as 'the foremost medieval numismatist of our time, or indeed perhaps of any time' (Lord Stewartby), he brought to numismatics his considerable linguistic skills and an informed interest in science, metallurgy, engineering, metrology and mathematics. And he brought a questioning mind: 'the enquiries into the validity of accepted conclusions should often be directed not at the conclusions themselves but at the means by which they were obtained' (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, cl (2007), 99). Had he but collected on the scale he did, his standing as a numismatist would have been secure. But his contribution went way beyond what he achieved as collector or indeed the munificence of what he bequeathed to the Fitzwilliam Museum. In the 1940s, when he started collecting, he was rare among historians to treat coins as a form of evidence and rarer still, as a fledgling numismatist, to bring to his new found interest the insights of a professional medievalist's understanding of historical context. He most probably reached the widest readership with a relatively short book, *Numismatics* (Oxford and New York, 1975), an exposition of numismatic method, based on thirty years of accumulated expertise.

Grierson's achievements were recognized with the award of numerous honours and distinctions. Elected FBA (1958), associate member of the Academie Royale de Belgique (1968), and corresponding fellow of the Mediaeval Academy of America (1972), he served as president of the Royal Numismatic Society (1961–66). He was conferred Litt.D. by Cambridge University for his publications and research (1971), and received honorary degrees from Ghent (1958), Leeds (1978) and Cambridge (LLD – 1993). In 1983 he was presented with a Festschrift: *Studies in numismatic method: presented to Philip Grierson*, ed. by C. N. L. Brooke, B. H. I. Stewart, J. G. Pollard, and T. R. Volk (Cambridge, 1983; 2008).

Unlike his devout parents, Grierson was a committed atheist. He once suggested, perhaps not entirely seriously, that Caius chapel be converted into the college library. Like many of his generation in the 1930s he had communist sympathies, though he was not a member of the Communist Party; as he explained many years later, 'I was never a joiner' (*Caian* (Nov. 2007), 172). In 1932 he visited the Soviet Union, which he admired, and eleven years later published with Methuen *Books on Soviet Russia, 1917–1942: a bibliography and a guide to reading* (1943). He would not visit Italy while Mussolini was in power, nor Spain under Franco, but he did visit Germany under Hitler. This arose when the distinguished biblical and legal scholar David Daube, like Grierson a fellow of Caius, found out that his father and father-in-law had been imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp on 11 November 1938 in the aftermath of Kristallnacht. Grierson flew to Germany on 18 November, having lobbied the tory MP for Cambridge University to obtain British entry permits for both men and their wives, and successfully secured their release within a fortnight.

Although he lived most of his life in Cambridge and regarded himself as British, Grierson retained a not uncritical affection for Ireland, which he visited regularly while his parents lived. Later in life he would recall childhood memories of being taken up Nelson's Pillar by his father to see the devastation wrought by the 1916 rising. Every few years in the decades that followed his mother's death in 1970 he would visit Ireland for short holidays, usually staying in Bray. He liked to walk in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains, including Bray Head, Carrickgollogan and nearby Ballycorus, to visit the NMI and NGI, and to call upon Irish friends and collaborators, including the Augustinian scholar John O'Meara (qv) and the numismatist and civil servant Colm Gallagher. He held Ed Walsh, founding president of the University of Limerick, and his wife Stephanie in high regard and they kept in contact up to Grierson's death. He had a fondness for what he regarded as the Irish sense of the absurd, publishing 'Irish bulls' in the *Cambridge Review* (9 June 1938); this was reprinted in pamphlet form in 1946, and again in 2012 in Travaini (ed.), *Philip Grierson*. He took great delight in a satiric novel by Honor Tracy (qv) about 1950s Ireland, *The straight and narrow path* (1956).

Grierson was devoted to the cinema from his student days, when he was secretary of the university film society; with the advent of videos he moved from regular cinema visits to viewing in his rooms, frequently inviting visitors or groups of students to join him. In no sense was he 'a film *auteur* in the way that he was a great historian and numismatist' (Grant Tapsell); he simply loved 'movies' (his preferred term) and liked sharing his pleasure with others. By the time of his death he had over 2,000 videos and DVDs on his shelves, most of them methodically listed. His taste was popular; he had what he called 'an unregenerate weakness' for Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood. He liked movies such as *Diehard* or *Terminator* and actors such as Sylvester Stallone, Jackie Chan, Sigourney Weaver and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

He retained remarkable good health until his last years, and even when his health declined he continued working. He played squash from his undergraduate days

and planned to give it up on reaching 80, though he was still playing in his eighty-first year. He spent the last weeks of his life in a nursing home at Cottenham, near Cambridge, where he died on 15 January 2006. He never married.

A portrait by George Bruce hangs in Gonville and Caius College. A complete bibliography of his writings from 1934 to 2006 is in Travaini, *Philip Grierson*.

Edward Timms, 'An interview with Professor Philip Grierson', *The Caian*, 1977–8 (Nov. 1978), 33–55; 'A numismatic career', *Spink's Numismatic Circular*, xcix (1991 and 1992) (revised version of 1987 interview in Helsinki); *WWW*; *Guardian*, 18 Jan. 2006; *Independent* (London), 20 Jan. 2006; Grant Tapsell, 'Philip: pizza and movies', A celebration of the life of Philip Grierson held in the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, 14 March 2006, online at www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/events/grierson/; Neil McKendrick, obituary, *The Caian*, 2005–06 (Nov. 2007), 161–190; Christopher Brooke and Lord Stewartby [Ian Stewart], 'Philip Grierson 1910–2006', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, cl (2008), 79–104; Lucia Travaini (ed.), *Philip Grierson, Irish bulls and numismatics* (Rome, 2011); information from Colm Gallagher and Abbot Christopher Dillon; personal knowledge.