

## CHRISTOPHER BLUNT AND HISTORIANS

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On the twenty-third of April 1958 the British Numismatic Society met at the Warburg Institute for the first time and was addressed by the doyen of Anglo-Saxon historians, Sir Frank Stenton. [*PLAY EXTRACT OF RECORDING, made by me at Christopher's suggestion.*] There followed an hour of stimulating historical observations on the Anglo-Saxon coinage.

For the origin of this event we must go back to Christopher Blunt's presidency of this Society in the immediate post-War years, when in one of his Presidential Addresses he warned of 'the perils that beset the path of numismatists who attempt to handle, unaided by the historian, the raw materials of which history is made'. The solution, he said, 'lies in co-operation between the historian, archaeologist and numismatist'.

So it is no surprise that in 1947 he wrote to Stenton asking if he would review a paper for our *Journal*. But the real breakthrough came five years later, when Christopher was working with Michael Dolley on the tenth-century hoard discovered in Chester in 1950. He decided to seek Stenton's advice on certain coins from the hoard and this led to a meeting between the three of them. There followed a stream of letters, particularly from Dolley who wished to acquaint Stenton with his remarkable discoveries in the late Anglo-Saxon coinage.

Stenton was a willing recipient for, as he said himself, he had been interested in coins since his childhood. His knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon series had of necessity relied on the commentary in the *British Museum Catalogue*, published in the late nineteenth century, and the views expressed in George Brooke's *English Coins* of 1932. Nevertheless he had devoted considerable space to the coinage in his great treatise, *Anglo-Saxon England*, which continues after sixty years to be an essential textbook for students of the period.

In March 1955 Sir Frank and Lady Stenton spent a weekend at Christopher and Elisabeth Blunt's home in Ramsbury, at which the launching of a *sylloge* of coins of the British Isles was discussed. Christopher had hoped to begin it with the celebrated Lockett collection, but this idea had to be abandoned when Lockett's widow died and the collection was to be broken up. Nevertheless a committee had been formed to pursue the project and in the summer of 1955 Stenton accepted an invitation to join it as its chairman. He continued in that role until his death in 1967. In an obituary, Christopher wrote that 'without his constant support and encouragement it is unlikely that the project would ever have been realised and it is certain that it would never have achieved what it has'.

By this time other medieval historians were following Stenton's lead in taking an active interest in the numismatic evidence. As a result, Dorothy Whitelock,

who had been elected a member of our Society in 1958, chaired the Sylloge Committee from Stenton's death until 1979 and was succeeded for fourteen years by Henry Loyn. Although from 1993 the Committee was chaired for a decade by Lord Stewartby, who of course is a numismatist, he has now been followed by another historian, Simon Keynes. Other leading historians have served as members of the Committee.

Christopher's tribute to Stenton was genuine, but it is equally true that the *Sylloge* would not have developed so quickly and successfully were it not for his own perseverance and his energetic promotional and editorial involvement. The Sylloge Committee had become a committee of the British Academy in January 1956, and nine years Christopher was elected to the Academy's Fellowship. Ian Stewartby has described this as 'a most exceptional distinction for an amateur scholar without a degree' and as giving him extra authority, both within the Sylloge Committee and in his dealings with the Academy's officers in furtherance of an ambitious programme of publication.

Central to an understanding of Christopher's achievement is the warm and generous hospitality he and Elisabeth so readily extended at Ramsbury to numismatists and historians alike. Michael Dolley was a regular visitor while in post at the British Museum. The Stentons, too, came frequently. Our President has recorded that in 1966, the year before Sir Frank's death, Lady Stenton wrote to Mrs Blunt that 'after eleven times enjoying the hospitality of your house perhaps we might feel that we know each other well enough for Christian names all round'. (How times have changed. But remember that Stenton was born in 1880.) Marion Archibald, Ian Stewart(by), Hugh Pagan and I are among many who also benefited at Ramsbury Hill from what Ian has aptly described as 'a kind of informal research institute, equipped with a first-class coin collection and a specialist library, and led by one who was held in universal esteem both as a scholar and as an administrator'. I am in no doubt that what we ourselves achieved in collaboration with Christopher owes much to the courtesy, kindness and consideration he showed us, not only at Ramsbury but also in his meticulous correspondence.

I will close by showing a historic photograph I took on one of my own visits there, I think about 1959. It shows Blunt, Dolley and Stenton examining a coin tray on which, if my memory serves me well, was the newly rediscovered gold penny or mancus of King Offa's moneyer Pendraed. But I would like to give the last word on this subject to Christopher himself, replying to Stenton's lecture here in 1958. *[PLAY RECORDING]*