CHRISTOPHER BLUNT
AN APPRECIATION

D. F. ALLEN
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This volume is offered as a tribute by the Members of the British Numismatic Society to Christopher Blunt on his 70th birthday in token of their admiration for his unequalled services to the Society and to British numismatics over a period of more than 40 years. It is fitting that it should be prefaced with some account of his life and achievements; but, written while his work is happily in full swing, this appreciation can be no more than a milestone on a road which still has far to go.

It was the courtly and benign figure of John Shirley Fox who first introduced Christopher Blunt, then a schoolboy at Marlborough, to the enticements of numismatics, and set him on a course which, with singular consistency of purpose, he has pursued from that day to this. By the time he joined the British Numismatic Society in 1933, at the age of 28, he had already for 10 years been a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society, and had contributed his first paper to The Numismatic Chronicle, on a theme close to the heart of his original mentor.

In 1933, it is fair to say, the British Numismatic Society had reached its lowest ebb. It had been brought to birth in 1903, with the highest hopes and ambitions, by a group of British numismatists whose differences with the Numismatic Society (not then Royal) ran very deep. Personalities apart (and there were enough of them and to spare) the basis of the quarrel was that the numismatic establishment of that day was giving insufficient attention to our own insular numismatics, in contrast to the Classics, the Continent, and the Orient. It was a complaint not without foundation, and the new Society proceeded with all haste to restore the balance. The first twenty volumes of The British Numismatic Journal bear witness to the vigour of the idea and to the energy and enthusiasm (more sometimes than the discretion) of the early editors. But the achievements for British numismatics recorded in those well-thumbed volumes of scarlet, green, and gold endorse the validity of the concept underlying the creation of a second national numismatic society.

By 1933 the fire had burned itself out. The founders were dead or on their way to retirement. The affairs of the Society had fallen into the hands of men who, whatever their merits as enthusiastic collectors or antiquaries, had few claims to scholarship and lacked both the will and the drive to enlist the aid of those who had. The feud with the establishment was now over and the Society had come, even if sometimes grudgingly, to be accepted, but by now its finances had fallen on evil days and the Journal was already in arrears.

This was the back-cloth when Christopher Blunt appeared on the scene. He was by then a rising merchant banker in the old-established firm of Higginson & Co., of which he was later to become a partner. Unlike an elder and a younger brother, each of whom has achieved distinction in an academic field, he chose not to go to university, but to set out as soon as possible on restoring the family fortunes—a decision which seemed more natural in those days than it would today, even for the son of a Church of England parson. But Christopher Blunt had the advantage of being born into a family of scholars and thinkers which embraced, for instance, a poet of world renown, Wilfrid Scawen
Blunt; and in his home life he was able to absorb influences which many first encounter only at their university. At the age when his contemporaries were reading for degrees, he was, in fact, through personal reading in numismatics, history, and archaeology, building up the foundations of the wide learning his work displays; but it is easy to overlook that this has been acquired exclusively as a spare-time activity. It is this combination of a scholar's view of life with a businessman's experience which has enabled him from the start to guide and direct so successfully the affairs of the British Numismatic Society.

Of this period I can write with some personal knowledge. My first memory of Christopher Blunt is in 1935, when this slim, fair-haired figure of immense height, and even then moving with an air of dignity and control, sailed into the Medal Room at the British Museum to suggest to the Keeper of Coins that its newest recruit should without delay join the British Numismatic Society, of which his predecessor George Brooke had been a member at the time of his death. The suggestion became a command, and within a year I found myself the Secretary of the Society with Christopher Blunt as its Director. From this posture I could, even then, observe the workings of his remarkable mind and personality.

While acknowledging the seniority of the Royal Numismatic Society, of which he later became President, Christopher Blunt had by the mid 1930s convinced himself that the aims of the founders of the British Numismatic Society had been sound and must be revived. British numismatics was a large and important enough field to require serious study and research on its own, in parallel with the work of the Royal Numismatic Society and in no sense in conflict with it. But if the British Numismatic Society was to justify itself, it was fundamental that its publications should pursue the highest standards of scholarship, both as regards content and presentation. A strong Journal involved a strong Society to support it. Having at an early stage set himself these aims, he has through many vicissitudes followed them through to consistent fulfilment, both by his own efforts and by the recruitment of willing colleagues and supporters.

After a year of service as a Member of the Council, Christopher Blunt was elected in 1935 to the office of Director, which at that time carried with it the responsibility for editorship of the Journal. He immediately took the Journal in hand and, usually with a collaborator, notably Horace King, carried the main responsibility for its composition and scholarly standards for the next 35 years. The war produced a short break, from 1942 to 1945, when much of his time was spent abroad on duties connected with military censorship, but there was no doubt to whom the formidable task of post-war reconstruction of the Society had to be entrusted and in November 1945 he was elected President for 1946. On conclusion of the normal five-year term, he reverted for another four years to the Directorship, which he had held up to the war. From 1955 he has been, and happily remains, one of the Society's Vice-Presidents. This is a record of loyalty and affection without peer in the Society's history, and it has provided the main base from which Christopher Blunt's own direct and indirect contributions to British numismatics have been made.

These began with what is still the standard paper on the short-lived mint of Edward I, II, and III at Berwick-on-Tweed (1931a, see also B. 1928a–b). Although in its early days the Society had been more catholic in its coverage, and there had been extensive attention given to the Saxons, Danes, and Normans, by the 1930s some revolution of
interest had determined that it should concentrate almost exclusively on the Plantagenet Middle Ages. Christopher Blunt's early work reflected this trend; its characteristic was always to combine an acute attention to numismatic detail with a thorough absorption of the contemporary documentation. It is possible to detect in this phase the joint influences of John Shirley Fox (of whom, in combination with his brother Earle Fox, much the same is true), and of the distinguished but by then ageing L. A. Lawrence. But it was not long before Christopher Blunt himself became the leader.

This was apparent after the publication (1936a, 1938a, see also 1950c) of his masterly studies on the gold coins of the reign of Edward IV, coupled, if one may so put it, with the name of Edward V. His handling of the controversy which followed from his reattribution to Edward IV, on the basis of the documentary evidence, of coins traditionally ascribed to the Prince in the Tower, is an excellent example of the diplomatic touch which has stood him in such good stead (1937a). After Edward IV, Henry IV (1936b, 1942a, to which he reverted briefly some quarter of a century later, 1967e), and back again to Edward IV, this time in conjunction with C. A. Whitton (1946a). That admirable schoolmaster had the misfortune to catch tuberculosis a few years before the cure was known and he was forced to retire prematurely. He devoted much of his enforced leisure to Plantagenet numismatics and the affairs of the Society. This collaboration marks an important stage in Christopher Blunt's work, mainly in the early post-war years, and ended only with Whitton's all too early death in 1950. It is to this period that there belongs the revised (3rd) edition of George Brooke's *English Coins*, which Whitton edited with assistance in fields where he was not a specialist from Christopher Blunt and others (B. 1950e).

As a side-line there belongs to this phase of Christopher Blunt's work his intriguing account of the jetton of Perkin Warbeck (1950b), almost the last of his contributions to the numismatics of the later Middle Ages; he was only to revert incidentally to the period on which his growing reputation rested, for instance in collaborative notes on the use of leather money (1959b) and the mint output of Henry III (1970b). What one may call the first or Plantagenet phase of Christopher Blunt's numismatic career culminated in the award to him by the British Numismatic Society of the John Sanford Saltus Medal (23 May 1951).

During the war, while he was in uniform, Christopher Blunt had little opportunity for practical numismatics, but ample time to ponder the continuity of British numismatic studies and the place of the Society in them in the unpredictable world to follow; and it was also borne in upon him that the great progress made in Plantagenet studies, to which he had contributed so much, was not matched by comparable up-to-date studies of the prolific issues of four centuries of Anglo-Saxon coinage. His opinions, it would seem, took shape while, as a colonel, he was stationed in Paris, where incidentally he had spent his childhood. This post gave him the opportunity to work at the Bibliothèque Nationale. His interest in the European connections of English coins had been first exemplified during the war by his study of Temple-type coins with the name of Æthelræd (1943a, a theme to which he reverted later, 1948b). But now the wider European context in which British coinage has to be seen became a major facet of his thinking.

So, when Christopher Blunt returned to the City after the war, he had already resolved in which direction the future for him lay, and from about 1947 onwards all his principal
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writings, alone or in collaboration—he has always welcomed collaborators—have concerned the Anglo-Saxon or related fields. The new direction into which he was to lead British numismatics, while adumbrated in the series of five successive Presidential Addresses to the British Numismatic Society (B. 1946f, 1947g, 1948j, 1949d, 1950i) became fully explicit in his five subsequent addresses as President of the Royal Numismatic Society (1957–61). He had previously been its Foreign Secretary (1949–56), but in 1957 became the first numismatist to have held the Presidency of both Societies.

For evidence of the new fire and enthusiasm which he instilled into the British Numismatic Society in the immediate post-war years, one may adopt the classic phrase *respice*. The post-war resurrection of the Society, both as an association of numismatists with common interests and as a vehicle for his own research and that of a growing school of admirers and imitators, was by common consent essentially his work. To him are due such turning-points as the decision in 1949 to house the Society’s library jointly with that of the Royal Numismatic Society at the Warburg Institute, a step which has had lasting value for all the parties involved in the transaction. In his own work, between 1948 and now, in a variety of papers long and short, Christopher Blunt has, alone or in collaboration, cast a new light on virtually the whole field of Anglo-Saxon numismatics from Offa and his times to the reform of Edgar. There is space only to be selective and it is more illuminating to present the story in its historical perspective than in the order in which it was written, something better seen in Robert Thompson’s bibliography (to which the references refer). Thus, we may begin with his major study of the reign of Offa (1960b, see also 1958c-d, 1969d–e), which should be read with his earlier work on the coinage of Ecgberht of Wessex (19576, see also 1958a). In conjunction with C. S. S. Lyon and B. H. I. H. Stewart, he has revolutionized the view of the coinage of southern England from 796 to 840 (1963a). Moving later and further afield one may refer to his study, with D. M. Wilson, of the important Trewhiddle hoard (1961a, see also 1955a), where coins and jewellery were mixed, and to his account of the St. Edmund memorial coinage (1969c). Nearer to the age of mint-names, we find him returning more than once, sometimes in collaboration, to the theme of Alfred and the unification of England (1950a, 1952c, B. 1956c, 1959a, B. 1959e and especially 1960c), which in the present volume he carries forward into the reign of Æthelstan. Between these key papers he had filled in the gaps with many shorter notes on new coins (1952a–b, 1956a–b, 1958e–f, 1962a–c, C. 26 February 1963, 1971c–d), old or new hoards (1953b–c, 1954b, 1957a, 1958b, 1964a, 1966a) or excavations (1954a and more to come). His concept of what numismatic studies of the period can achieve for the historian has been plainly expressed (1960a, see also 1970a).

Of particular interest are his incursions into the study of gold in the Anglo-Saxon period. Passing quickly over a penetrating review of C. H. V. Sutherland on thrymsas and the Crondall hoard (B. 1948i), one may recall his share in recognizing the gold coin of Pendred, which he has since generously presented to the British Museum (1968a). But this was not his only essay into Anglo-Saxon gold, since it was he who first brought to light the gold penny of Edward the Elder in Lausanne (1948a), which had been found in Switzerland. Unfortunately, his efforts to arrange an exchange which would bring this remarkable piece to England have so far failed.

Christopher Blunt has not attempted, in his own writings, to make a similar impact on coinage subsequent to the reform of Edgar, though what he has written or recorded,
often with collaboration, has been highly significant (for instance, 1967b–d, 1969b, 1971b–c).

It is at this point that reference should be made to Christopher Blunt’s close working
association with Michael Dolley, who joined the staff of the British Museum in 1952.
Their first collaboration in print was the publication of the very important 1950 Chester
hoard (1953a); other joint work has appeared in later years, much of it in relation to the
last century of Anglo-Saxon coinage (for instance, B. 1955c, 1957a, 1960c, 1961b, C.
numismatic editing of Sir Frank Stenton’s volume on Anglo-Saxon England in the
Oxford History of England (B. 1971e). In fact the number of joint papers may do less
than justice to the degree of mutual consultation, but the steadying hand of the senior
partner is apparent throughout, whenever the collaboration took place, as much in these
papers as in the editing of this Journal and in the creation of the Sylloge of Coins of
the British Isles, to which we shortly come. Other collaborators, not so far mentioned by
name, have been J. D. A. Thompson (1955b), F. Elmore Jones (1957c, 1968b, 1969b),
G. van der Meer (1969d, e), J. D. Brand (1970b), and Olof Von Feilitzen (1971b).

In assessing Christopher Blunt’s contribution to British numismatics a very high place
must be given to his creative activities as editor. There is no need in this context to
elaborate on the extent to which The British Numismatic Journal, with its high standards
and wide coverage, has reflected his editorial skills; but this has, all too often, made
unseen demands on his abundant reserves of diplomacy. But it is essential to record
and underline his part in creating and shaping the British Sylloge. His own, all too
modest, account of this is to be found in the words he used when receiving the Medal
of the Royal Numismatic Society (17 June 1969). We can do better.

The Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles was officially born in 1953, when the British
Academy adopted a suggestion of the Numismatic Societies forwarded to it in the
previous year by Sir Edward (then Dr. E. S. G.) Robinson, the Keeper of Coins at
the British Museum. It will cause no surprise here that the initiative for this then almost
visionary enterprise came in fact from Christopher Blunt, with the strong backing of
Michael Dolley, who has since shared the general editorship of the series. Others
who were involved are Professor Dorothy Whitelock, Philip Grierson, author and editor
of the first volume, and Philip Whitting, whose services as the Sylloge’s first Secretary
should not be overlooked. From the start the keenest interest in the series was taken
by Sir Frank Stenton, a numismatist from his childhood, and in the early stages Sir
Edward Robinson, as founder of the Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum, made an im-
portant contribution. Those named above formed the first, and very strong, Com-
mittee under the chairmanship of Sir Frank Stenton, who, with his wife, were later to
become close friends of Christopher Blunt. After Sir Frank’s death it was Professor
Dorothy Whitelock, another friend, who assumed the chairmanship. To the Fest-
schrift volumes for both Sir Frank Stenton and Professor Whitelock Christopher
Blunt made contributions (1960b, 1971b). But all who have served on the Committee
would acknowledge that the series could not have got off the ground, nor continued,
as it has, from strength to strength but for the continued drive, forethought, and calm
supervision of Christopher Blunt. It is remarkable that a busy partner in a merchant
bank, later executive director in successor companies, could find the necessary time in
the 10 or 11 years before he retired in 1964 to devote to this by no means secondary task.
By the time of his retirement it had become obvious that Christopher Blunt’s services to numismatics deserved wider recognition and in 1965 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, to which his younger brother already belonged. His election was remarkable in one particular respect, in that, over the whole course of its history, not more than a handful of Fellows have ever been elected to the British Academy who hold no university degree. It is no coincidence that the period immediately following his retirement and election has been, as the bibliography shows, particularly productive.

The *Sylloge* soon settled down to an annual rate of production of three volumes every two years, and is now approaching two a year. The twentieth volume has already appeared and an index up to this point is in preparation. This has, in addition to editorial functions and occasional part-authorship, involved planning and financial acumen on an appreciable scale. The project has been financially successful in the sense that the cash flow from sales pays for new volumes, as they come along, with only a marginal injection of fresh capital or outside support. The series has now managed to put on record, in up-to-date fashion, the Saxon and Norman coins of a fair proportion of the main collections of this country and abroad. Cambridge, Glasgow, Oxford, Edinburgh, Belfast, Chester, Gloucester, Bristol, Reading (the Stenton Collection), and various Midlands museums at home have all contributed; abroad Copenhagen on a vast, Stockholm on a smaller, scale are there. A start has been made on private collections as well, including the Norweb Collection; of this volume Christopher Blunt was the principal author (1971a). Apart from volumes already planned—York, Leeds, and Liverpool at home, and Finland abroad, for instance—the main gaps in the coverage of the series are the British Museum itself and the great Stockholm Collection, which is to be handled in a separate manner. The concept that the British Museum should be included in the series was there from the beginning, but only a small start has so far been made; it is hoped that there will be opportunities for this to be rectified in the near future with the Museum’s full co-operation.

A legitimate criticism of the *Sylloge*, as it has developed over twenty years, is that the record has concentrated too much on the Anglo-Saxon and Norman series, to the exclusion of the later Middle Ages and after; even the pre-Roman coinage is usefully, but only partially, covered. This is true, but it has probably been advantageous to make the most of the particular editorial expertise available and to leave to a later phase the comparable coverage of other no less interesting periods; and it has been right to record first those times and places where the coinage is a significant factor in the economic and political history of the country. Christopher Blunt can claim that he has, with all the collaboration which a series of this kind calls for, provided the basis for the study of British coins of the early Middle Ages in more depth than is yet possible in any other country of Europe. The bequest by Lady Stenton of the bulk of the Stenton estate to the British Academy to further, amongst other projects, the work of the British *Sylloge* is a token of the respect in which his achievement is held by the country’s most distinguished scholars.

It is neither possible nor desirable to encumber an account such as this with all the details of Christopher Blunt’s career. For instance, in addition to the metropolitan activities with which we have been mainly concerned, he has been ready to play an active part in the numismatics and archaeology of the provinces. He has been President of the Kent Numismatic Society, of the Bath and Bristol Numismatic Society, and of the
British Association of Numismatic Societies, with the organization of whose earlier Coin Days he had much to do. He is the very active President of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, the product of a long residence in the county, and he is now Chairman of the recently formed Wiltshire Museums Council. Within the Society of Antiquaries, to which he was elected in 1936 and on whose Council he served from 1957 to 1958, one of his main contributions has been in helping to organize the rehabilitation of William Morris’s Kelmscott. His work has been recognized abroad and he was, for instance, elected an honorary Member of the French Numismatic Society when in 1965 it celebrated its centenary. This list could be indefinitely extended, but it is sufficient to say that Christopher Blunt’s numismatic work has been fitted into the interstices of an otherwise very full life, and that he has never grudged his energies to any worthwhile cause in the interests of history, numismatics, or antiquities. That he recognizes his debt to others is exemplified by his record as an obituarist (B. 1939a, 1943b, 1949a, 1953d, 1966c, 1967g, 1968d, 1967h, 1970d–e).

All this has, most fortunately, been conducted against a happy home background, and he has throughout had the constant support of his wife, Elisabeth. From Gerald Road, through Uffington and Hungerford, to Ramsbury and now from time to time in Albany, his home has always been a centre for numismatists of all ages and countries whom he and his wife have delighted to invite and entertain. One such guest, Professor K. F. Morrison, had the good taste to marry one of their daughters. Christopher Blunt’s excellent library and his collection of coins, which incidentally incorporates that of John Shirley Fox, have always been at the disposal of scholars and friends.

In a tribute of this kind it would be out of place to attempt any more critical evaluation of Christopher Blunt’s total contribution so far to British numismatics. Moreover, it would imply a finality which is not there. Much remains for him to do. This volume is mainly devoted to his study of Æthelstan, but other reigns too, both before and after, call for equally comprehensive and penetrating treatment. It is hoped that Christopher Blunt will soon be able to start on a revised catalogue of the British Museum’s Anglo-Saxon collection, beginning with Alfred, a reign where the 1893 catalogue is sadly behind the times. It could well be that some of Christopher Blunt’s most important and lasting work lies ahead of him. It would, therefore, be unbecoming to qualify this interim record with facile judgements. Let the record stand. It is something to be proud of and the British Numismatic Society itself is proud to be able to do honour, on his seventieth birthday, to someone who has rightly been called its second founder.

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