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Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting, 25 November 1975

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

Tonight I publicly complete my five years’ service as President, expecting to hand the seals of office to a master of detail, Mr. Peter Woodhead, under whose penetrating eye I predict that the Society will flourish for the five years to come. I thank you for the privilege that you have given me, for the pleasure of working so closely with a body that is free and friendly, yet critical, that preserves the graces of true amateurism when many antiquarian studies are hobbed with cant-talk and bogus professionalism. I thank you too for the opportunity to speak at large, to voice the peripheral interests which make coins such a central and referent subject. Like Memling’s model, I hold a coin between my fingers to proclaim that I will live and die a wide-eyed child of the unbounded Renaissance.

One year is too short for a worthwhile review of any but an insect life: a human census needs a Roman lustre, and of this I shall avail myself later. But one year brings the sad duty of recalling those whom we have lost—three only in the Society, but two of exceptional stature, with whom I have enjoyed long friendship, and a third who has been a benefactor.

In Derek Allen, who died suddenly in June, not only our Society and our sister, not only numismatics and music, his other particular devotion, but the whole commonwealth of learning and the arts has lost a friend and advocate. He was incomparably the most influential figure in the British numismatic sphere. As a measure of his self-effacing industry I remind you that he served as our Secretary in his youth, as our President from 1959 to 1963, and President of the Royal from 1966 to 1970, that he commenced in the Department of Coins and Medals in 1935, producing the ‘Tealby’ catalogue, a major task to a lesser man, as though without effort. He left the Coin Room for the wider Civil Service, which took him across the world and to the highest posts, after which, as Secretary, and recently as Treasurer, of the British Academy, he guided with beneficence the largest non-political patronage this province of the learned world enjoys. Yet, in effect, he never left the Coin Room: he remained the undisputed master of Ancient British numismatics, from his famous article in Archaeologia to the great Catalogue that he left unfinished but fully informed. It will be Allen’s Catalogue no less than it is Mozart’s Requiem. Today, not more than ever, but more than in our grandfathers’ day, scholarship subsists on patronage (the Sylloge, for one thing, could not exist without it) and scholars may walk in suspicious trepidation of those that dispense it. At lower level I myself experience the peril of the academic civil servant, struggling not to become déclassé and yet to keep, with patience and humility, the confidence of the colleagues.
that one feeds. Derek Allen will always be my model. From either side, he was one of ‘them’, yet completely one of ‘us’: not a hybrid but a perfect species, which has no place in Lord Snow’s tenebrous zoology.

The second was that happy warrior Hugh Shortt, Curator of Salisbury Museum and a member since 1955. His publications include an early survey of the mints of Wiltshire but his sustained interest was in oriental coins. He stood out among curators not by virtue of his office—his is not the only important museum in Wiltshire, far less in all Wessex; curators may be careerists or field-specialists in need of a benefice. Hugh Shortt became a figure of national, as well as local, standing for the breadth and tolerance of his learning, for his enthusiasm, and for the gallantry that made nothing of his physical weakness.

The only other loss by death has been Mr. Pearson Graham, who was elected in 1968 and attended occasionally, but keenly enough to bequeath the Society £100. I must, however, mention, though he was not a member and primarily an orientalist, whose interests just impinged on ours in his magisterial Coinage of the Visigoths, that distinguished scholar George C. Miles of the American Numismatic Society, with grateful memories of my welcome at a summer seminar.

Beside these losses we must set 7 resignations and 14 amoivals, which just balance the 21 new members elected this year, leaving a total of 519—376 ordinary, 6 junior, and 137 institutional. By nineteenth-century standards this membership is huge: the Royal kept afloat with some 60 or 70 ordinary members in the 1860s and select bodies with no ‘passengers’ (such as the Vernacular Architecture Group) can still achieve great things with that sort of number as long as they do not publish on any considerable scale. This is, and will remain, the critical point. The expectation of life for our Society, other than as a ghost, a section, or a club, is determined by two factors—the access of material worthy of our Journal and ‘growth’ at least as fast as that of production-costs. I trust that it will live until, or unless, the Journal fails from intellectual rather than economic inanition.

Until, many years ago, Mr. Blunt ‘quickened a new birth’ the Society was in danger of fading through age and repetition. This is no longer so. I present new candidates for office, mature yet fresh for action—beside the new President a new Director in Mr. Brand, and welcome Mrs. Delmé-Radcliffe to the editorial table. You will all share my wonderment as well as gratitude that, amid his great and, I hope, growing responsibilities, Mr. Stewart has found time to have been so successful a Director for so long, and though we shall miss Mr. Porteous’s urbane and cosmopolitan mind among the editors, he too has served us well among many other commitments. These changes apart, Council has a strong continuity and is more closely identified with the Society at large than in some bodies. Let us remember the corollary of this: Council is not in business to serve the members like customers; the Society is a co-operative Society; there is no alternative source of supply and members can, or should, not walk out as from a shop that fails to deliver the goods. I say this in case any members become restive because the Journal is apparently late, despite the fact that we have had a free and special issue. The issue for 1973 can be expected in the spring and that for 1974 is ‘catching up’. We are not alone in having troubles from the printing industry; the editors, of whom Mr. Pagan bears the heaviest charge, are honorary and work in their own time to the most exacting standards.
In publications, where again I rely on our Librarian’s watchful eye, I note Dr. Grierson’s small but thorough handbook, Numismatics, and two new fascicules of the Sylloge—Elizabeth Pirie’s on the Yorkshire collections and three collaborators on the Hiberno-Norse coins in Copenhagen. Major Pridmore has carried his great work on colonial coinage into India, with ‘John Company’s’ issues to 1835, and has proved himself master of techniques needed for a predominantly oriental series. India was never a colony in any but a perverse sense. In another field, once thought ‘marginal’ but ever more displayed as a source of valid historical evidence, we have Gavin Scott on British Countermarks on Copper and Bronze Coins, and our member Roy Hawkins’s Four Studies on tickets and checks. A. J. Nathanson on Thomas Simon has no original matter, but vol. V of The Correspondence of Isaac Newton covers his work at the Mint. Then there are solid numismatic contributions to various archaeological and historical works of wider import, such as the massive Excavations in Medieval Southampton, 1953–1969, the unequal Festschrift called St. Wilfrid at Hexham which includes a fresh study of the Hexham hoard by R. N. Bailey and Hugh Pagan, and Christopher Brooke’s London 800–1216: the Shaping of a City, for which our retiring Director has provided material on the mint and hoards of London. What a pity he could not have prevailed on the author to delete the meaningless ‘800’ and substitute, not on numismatic evidence alone, a significant date -c. 730 or c. 650!

Finally, our sister society has issued the first number of Coin Hoards, a compilation of interim reports on recent finds, recent studies of old finds, and some reports that must probably be taken as final. Our Librarian expresses alarm lest we be entering an ‘Alexandrian’ age of abstracts and hopes that people will not feel themselves absolved from making full reports. I can reassure him from other archaeological publication. ‘Interims’ are a safeguard; they neither discourage the industrious nor spur the dilatory. For my part, however, if not my successor’s, I feel absolved thereby from the very provisional hoard-report that has become customary on this occasion. In fact there was little to put in it this year.

In retrospect over these five years I can discern some pattern in numismatic research. The established work of the mature, if not always middle-aged, generation has been maintained, not least in the continued sifting and recovery of scattered evidence about old finds and pedigrees, in full communion with our predecessors. Mr. Blunt and his pupils have found yet more weak spots in the seemingly impenetrable Old English shield-wall and strengthened them. On my own subject of ‘sceattas’ a few, not least Dr. Metcalf, have been at work, but much more remains to be done. There has been much progress in the study of tokens and lesser things, closely tied to local history and to medieval and post-medieval archaeology. Yet I am a little uncertain about new fields and the new generation. Metallurgical studies are on the move, but ‘archaeometry’ is a scientific rather than a humane discipline, beyond the powers of an amateur society and most private equipment. We may not keep the means of neutron activation at home, but we do keep cameras and projectors, and I believe that direct, almost instinctive, observation, rather than itemized analysis is the amateur’s way in the future. I mention Mr. Woodhead’s new approach to the Edwardian coinage. Another tool, once frightening but now in everyone’s hands, is the limited application of statistical and distributional methods. The astonishing, if rather negative, analysis of the Hamwih sceattas is an instance. Another field, admittedly with room for speculation—another new assart
made in the forests that surround conventional history, where numismatic skills are needed—is that of the sources of bullion for money or any other purpose: I mention the work of Professor Sawyer. A like field, to leave the Middle Ages for those of exploration and empire that have so suddenly come to a close, is that of the sources, and withholding, of bullion on a much greater scale, while the precious metals were still economically dominant. This is a well-documented period, but the material may be unwieldy or difficult of access and the numismatists’ assistance, in providing both illustrations and a valid, independent, and relatively manageable source should be welcomed by students of economic history at all levels. I could cite the work of Dr. Grierson and many others, but I shall single out the haute vulgarisation of Mr. Porteous to a wider public who may not realize how lucky they are.

The study of coins is antiquarianism: the presence of coinage, especially of coinage still current, is ‘living history’. The last five years have seen a chasm open which will ever distance the next generation from mine. We have survived an unhealthy accession of insincere numismatists, mere speculators, but they have left private collection increasingly difficult and study more than ever dependent on public collections. I shall return to this in my final discourse, but it is a mere symptom of the illness. ‘Ils ne mouraient pas tous mais tous étaient affligés’; yet, in the case of Sterling in any form that our fathers would have recognized it it looks like a terminal illness. I am not speaking of so-called decimalization, which was no remedy, however radical, though perhaps an anaesthetic. The French, with their pièce de cent sous, as they knew it for more than a century after the centime appeared, kept their sense of continuity and a unit of 100 shillings would have served us well. The true pence would have soon died peacefully in any case, while the ‘new pence’ would remain relatively ‘new’ for a thousand years had they the remotest chance of surviving for that time. True, the English pound is some way from the declension of its once identical siblings the lira and the ancien franc, or livre, now disguised as a centime. But when I was born the Sterling coinage that, more robustly than any other in Europe, had ‘braved a thousand years the battle and the breeze’, could produce an authentic silver penny, thought inconveniently small for common use but still weighing nearly a third of what it had weighed 700 years before, and more than a late medieval halfpenny. I dare not reckon what it would be now, but a grain rather than a pennyweight, and the last five years account for much of this. Precious metals are, of course, now but two commodities among many, even if the bullion-value of the least collectable old coin suddenly begins to look impressive. I shall be told that I am living in the past by even mentioning such terms, that I am a peasant with a stocking, bound to the soil when I should be gazing heavenward to endless expansion. Yet I hold more than a grain of my earthy suspicion, and I hold my respect for the England that mined very little of her silver yet acquired it in plenty. If this means that I have one foot in the Middle Ages it may be because, in one monetary sense, 1919 was much closer to 1219 than it is to 1975.

**COINS AND MUSEUMS**

Coins are ever scarcer and dearer, students ever more dependent on public collections. True, the Sylloge is intended to bring public collections to your doorstep, but for many purposes it is no substitute for handling originals and museums exist, in part,
to facilitate this. To set this in context let me repeat the orthodox dogma, which I propose neither to dispute nor to defend, about the duties of museums, including those on the largest scale, which include whole cities in their exhibits. The duties, in descending order of priority, are these: 1, to preserve the ‘stuff’; 2, to make it available for study; 3, to show a little of it to instruct, even to delight, the gaping mob. These duties may conflict: too many things may be tested to destruction or suffer from what is called ‘visitor-erosion’, which blends insensibly into pilfering, but not into burglary. Exposure to study is inconsistent with 100 per cent security, even if access is restricted to formally established students, as might happen under a totalitarian regime, or beyond them, to the aureole of ‘honorary professionals’, such as flourishes under the British establishment.

I need but cite the case of Thomas J. Wise. But the risk is worth taking, as is the greater risk implicit in the very words ‘probationer’ or ‘apprentice’. Societies such as ours have the free and prescriptive privilege of attesting, without formally underwriting, such students—of being the compurgators of a particular clergy—and we should guard it with all our conscience. The risks and conflicts of custodianship are ineradicable, but the priorities must not be shifted. They are fundamental to true archaeology.

There are also risks beyond the scope of normal custody. A strong building is often, and for that reason, a dignified building; a gimcrack booth is neither. A grave warden may be better than one with a gun, which is, in British eyes, undignified. And what are twelve revolvers against earthquakes or Tartar hordes? The basic risk lies in having all, or too many, of a kind in one place. Yet, here too, there is a conflict: a museum with too few is too small for comparative study. The work that matters is done in what are called ‘national’ museums—a dangerous and deceptive term, for such museums are of supra-national importance, and if they aim at less they cease to be national and become provincial in an elephantine way. Nor do they all belong to the state, though the state ought not to let any one of them collapse, even if it is technically private, the personal property of one individual. One thinks of Pitt Rivers and the erosion of that great man’s legacy. By a good custom such museums are associated, formally or, at least geographically, with universities. As far as holdings of coins go there are but four or five such ‘national museums’ in Great Britain—the Ashmolean, the Fitzwilliam, the Hunterian, perhaps the Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, and, above all, the British Museum, the cause rather than the effect of academic Bloomsbury. This association is very proper: a living university has living students of every grade and attracts fringe-institutions and fringe scholars, which it encourages, or at least tolerates. That is why I am speaking in this building, though I have never had any formal affiliation to ‘this’ university. For museums the best security of all lies in constant use. People will miss what they come to expect. Only a dead or dying university provokes anti-academies and neglects its possessions.

Such ‘national’ museums cannot be created by fiat. By providence, or beneficence, they must reach a certain size and after that they really begin to grow. Numismatically speaking, in England and Scotland, we already probably have enough of them. In America there are certainly too many of them trying to reach the point of spontaneous growth and only two or three that have arrived. In France intensive centralization has ensured that there is really only one, but there are too many that are not quite ‘there’, not so much from lack of possessions as from lack of use. Let those that have not, or have not nearly, ‘arrived’ resign themselves to being provincial museums, or teaching collections up to undergraduate level, such as that established by Sir Frank
Stenton at Reading. These are honourable estates, but before I return to them let me consider the third aspect of museums, beside conservation and study, that of display. It is probably more important to minor museums than to national ones. For one thing, they have to make the most of less; for another, they can experiment with less risk, on a smaller scale. The national museums are strong enough—or should be—to stand as fortresses of the whole learned world against political and other gimmicks, which is sufficient reason for aiming at a supra-national status. Provincial museums belong to the people of the provinces and can do worse than to keep the people happy.

The Department of Coins and Medals has just set up a permanent exhibition at the British Museum. It contains electrotypes and real coins, mixed up, and quite well lit, in table-cases. It is an elementary display, not meant to assist in finer identification, as I observed from a young man vainly pressing his nose against the glass. Above the cases is a frieze of sometimes dim enlargements and a miscellany of general ‘background-material’ at the same intellectual level. It is well thought-out within its terms, but does such a peep-show deserve such space at the heart of one of the world’s greatest repositories of material for study? I ask this in the knowledge that those responsible cannot answer me directly here, in the hope that no significant coin has been tied down whence it can only be extracted with difficulty, and so removed from study, and in the belief that it was arranged on a mean budget, so that it is ipso facto unworthy of a great museum. But I am familiar enough with the ‘interpretation-fiends’, imposing their soft lights and background-music on museums of all kinds, that education of dunces, by dunces, for dunces may not perish from the earth. I do not believe that the universities should teach the ABC by means of neon-lights—at least not across their portals—whatever they do in the backrooms of Toynbee Hall. And I do not believe that the Museum needs to press coins into being ‘medallic illustrations’ of an etiolated restatement of dreary and often erroneous orthodoxy—1066 and 1485 and all that. I have seen it done more neatly, and more fittingly, in Doncaster.

This is not to condemn the arts of window-dressing and static display, the masques and pageants of a world of high wages, where dummies must serve. Still less is it to condemn exhibitions with an impetus and message of their own. I passed through one such to enter the dim cavern of coins, deliciously overloaded, circumspectly ‘committed’ and almost 100 per cent reproduction, in honour of Jefferson and Franklin—a proud, but literally cardboard, assertion of a historical myth and a living entity. Can’t we do as much for Brunanburh as they for Bunker Hill? Before the last war its Victorian equivalent stood before the coin-room, likewise 100 per cent reproduction—a cascade of glittering electrotypes on blue velvet. Myself as a child, I sensed they were not real: our maid thought they were, and we both thought they were lovely. At least two messages, now outworn, ‘came over’—the gospel of Mammon according to the gold standard and the Victorian myth of evolution in art. Yet who could leave the American exhibition without feeling that the American myth must not become outworn? And who could leave the ‘British history in coins’ (I might make an exception of the Ancient British section), without myth, without controversy, without shape or statistics, with any such feeling at all?

Certainly, if important individual coins are used in the exhibition the actual damage would be slight—nothing to the horrifying results of the Museum exposing its finest manuscripts open at their most famous pages for a hundred years, when enlarged
reproductions would serve much better. This is the very negation of conservation. It satisfies only children at one brief stage of development. It is a kind of secular, democratic relic-cult, seen at its most pathetic on Capitol Hill, with its sad gradual to a totally faded Declaration of Independence. The custodians of real, thaumaturgous relics, with a thousand years of experience, know better and only expose them on rare occasions.

In short, there is nothing to be gained by exposing what one cannot really see. Coins, in particular, do not lend themselves to normal exhibition behind glass, and medals fare little better. A very instructive little display of coins and medals in the recent Palladio exhibition was deadened by its lighting and surroundings, and only strong sidelights and magnification might have saved it. On the other hand, modern colour-slides at fullest enlargement are, literally, a revelation, and these, and enlarged colour-prints are much more manageable than lenses for each specimen. Real coins, when displayed beside enlargements, only show what sad brown blobs they often appear to the naked eye: their place is more as a scale than to satisfy some desire to gaze without understanding on the substance of antiquity. Coins, at least for their artistic virtues, are almost microscopic objects and deserve the presentation of the microbiologist. For a simple example I cite an exhibit in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester—a shabby sestertius beside a huge ‘blow-up’ of it, with all its epigraphy expanded.

From this point I return to the place of provincial museums, both as repositories of coins and as means of instruction by them. They are certainly suited to elementary demonstrations like that at Chester and to extended samples of common types, perhaps under magnification. This is an economy: it saves hours with difficult reference books and time-consuming visits to national museums, whose staffs have higher things to do. On the other hand, the deliberately collected reserves of local museums are little used, and of little use, except when strong in local mints and local token coinages. These are too often wrongly identified as such, yet it seems spiritually, if not intellectually, desirable that a student, say, of the Lincoln mint should have a compelling reason to visit Lincoln. Genuine provinces—though it might be disputed whether there are any, by numismatic or any other standards, in England as there are in Germany—might claim that their historic identity deserves numismatic representation. England has few ‘provincial’ museums in this sense, long enough established to have acquired something like the balanced corpus of national museums but of more limited reference. One or two deserve to be in this category, yet the jealousy of local authorities militates against it. The Yorkshire Museum ought to be just that; Norwich Castle ought to be the museum for all East Anglia; Birmingham Museum is in fact the provincial museum of something totally indefinable. Among the county-towns of the smaller kingdoms Maidstone comes near this status and has a long tradition of numismatic interest. Yet reservations remain: provincial museums are less certain of a continuity of sympathetic curators and less certain of security. They may also become the shuttle-cocks of local politics and, especially in the swollen small-towns of the north, the platforms of petty rivalry. I can see no point in taking slices of notable hoards in order that Blackthwaite may keep up with Blacktwistle. Nobody is going to visit either if he can possibly help it and the presence of a few gold coins is unlikely to encourage him.

There is, however, one field where local museums should certainly act as repositories and guard their possessions like gryphons. It matters not how the museum is constituted
provided that it is permanent, is not activated by rivalry, and has strong bonds with local field-archaeology. I speak of assemblages of site-finds, especially Iron-age, Roman, or from such places as deserted medieval villages. These assemblages are seldom worth displaying and, if displayed, should be displayed in entirety. They must be safe from substitution or disposal of duplicates, for it is the whole, not the components, that matters, and no archaeological ‘write-up’ can ever be considered final or complete and students should be able, indefinitely, to refer to the uncontaminated original material. This is a case where conservation and study have the absolute priority over exhibition.

In returning to this distraction of purpose that affects all museums let me pronounce another dogma, another imperative, but not an absolute imperative, in their conduct, less well known than that with which I began, but which I hold with like conviction. It is the dogma of environment and it may conflict with all other considerations. An object should be kept in, or as near as possible to, its original context. City treasures should remain in the city; family pictures should remain in the family or, at least, in the house; vernacular buildings should stand on their soil; altar-pieces should remain in the church, despite the candle-smoke. All too often this serves neither conservation nor comparative studies, which demand that objects be brought together. Taken to its conclusion it becomes absurd: it would treat the whole world as a museum, which is the way a ‘pure’ student might see it. In a compromised form it is the charter of the local museum, which has no intellectual, as distinct from historical, warrant except in such a compromise. We must respect the compromise as we respect compromises between the three conflicting ‘duties’ but the relative priority is not so clear. We must therefore look to, and perhaps adapt our values to, the historical situation of museums themselves. National museums are essentially eighteenth- and nineteenth-century institutions, collecting for ease of access and comparative study. Good reproduction and swift travel make their purposes less urgent, or perhaps limit their scope, and the local, distributed, and less vulnerable museum may press its claims anew. This means more specialization on the part of great institutions, and thereby a raising, not a lowering, of their standards of scholarship. Those that call for more popularization at the great museums must be tactfully directed to the provinces.

The implications of the ‘dogma of environment’ apply, in general, less to coins than to most objects. Coins are by nature mobile, their precise context is a matter of accident, not substance, and the records of their provenience are generally better and easier to follow up than for most objects. Witness our recording of hoards. This circumstance would vindicate the over-riding claims of major museums, in coins if in nothing else. It would also urge the listing and photography of all museum-objects, with coins as a model instance, in which the Sylloge shows how simply this may be done, and how useless the casual collections of minor museums may be until they are drawn together into such a greater whole.

The same applies to casual private collections. The day of the huge private assemblage that may be a quarry in itself is past. The specialized collection is a different matter and it is often desirable that it should remain intact (where else but in a public museum?), or at least remain on record in the Sylloge. At whatever level the building of a collection means the Bildung of the collector and the record of such an education may often be of value to others. Only the ‘space-filling’ type of collection is utterly barren, and I would beg such collectors not to be jealous or to yearn for the unattainable. The museums