OBITUARY

GEORGE C. BOON (1927–1994)

George Counsell Boon, the former Keeper of Archaeology and Numismatics in the National Museum of Wales, died on 31 August 1994 at the sadly early age of sixty-six years. He was born in Bristol on 20 September 1927 and educated at the university there, taking an honours degree in Latin. Although a fine linguist who continued to read the classical authors for recreation, his principal interest lay in Roman history and archaeology. His first post was in Reading Museum where he was on the staff of the Department of Archaeology from 1950 to 1956. In addition to his curatorial duties he pursued with typical vigour and dedication the investigation of the nearby Roman town of Silchester. His excavation report, published in 1957 (revised 1974) marked a major advance in the understanding of towns in Roman Britain, and already displayed the painstaking scholarship and fresh insights which were to characterise all his work. Moving to Wales in 1957 he then turned his attention from a Roman civil to a military site in his excavation of the legionary fortress at Caerleon, the results being published with his customary promptness in 1972. George Boon was Keeper of Archaeology in the National Museum of Wales 1976–86, and Senior Keeper and Curator (second only to the administrative Director) from 1987 until his retirement in 1989. He continued to work and write extensively on archaeological subjects and was associated with numerous archaeological organisations. His contribution to them will be detailed elsewhere, but particular attention may be drawn to his Vice Presidency of both the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies and of the Society of Antiquaries, to which he was particularly attached. George Boon’s international standing in the archaeological world is shown by his appointment as a corresponding member of the German Archaeological Institute.

Numismatics was also one of George Boon’s life-long personal and professional interests. He became a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society when he was twenty-seven and published many articles on Roman topics in the Numismatic Chronicle. Being principally a student of the Imperial coinage, he did not join the British Numismatic Society until 1980, when he had become more closely involved with the English series. He was elected a member of Council in 1983 and continued to serve until 1986. He published relatively few papers in the Journal, again as a result of his earlier concentration on Roman subjects. An important paper on ‘The Cardiganshire silver and the Feathers coinage 1671–1731’, appeared in BNJ 1993. He also contributed several percipient reviews and regularly read papers preparatory to his books (later published by the National Museum of Wales) at the Society’s monthly meetings.

George Boon’s contribution to numismatics was in two areas, both of great value. As curator in Cardiff he pursued an active policy of acquisition which transformed the coin collection there from one of essentially only local significance into one worthy of a national museum. While giving preference to material found in Wales and directly relevant to its history, he also built up a representative collection which set these coins in their wider context, and acquired a number of key rarities in several series, all of which made it imperative for scholars to visit the Cardiff cabinet. The importance of the enlarged collection was acknowledged by the change in the name of his department in 1981 to that of ‘Archaeology and Numismatics’, and not least of his achievements was his success in ensuring the continuance of a numismatic post in the National Museum of Wales after his retirement.
In the field of scholarship George Boon's numismatic work covered a broad range of date and subject matter and was of the highest standard. For the Roman period, particularly outstanding were his papers on 'The Roman temple at Brean Down, Somerset and the dating of the minimissimi' (NC 1961) which decisively debunked their long-accepted dark-age date, and 'Counterfeit coins in Roman Britain' (Coins and the Archaeologist, edited by J. Casey and R. Reece, 1974, revised 1988) which was at the same time a pioneering and masterly exposition of this difficult subject. There are the books on Welsh tokens of the seventeenth century (1973), Cardiganshire silver and the Aberystwyth mint in peace and war (1981) and Welsh hoards 1979–81 (1986). The last included the famous Wenallt hoard of unprecedented coins of Empress Maud (as George Boon preferred to call her) and the Norman barons in south Wales, the discussion of which demonstrated his great numismatic expertise and his deep knowledge and understanding of the Welsh and the English historical sources.

Although George Boon's publications displayed a detailed knowledge of previous research, his work was always based on the primary evidence of the coins or artifacts themselves and of the contemporary written records. This approach gave his work a refreshing originality and independence as well as great authority. He wrote with fluency and elegance, reflecting his respect for the cadences of Latin and classical English prose, while not afraid to indulge in the occasional purple phrase which often served to fix a telling point in the mind. These qualities were epitomised in his booklet Coins of the Anarchy 1135–54 (1988). This, like all the books published under his direct control, was handsomely produced with lavish illustration and an archaeologist's appreciation of the importance of maps and drawings.

George Boon appeared formidable to many meeting him for the first time, but when he had accepted someone as a serious fellow-student, his loyalty and support were total. He enjoyed the respect and affection of a wide circle of colleagues and friends in many walks of life, who benefitted from his willingness to share his immense learning and to discuss problems in complete confidence and without reserve. His unexpected death at the height of his powers has deprived numismatic studies of much important work from a perceptive and original mind. To his wife Diana, and to his children and grandchildren, we extend our deepest sympathy in their sad and premature loss.

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