ROBERT B.K. STEVENSON, 1913–1992,
A NUMISMATIC APPRECIATION

LORD STEWARTBY

Numismatics, too often an esoteric subject, occasionally enjoys the attention of an antiquarian polymath who can bring the benefit of related techniques and broad experience of historical artefacts to the study of coins. Robert Stevenson was such a one. In an earlier age, before the intensive specialisation of modern research, such scholars were less rare. The great Sir John Evans was the classic example in the nineteenth century. More recently, there have been few who could command so wide a field. Perhaps the most familiar figure of the kind to members of our Society in the post-war era was Stuart Rigold, our late President, whose role as Inspector of Ancient Monuments had given him an encyclopaedic knowledge of England’s physical past and enabled him to comment pertinently, with an historical nuance or a cultural parallel, on almost any paper read to the Royal or the British Numismatic Society, whatever its period or subject matter.

Robert Stevenson, Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland from 1945 to 1978, and President in 1975-8 of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, to which the National Museum owed its origins, was, in the Scottish context, a universal scholar of similarly unlimited range. Flint axes, Pictish metalwork, medieval weapons, Renaissance wood-carvings, Edinburgh silverware, highland dress—these and countless other topics all claimed his expert attention as curator or student, and the festschrift presented to him after his retirement in 1978 was fittingly entitled From the Stone Age to the ’Forty-Five.

I do not need to include here more than a few of the biographical details that can be found in the festschrift tribute by Alastair Kennedy, then Chairman of the Trustees of the National Museum, and in an obituary by his museum colleague Stuart Maxwell in the Antiquaries’ Proceedings.1 He was introduced to academic and historical thought at an early age since his father, who had an interest in sundials and merchants’ marks, was President of the Glasgow Archaeological Society and Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages in Glasgow University.2 Robert read Classics at Edinburgh, where he was up to Gordon Childe for archaeology, and continued his studies at Bonn and at the Institute of Archaeology in London. Subsequently he excavated not only in Scotland but also at Constantinople, where he became an expert on Byzantine glazed pottery, at Maiden Castle under Mortimer Wheeler and at Wroxeter under Kathleen Kenyon. Having joined the staff of the National Museum as Assistant Keeper in 1938, he moved to the Department of Health at the beginning of the war, after packing up the contents of the museum for safe storage. Then into the army and, after taking part in the landings on Sicily, he characteristically found time to study neolithic pottery in Italy before demobilisation in the rank of major in the Intelligence Corps.

Although barely thirty-two when appointed Acting Keeper of the museum in 1945, Stevenson had already made something of an international mark as a scholar, and with practical administrative experience gained from the Civil Service and the army he was well equipped to assume responsibility for a national museum and to plan for its future.

1 PSAS 122, 1992, 1-4.
2 During the seventies and eighties Edward Burns lived at no. 3, London Street, Edinburgh, and Stevenson observed (with regret that he had learnt this too late to ask about him) that his father, Professor W.B. Stevenson (1869–1954), must for a time have been a neighbour, living at no. 4 between the ages of seven and seventeen.
My first meeting with Robert Stevenson was on a visit to Edinburgh at the beginning of the fifties, when I was writing The Scottish Coinage. I had come to check a number of points with the national collection and to select coins for illustration. Though I was only a schoolboy, the head of the National Museum received me with the greatest kindness and consideration, and treated me entirely without condescension. As a result, to my great delight, we were able to discuss problems and ideas relating to Scottish coins as one student with another, and so began a dialogue which, though with sometimes lengthy intervals, was to continue for the remaining forty years of his life.

A year or two later I had occasion to contact Stevenson on a most curious matter, which, after due passage of time, I think deserves to be placed on record. One day in 1953, when I was talking with Mr. Douglas Liddell at Spink's, a large man with a white beard arrived, who wanted to sell him a silver penny of Carlisle in the name of Stephen. Since this was a rare item that I knew only from illustrations, I asked to see it, and a conversation about Scottish coins developed. The customer turned out to be called Philip Thorburn, son of the ornithological artist, Archibald Thorburn, and a well-informed collector of Scottish coins who was then switching his interest to the Islamic series. In the course of our conversation he asked me where I was at school and what coins I collected. Soon after I returned to Haileybury the following term I received a price list of Thorburn's Scottish coins from which he invited me to select any that I wanted. They included a number of very rare and desirable things, not highly priced, and which, as a schoolboy collector, I had hardly dared hope to possess. I asked for as many as I could afford, and on receipt eagerly checked them against The Coinage of Scotland. I was concerned to find that one of them was not only illustrated in the book, but stated by Burns in the 1880s to have been at that time in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries. So I wrote to Stevenson to ask him about it and he replied, to my surprise, that although Burns had been in error in describing that particular coin as belonging to the Antiquaries, certain Scottish and other coins had indeed been found to have gone missing after a recent visit by Thorburn to the museum. He let me have a note of these, and I was duly able to recover some of them from Thorburn's list, among a further group that I ordered for myself. Word had it that Thorburn, when in acquisitive mood, would put his left arm in a sling, line up desirable coins on the edge of the table, raise his arm slightly, and then quickly flick them into the sling while a dealer's or curator's head was turned: a technique which attracted suspicion after it was noticed on occasions that his left arm appeared in perfect order in between sightings of the sling. His resignation from the Royal Numismatic Society followed some time later, after he had been confronted with the evidence, and the Trustees of the National Museum took an appropriately sympathetic view of the problems facing Stevenson and his tiny staff in their guardianship of such a store of historical objects, many of them both small and valuable.

Curatorial duties extended not only to care of the magnificent collection of Scottish coins, but also to the sorting and recording of newly found coin hoards, with an eye to the selection of suitable additions to the National Museum's holdings. This process was to be responsible for most of Robert Stevenson's published work on coins; but not for his first, which was a classic example of the value of combining numismatics with wider historical knowledge and observation. In 1919 a large number of copper pennies of the fifteenth century, of a type hitherto rare, had been found in a drain at the Cluniac abbey of Crosraguel in Ayrshire, leading George Macdonald to propose, against earlier views that they originated in Sicily or Naples, that the James named on them was king of Scotland, and that they had been struck at a mint in the abbey itself. It was left to Robert Stevenson a generation later to draw attention to the fact that their obverse type, an orb mounted by a cross, was the device of Bishop James.

3 Mr. Robert Thompson has kindly assisted me in the preparation of the bibliography printed hereafter. I am also grateful to Mrs. Murray and Mr. Pagan for comments on the text.
Kennedy of St. Andrews, as still to be seen there in St. Salvator’s College. Bishop Kennedy, to whom minting rights had been confirmed by James II, was a leading figure in the realm from the 1450s and Stevenson surmised that these pennies had been struck on his authority. Mrs. Murray has subsequently argued that their issue was too large to have been undertaken other than on royal authority, and that they were more likely to be the black money that contributed to complaints against the king in 1482, but there is no record of them in government documents or the accounts of the royal mint, and Stevenson maintained to the end that they were Kennedy’s.

Most of Stevenson’s subsequent numismatic work arose directly from museum acquisitions or the discovery of hoards. He added to the collection systematically from the great Lockett sales of 1957 and 1960, with particular emphasis on the long voided-cross sterlings of Alexander III (1249–86) from the Brussels hoard of 1908, a series not well known in the time of Burns; and in retirement he advised the museum on its needs at Col. Murray’s sale in 1986. He would also acquire coins from dealers when working on a particular series, or if unusual material appeared. The purchase of a new Alexander short-cross sterling in 1959 prompted him, in a brief note, to make the important observation that this coin, and a few others, had an unbearded face and should be attributed not to Alexander II but to the first year of the reign of the young Alexander III, before the long-cross was introduced in 1250. He had clear views about the care and enhancement of a national coin collection, and he took the opportunity to express these in a lecture to a meeting sponsored by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1978. This is of such general interest that it has been reproduced hereafter, as an appendix, from a typescript found amongst his papers.

Relatively few important hoards of Scottish coins were found in the first half of this century, and in one sense that was fortunate since there was no one then at the Museum qualified to deal with them. That is why it fell to Macdonald, chiefly distinguished as a classicist, to record not only the hoards of English Edwardian sterlings found early in the century, but also the fifteenth-century material from Perth (1920) and Whitburn (1921), as well as Crosraguel. Stevenson was not the only later student to regret the lost opportunity for the National Museum to acquire runs of coins of James I, II and III from these critical finds — much of the Perth hoard ended up in Perth Museum and many of the most important Scottish coins from Whitburn went to the British Museum instead.

During Stevenson’s keepership the incidence of discoveries increased. Beside a number of lesser finds, there were the usual Edwardian hoards from southern Scotland (Renfew, 1963, and Loch Doon, 1966), a run of hoards unusually rich in base metal coins from James III to Charles I, and a remarkable find of English tenth-century coins on the island of Iona. This last was to raise in one step the National Museum’s previously modest Anglo-Saxon holdings to a new level of importance, and not only introduced Stevenson to the series with markedly beneficial effect but also led to his production in due course of the sixth volume of the *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*, devoted to the pre-Conquest English coins in Edinburgh. This broke new ground in including an excellent introduction on the evidence for coin use in Scotland during the Viking Age. He was also, a few years later, to return to this series in a pioneering joint paper with a metallurgist on the tenth-century debasement. In the same year that the Iona hoard was found, 1950, another major hoard of similar period was discovered in Chester, and the two together served to provide a new stimulus to Anglo-Saxon numismatics.

5 V. Smart, *The Coins of St. Andrews*, St. Andrews, 1991, pp. 32–5. In a recent letter, Mr. Stevenson stated that his opinion is still very strongly in favour of a Kennedy connection for these pennies, though he concedes that the issue may have been long-lived and have continued to be struck after Kennedy’s death.
6 Despite the flattering references to myself, I hope it will be understood that, with advice, I have felt it best to reproduce Stevenson’s words wherever possible as they stood.
7 NC 1905, 1913 and 1923.
8 NC 1919 and 1921: *PSAS* 1921–2.
Stevenson’s prompt and concise publication of the Iona hoard in the *Chronicle* for 1951 was distinguished by acute observation of stylistic groups. This greatly impressed Christopher Blunt to whom, with R.H.(M.) Dolley, fell the task of dealing with the Chester hoard. Indeed, the two hoards raised so many new questions about the neglected English coinage of the tenth century that this was to become one of the main areas of Blunt’s research for the rest of his life. On several occasions, when working on coins of that period in his later years, he remarked how much he had learned from Stevenson’s approach to the Iona coins.

By training and taste Stevenson was a typologist. The common strand in his wide involvement with archaeology was the classification and arrangement of artefacts, by their technology, the development of forms, the evolution of ornament and the identification of parallels. Such an approach was ideally suited to the detailed analysis of early coin series. Like all those who have used the work of Edward Burns, he was introduced to modern methods of medieval numismatics through the writing of their earliest, and still one of their supreme exponents. The study of punches and letter-forms, dies and die-linking, was to Stevenson simply an applied, and exceptionally detailed, form of the archaeological typology in which he specialised. His attitude to coins was an ambivalent one: partly fascination with the material and the challenge of subjecting it to his particular skills; partly the horror of contemplating the enormous amount of time, effort and eyestrain required to ensure that it submitted.

Of three further important hoards turned up in Scotland in the next few years, two were from the second half of the fifteenth century, from Glenluce Sands, Wigtownshire (1956), and Rhoneston, Nithsdale, Dumfriesshire (1961), and the third a large find of tiny copper coins of Charles I from Pow, Orkney (1955). The Glenluce hoard was discovered by Dr. and Mrs. E.M. Jope, professional archaeologists, who referred it via J.D.A. Thompson of the Ashmolean Museum to Robert Stevenson in Edinburgh. Four years before the discovery of the Glenluce hoard I had contributed my first paper to the *Journal*, reviving the Burns attribution to James III of (right-facing) portrait groats which Grueber and Macdonald had later put to James V. Since the Glenluce hoard, by including these portrait groats with other coins no later than the 1490s, provided the missing hoard evidence to confirm the reattribution, it was gratifying as an undergraduate to be invited by Stevenson to undertake the publication of this hoard on behalf of the National Museum. But as a curator Stevenson was never jealous of his material, nor did he regard amateurs with the suspicion that is harboured by some professionals. He was only too happy to share with others the labour of sorting hoards and recording them.

After Glenluce I could hardly have hoped that a second hoard of the period would soon appear, to corroborate another attempt that I had lately made to vindicate an original attribution by Burns. But the contents of the Rhoneston hoard served to confirm that the left-facing portrait groats, commonly assigned to James IV in the first half of the twentieth century, should be restored to James III, and Stevenson generously invited me to join with him in the publication. This led us into much discussion of the make-up of Scottish currency at the end of the middle ages, and for Stevenson greatly enhanced the interest of three new hoards found in 1962–3 which took the story into the sixteenth century.

Stevenson’s readiness to enlist the help of student-collectors resulted in the timely publication of two important Edwardian hoards, from Renfrew (1963) and Loch Doon, Ayrshire (1966), through the agency of Mr. Woodhead and Dr. Tatler. It is a practice that has happily been continued, since Stevenson’s retirement, by Dr. David Caldwell in inviting Messrs. Woodhead and Wood to collaborate in publication of the fourteenth-century finds from Aberdour, Fife (1978 and 1981), and Mrs. Murray and Mrs. Delmé-Radcliffe, experts respectively in the Scottish and English groats of the fifteenth century, in that of the late medieval find at Innerwick, East Lothian (1979).

9 *BNJ* XXVII, 66-72.  
10 *BNJ* XXVII, 182-94.
But to return now to Stevenson’s own work on Scottish coins from new Scottish hoards: in each case this was undertaken primarily in order to select specimens for the museum, and the need for this arose first in the case of the Pow hoard in 1955. No-one had done any serious work on the unprepossessing little copper turners of the 1630s since Burns, and Stevenson set out to check them in greater detail than Burns had attempted. This resulted in a much more minute classification of the series, revealing unexpected patterns in the use of crown and letter punches. The only complaint I could make about this remarkable paper is that the listing of varieties is so detailed that it is often not possible to classify individual specimens exactly by the Stevenson numbers unless (which is by no means invariable in this series) they are well-struck and in good condition. But the Pow hoard report is by any standards a paper of great numismatic distinction, not least for the penetrating treatment of the historical and documentary evidence which occupies more than half the introduction.

Further important post-medieval hoards appeared in the early sixties, three of them spanning the sixteenth century: from Linlithgow (1963), c. 1530; Rigghead, Collin, Dumfriesshire (1963), c. 1555; and Noranside, Tannadice, Angus (1962), c. 1587. These hoards are of particular value in containing large runs of petty currency in relatively good condition, offering an opportunity for the study of series which were not normally chosen by hoarders and of which surviving specimens are often worn or corroded. Originally Stevenson planned to publish an omnibus report on the three hoards, incorporating new discussion of the billon placks of James IV and V, abundantly represented at Linlithgow, of the silver groats of James V in the light of those from Linlithgow and Rigghead, and of the billon bawbees of James V and Mary from Rigghead and Noranside. In due course it became evident that each of these series deserved a thorough reassessment going beyond the coins in the hoards, a tremendous undertaking that Stevenson not surprisingly had to defer until retirement. Starting with the most difficult, and working backwards, he completed his study of the bawbees in 1988, followed three years later by the groats, which were in the press at the time of his death. He was already hard at work on the placks but had not reached the point where his lists were in publishable form. Finally, he planned a general survey of Scottish currency of the sixteenth century in the light of these three and other hoards, along the lines of a joint paper that he had written with Mr. Porteous in 1972 on the hoards and currency of the seventeenth century.

The bawbee paper must rank as one of the most remarkable examples of modern numismatics to have appeared in our Journal. Although not a die study as such, it goes into the greatest detail, clarifying sequence at many points and presenting a convincing arrangement of the whole coinage, phase by phase. Many of the specimens are poorly struck and difficult to decipher, quite apart from the effects of wear. It is a series as complicated and intricate as any in the British field, and Stevenson’s work represents as much of an advance on Burns as, for example, does Mr. North’s Sylloge on the essentially correct but much less detailed work of the Foxes on Edwardian sterlings; but with the bawbees the credit is all the greater for there having been no progressive study of the series by others in the interval. Like the bawbees, the James V groats offered inviting material for Stevenson the typologist, and the results are no less impressive. Here, with a smaller coinage, he was able to record the obverse die of every specimen known to him, and his resultant classification represents the first satisfactory arrangement of one of the few parts of the Scottish coinage where Burns fell into material error over sequence.

Mindful of the importance of the Coats collection to Edward Burns, Robert Stevenson believed that private collections had a key role to play in numismatic research. Several times he told me that he would never have been able to carry out his work on the placks, groats and bawbees of James IV, James V and Mary without the extended loan of those parts of my collection. Although he worked extensively from photographs, he needed actual coins to study at home, and these could only come from a private collection. Over a period of years, boxes of coins would travel up and down to Scotland, sometimes on holiday journeys, sometimes by
Robert B.K. Stevenson

ministerial boxes. Fortunately, a cousin of my wife’s is a minister in the Scottish Office, and members of his private office have been most helpful in arranging the safe transport of this irreplaceable material on some of their regular journeys between Edinburgh and London. One of the problems was that, every time Stevenson produced another draft of one of his papers, I would need my coins back to check the text. Doing so was a difficult but absorbing task, partly because of the complexity of the material, partly because Stevenson’s extreme economy of expression resulted in a text of Tacitean density. One needed a stretch of uninterrupted hours to tackle one of his typescripts properly, but the effort was well rewarded. I remember, in particular, the admiration I felt for his work one weekend in 1988 when I had to be on duty as Security Minister in Northern Ireland. I was confined to Hillsborough Castle, with the drums beating all day outside for the parades to mark the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, and concentration would have been impossible without a real challenge. So I was thankful to have the final draft of the bawbee paper to go through and check against my coins, a task that I completed just as the drums at last fell silent. I cannot now remember how many stages I saw of the bawbees and groats, but the orderly catalogues and (relatively) simple texts, as they finally emerged, belie the long travail of gestation and the immense attention that Stevenson applied to detail in resolving the problems that arose.

My last discussion with Robert Stevenson took place over lunch at the New Club in Edinburgh in April 1992. James V groats were in the press and we talked of plans to complete his work on the placks of James IV and V, which he had been pursuing intermittently since the Linlithgow find of 1963. He had devised a new system of classification, based on the punches for crowns and cross-ends, which broadly confirmed the general arrangement set out by Burns a century before, but going into much greater detail. Fortunately, he had marked his classification on the envelopes of my placks, and I hope that from this I may in due course be able to reconstruct his work at least in summary form, using the professional drawings that he had commissioned of the various cross-ends and crowns. One of the greatest problems I shall face will be in deciphering the handwriting of his notes. I know that I shall not cause offence to his family if I say that his writing is the most incomprehensible I have ever encountered. I have spent hours with a magnifying glass trying to work out how some of these strange marks were made on the coin envelopes, and what their author can have intended them to convey. Whether I shall be successful I cannot with confidence yet say, but I have no doubt that it is worth making the attempt. The same applies to his unfinished work on Scottish currency in the light of the sixteenth-century hoards, although being less technical this should present somewhat lesser problems of decipherment.

One other item in Stevenson’s bibliography, though not primarily numismatic, must be mentioned here. In 1981 the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, founded in 1780, published a volume to mark its bicentenary, and this included a monumental account by Stevenson of the history of the museum which, until the 1850s, had belonged to the Society. This article, which runs to 125 pages, includes a great deal of information about coins, finds and numismatists. Throughout his adult life Stevenson was devoted to the Museum and to the Society,11 and it was a matter of sadness to him in his retirement that the future of the museum as he knew it was at risk. In his last few years as Keeper, much of his time had been taken up with proposals for a new building to house the Museum, travelling abroad to see comparable institutions, and developing plans for a new museum physically more suited to the needs of an archaeological and historical museum than the elaborate Victorian gothic structure in Queen Street. In 1974 these plans came close to being implemented, but at the critical moment the funds were not forthcoming and the scheme was shelved. Official suggestions that the National Museum should be amalgamated with the Royal Scottish Museum were robustly resisted. Stevenson

11 The council of the Society is proposing to use a bequest from him to initiate the R.B.K. Stevenson Prize, to be awarded annually to the author of the most outstanding article accepted for publication in the Proceedings, starting with vol. 124.
felt it inappropriate to combine two museums with such divergent style and purpose; that a
general museum such as the Royal Scottish, with its emphasis on natural history, ethnology,
geology and so on, should not be merged with a museum dedicated specifically to national
history; and that such a merger would not only be for the inconvenience of visitors wanting to
to see the memorials of Scottish history in Scotland, but would diminish the priority accorded to
the pursuit of the archaeological and historical record in Scotland which had been the
foundation of the National Museum with its origins in the Society of Antiquaries. But, much
to Stevenson's distress, the pass was sold by his successor, and the creation of a combined
museum by development of the site adjacent to the Royal in Chambers Street is now
proceeding. One would like to think that the decision of the new keeper (himself a
numismatist) that the National Museum should have its separate entrance, is a step in the
direction of Stevenson's instincts and at least a partial recognition of the force of the
arguments that he had deployed.

For most of the time I knew them, Robert and Elizabeth Stevenson lived in a spacious house
in Cobden Crescent, where we had a number of working sessions on bawbees and groats and
placks over the years. In 1990 they moved to a newly built flat in Mortonhall, but I never
visited him there and indeed I doubt whether it would have been possible for two of us to
work together in his tiny study. Sadly he was not to enjoy it for long, for he suffered a fatal
heart attack on holiday with Elizabeth in the Pyrenees, in July 1992. As always, he was
combining a holiday with visits to places of historical interest. Elizabeth tells me she cannot
recall a holiday in Britain or on the Continent that was purely recreational; and that Robert
was particularly pleased with the motor caravan they used in the 1970s because the high cabin
enabled him to see over walls that had previously hidden places of interest to him.

Robert Stevenson was an indefatigable antiquary of the most civilized kind. He was a
person of modesty, charm and complete integrity. Although immensely learned, he carried his
scholarship easily and with an engaging humour. Though persistent and resolute in his aims,
he was invariably courteous and patient. He did not allow disappointment about the future of
his museum to deter him from continuing to work there for its benefit after he retired. He
achieved a great deal on his own as a scholar but his contribution and encouragement to the
work of others was incalculable. We are fortunate indeed that with the many claims on his
interest he found as much time as he did for coins. The Royal Numismatic Society recognized
this by electing him to honorary fellowship in 1979, and we can only regret that he did not live
long enough for three of the most accomplished studies that have ever appeared in our
Journal, on the turners, bawbees and groats, to bring him the Sanford Saltus medal of our own
Society which they undoubtedly merited.

PUBLISHED NUMISMATIC WORKS OF R.B.K. STEVENSON

(This list does not include reviews – see BNJ, NCirc, and Arch.J. – or minor entries in Coin Hoards I–III or
Discovery and Excavation in Scotland)


1951   (a) The Iona hoard of Anglo-Saxon coins, NC 1951, 68–90.
      (b) A hoard of Anglo-Saxon coins found at Iona Abbey, PSAS LXXXV, 1950–51, 170–75.
      (c) Coin hoard, Castle Maol, Skye, PSAS LXXXV, 1950–51, 158–59. (Includes note on Scottish half-
           merks, 1572–80; hoard contained silver to 1601 and billon placks and hardheads of James VI.)


1. Balligmorrie, Barr, Ayrshire (James III–V billon), R.K. (Mostly James IV pennies.)
2. Braeside, Greenock, Renfrewshire (James V–VI), R.B.K.S. (Bawbees of James V and Mary,
testoons, nonsunts and quarter-merks to 1573.)
4. Pow, Stromness, Orkney, R.B.K.S. (124 Charles I turners plus 3 forgeries, 4 English farthings.)

1958


   (ii) Mossend Farm, Beith, Ayrshire (1570s, Mary–James VI, nonsants, 1565 1/3 ryal, half- and quarter-merks 1572–4).
3. The Recent Growth of the Museum’s Coin and Medal Cabinet, pp. 198–9 (Numbers of post-war additions of coins, medals and tokens).

1959


1960


1961


1965


1966


1967


1968


1969


1972

   (c) The Lochgelly find. BNJ XI, 1972, 183–84.
   (d) Two medieval jettons from Buttle Castle. Dalbeattie, Kirkcudbrightshire, Trans Dumfries Gall Hist Antiq Soc 49, 1972, 118.

1975


1976


1979

A counterfeit revenue stamp on Scottish banknotes about 1825. NCirc LXXXVII, 1979, 285.

1981


1986

   (b) Votive coins deposited between 1600 and 1800 in Orkney and elsewhere, PSAS 116, 1986, 343–45.

1988

Holy wells and coins. Trans Dumfries Gall Hist Antiq Soc 63, 1988, 92.

1990


1991

It has been a fundamental belief of mine that objects are kept in museums to be used: if they are to occupy perpetually premises rentable at so much a square foot, this has to be justified. But also I do not believe that because no one uses them they are unjustifiably kept. We preserve for the future, which is longer than the present, and we hope longer and more propitious than the past for our museums.

The one coin collection of which I have had experience, as a conscript, has had long periods of disuse, and languishes largely unseen. The founders of our Society began collecting coins for our Museum in 1781 — about 450 of them in that year, as we know from the printed accession lists which establish the pedigree of so many of our present-day possessions. Of those over 200 were Scottish, half of them gifted by Dr. William Hunter. Of the 166 Roman, probably a quarter from two named finds of coin hoards, one in Fife and the other at Linlithgow; some of the other coins were indeed also specified as from hoards. Later on a consolidated list of the Scottish coins was made in 1831 and published in Archaeologia Scotiae. Like other bodies and museums we benefited in the first half of the nineteenth century from small samples from coin hoards distributed by the Barons of Exchequer, but after the Museum was nationalised in 1851 it became the preferred recipient, later allowed in effect to select what it wanted from hoards or other strays, as far as that is to say as they all got to the Exchequer. I shall come back to the changing policies of successive generations as shown by their choices. At any rate much of the character of the collection, and much of its importance, is due to runs and rarities selected from hoards from all parts of Scotland. These comprise Roman, Anglo-Saxon and English coins in some quantity as well as Scottish, and some Continentals, even central Asian, and come, so far, to the early nineteenth century.

Another of my beliefs is that, because staffs of museums are small and can rarely be single-mindedly devoted to any specialisation, their collections grow best when they collect collections. Hoards are a special case of this. But we owe very much to two collectors in particular. The first, James Sutherland, professor of Botany in Edinburgh at the end of the seventeenth century, was gathering Roman coins, but was also studying Scotland's own coinage at a time when he could select a fine typological series and some unique gold pieces. In 1705 he sold his collection, with the carefully detailed catalogue in his own hand, to the Faculty of Advocates, in whose keeping it was used as a source, for example for the lists and illustrations of Scottish coins and medals, in Anderson's Dipomata Scotiae published in 1739 — its full title included the words numismatum Scotiae thesauri. From the Advocates Sutherland's collection was bought by the Antiquaries in 1872 for the Museum.

In the 1870s also Thomas Coats over in Paisley was employing Edward Burns to form a first class collection of Scottish coins, bought from far and wide — some doubtless from the premature sales of duplicates from the now combined Antiquaries and Advocates collection. Burns was a genius, and his interpretation of the Coats collection added immeasurably to the understanding of our coinage. Thanks to his patron he was able to integrate in the great catalogue of the Coats collection the many varieties he found by close study of our collection — plainly the duplicates sales would have been much reduced if he had been able to do this sooner. He also included additional varieties in the British Museum and in the Pollexfen collection: and as a result we bought from the Pollexfen collection about 300 coins in 1900. This was financed by the sale of the miscellaneous foreign collection — which unfortunately included many from hoards that were therefore part of the history of currency in Scotland.

Neither Coats nor Burns lived to see their catalogue published, the three volume Coinage of Scotland in 1887. No further study of any section of our coinage appears to have taken place till 1922, when the discovery of a fifteenth-century hoard in Perth diverted George Macdonald's studies from classical times. And there was very little for long after that, despite the gift by the Coats family of their Scottish collection in 1921 to the National Museum of Antiquities, where it is kept separate as the standard reference collection. It continued to rest in its safe almost unused till a stimulating book was written in 1953 by a schoolboy, now Ian Stewart MP. For even more than with Romilly Allen's catalogue of the Early Christian Monuments of Scotland, Burns' work was so complete, that his subject was knocked stone cold for decades.

While Burns does overshadow everyone else (and I have not mentioned his work on English coins, much of it lying in our trays in his untouched and unconsulted arrangement of the English coins from the Montrave hoard), a fair picture of the past requires some other figures to be named. The Revd Dr John Jamieson was in effect honorary curator of coins around 1830 (as were other members of the Society officially up to 1954, and in practice Robert Kerr up to his death in 1967). Dr Jamieson and W.H. Scott, doctor of medicine, studied coins from Viking hoards, Anglo-Saxon and remoter coins, some of which were given to the Museum. Scott published ahoard in full in the second volume of the Antiquaries Proceedings in 1852; and at about the same time J.H. Smith, the Society's secretary, published a hundred Roman coins, about a sixth of those that had been found at Portmoak in Kinross-shire. Though there is a great deal of numismatics recorded in later volumes, for many years more detailed
accounts have also been published in the *Numismatic Chronicle* and the *British Numismatic Journal* by the Royal and the British Numismatic Societies. Then there was George Sim, who published much, from a summary of the notable Scottish and English coins in the Museum in 1860 to the basic sorting of 12,000 Edwardian coins from Aberdeen in 1887 (the survivors in Aberdeen have at last been done in detail in the last few years by Mr. Mayhew in Oxford). Sim built up our collection from hoards, and negotiated the Advocates' purchase. Perhaps because of his death we have no record of what we got from the Aberdeen hoard. His successor Adam Richardson published in 1901 a one-volume catalogue of the Scottish coins in the Museum – most useful, and still selling slowly, it is without any originality, and his efforts to follow Burns were sometimes made impossible by not having the Coats collection at hand to consult, as we now have.

In the case of any collection, policy and interpretation are, if I may use the expression, two sides of the same coin. The acquisition policy and the policy on how physically the collection is organised and recorded, determine what there is for the next comer to interpret. Equally what one wants to interpret determines one's policy. We must be enormously grateful to the successive honorary curators who encouraged Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancers to let them have here runs of coins, however sketchily they were able to publish them. But there was an unfortunate distinction for a long time between what I would call the archaeological approach, and the numismatic one. The keepers of the archaeological and miscellaneous collections always thought of the find-spot and pedigree as important attributes of their specimens, long before the days of distribution maps. But throughout the latter part, at any rate, of the nineteenth century the honorary curators treated the coins as if they had no significance except in relation to other coins. They were just coins, although Burns had used hoard associations wherever possible in the Scottish series, and not only most cogently in his brilliant elucidation of the sequence of Edwardian sterlings. Yet he too only recorded a limited number of provenances in his catalogue.

Fortunately some of our coins were kept apart as archaeological specimens, particularly Roman coins like the hundred coins from Portnaboe, grouped together and labelled; or the coins found with hoards of Viking silver ornaments, which remained exhibited along with them. Again when it came to duplicates, no one here ever sold off bronze axes as duplicates, and the completely broken up bronze weapons and bronze scrap from the large Duddingston hoard that was the Museum's very first accession, survive almost completely. But the unique Bute hoard of David I's coins with coins of Stephen, which for a while was kept intact along with the gold objects found with them in 1874, was pillaged for the disastrous sales of duplicates ten years later. Then, or sooner, the Anglo-Saxon coins were arranged and carefully labelled, without any indication of their provenances. Nor was there any manuscript catalogue of them or summary. This is so still for the thousands of English coins, and none of their hoard groups found before 1900 have been kept together or labelled as such, with the important exception of Burns' Montrave hoard, and the odd one of Deumfries 1878, too corroded into a lump with brooches for it to have been separable then.

Now I think there are good reasons for only occasionally retaining the whole of a coin hoard claimed as Treasure Trove, allowing a large part, or all, to be returned to the finder, quite apart from the cumulative problems of storage and retrieval with the chronic ones of lack of space and staff. This has been, and probably still is, a field of considerable controversy in England, between archaeologists and numismatists. Since the institution of rewards for Treasure Trove a century ago, changed later from bullion value [to] full market value, expense is important – especially as it is the recipient museum that has to pay, and now that value can be astronomical for rare gold.

Fortunately in that sense, there has been no gold find for a long time in Scotland. A second reason is the real importance of collectors to numismatics. Not those who put the prices up, but initially the specialist dealers who discover and list rare coins and give museums a chance to buy them, and then the collectors in the Coats, and Hunter, tradition, on however small a scale. They pursue their subject single-mindedly, and can in the case of people like Ian Stewart be their own Burns and enlarge the range of their subject. I believe the balance of advantage is to allow the collector to have what is left of a hoard that has been studied and recorded in full (I shall come back to that), after perhaps several museums have had the opportunity of selecting what they can usefully pay for (I shall come back to that too).

As in the detailed studies of any complicated series, a reasonably large sample is necessary before the patterns can be observed properly, and the existence of the Coats and Antiquaries' collections gave Burns his chance, for the proportion of Scottish coins in most hoards is not very large. English and other foreign coins circulated preponderantly in value, except from the late fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century. The difference between Burns and those who had a few years before sold off more than half the coins of William the Lion that had been in the Museum for ninety years, was that he was interested in the distinction between dies, as well as between types and lettering. Roman and Anglo-Saxon coinages have a great many coins that are distinguishable by variations in the devices and legends which can be brought out in a printed description. That way one can get less far beyond broad typological distinctions in the case of medieval coins that are not dated, even by the king's numeral, and to which there are few references in the historical records. Unstandardised portrait punches, variations in minor details and privy marks introduced by the Mint, accidental breakages of letter punches, required not only Burns' close observation but also his wealth of illustration, made possible by photography. It is interesting that William Hunter with his gift a century earlier had specified that three of the gold unicorns of James III were from differing dies. Perhaps he was interested in dies for the good reason that they were differences that could be collected if one
wanted a collection more complete than other people’s. Burns however used these varieties to link coins which shared dies, into proven chronological sequences, and to link mints in different towns. His catalogue provided a reference system so that new varieties and dies could be recognised and collected in a way impossible before.

It would seem obvious that once your interpretation has become more detailed your policy will be to collect more, to choose a larger proportion out of the hoards offered, but this happened more slowly than one might expect. Though the purchases from the Pollexfen collection represented a good influx of minor varieties, George Macdonald only selected one per cent of the coins of the time of James III from the 1920 Perth hoard which he had studied and published in considerable detail: it contained about 850 Scottish and 250 English. So, many dies unrepresented in our national collection are to be found among what was bought from the finders by Perth Museum. At that time the King’s and Lord Treasurer’s Remembrancer would not allocate treasure trove beyond the National Museum of Antiquities and the Royal Scottish Museum. There was also a failure of communication within our museum, because no note was made of what the particular varieties of the selected coins were, or to show why they had been selected. It is at least evident that the policy did not aim at making the national collection in any way a complete series of dies of Scottish silver coins. The Perth billion plucks were not in good enough a state for any effort of the kind to be made with them: this as well as the probable quantity of dies tends to keep base metal in a different policy category. Runs of them are however a feature of our collection not found, I think, in other museums and due to our first choice on hoards. At the other end gold is too scarce, and now too expensive, to do more than think of collecting photographs.12

Two hoards of a type rarely recorded anywhere were sufficiently interesting for Macdonald to publish them in the Proceedings in 1916. Both buried about 1800 they consisted mostly of William of Orange silver rubbed smooth or nearly so with coppers of the Georges in nearly as bad a state. Their interest lay in their demonstration of the Patrick coin collection in 1936, though of course very rare ones. The two notable exceptions were due more to clipped English coins, was kept complete to be exhibited as a heap of silver. The nearly two thousand Roman coins coincided with a good historical and documented study of others from the Midlands of England.

...
Saxon coins, notably within one mint, at Chester. It is clear that the penny which Dolley had noted as being produced for export to the Norse traders, \(^{13}\) was of a poorer standard.

Neither the Anglo-Saxon Sylloge nor the purchase around 1960 of some 600 coins from the Scottish part of the Lockett collection would have been possible without the great amount of work done by Robert Kerr after he had retired from the Royal Scottish Museum. He listed and card-indexed coins, compared Lockett photographs with Burns illustrations, and sorted out and published the several hundred horrid little billon pennies of James IV from Ayrshire. But it was fortunate that the considerably more interesting James II and III pennies from an extraordinary couple of hoards from Glenluce and Nithsdale (Rhoneston) should have come up when Ian Stewart was prepared to arrange and publish them. His series of papers too on the early Scottish coins, particularly Alexander III, coincided with and helped our decision to make as complete a series of thirteenth-century coins as possible from what was being sold from the Lockett collection. Though we were very successful in this, we have not even after twenty years managed to arrange and check the collection according to his new arrangements or to check it with the detailed die-linked series which he has constructed with the help of photographs from us, but most of all from his own collection for which he has drawn from the same fabulous source, the Brussels hoard, and other parts of Messrs. Baldwin’s stock.

The new school of spare time numismatists with highly professional standards, following Burns’ leads to their logical conclusions, have also been working on the Edwardian coins of which Scotland has again been providing new examples, and both Stewart and Woodhead have done the National Museum’s work for it by cataloguing and publishing, with many new insights, the hoards from Renfrew and Loch Doon. The coins from the first of these have been made a study collection in Glasgow University except for the rare halfpennies and farthings which we have, along with a small type series of properly classified sterlings from Loch Doon. The Alexander III late coins remain a mystery which even Stewart has not made much of, \(^{14}\) but we accumulate die-varieties.

\(^{13}\) This theory is not now favoured: see Hunt, Stewart and Lyon, *Coinage in Tenth-Century England*, pp. 164 and 254.

\(^{14}\) R.B.K.S. did tell me that he felt the paper by Mr. North and myself on this series in *BNJ* 60 had found the solution.