

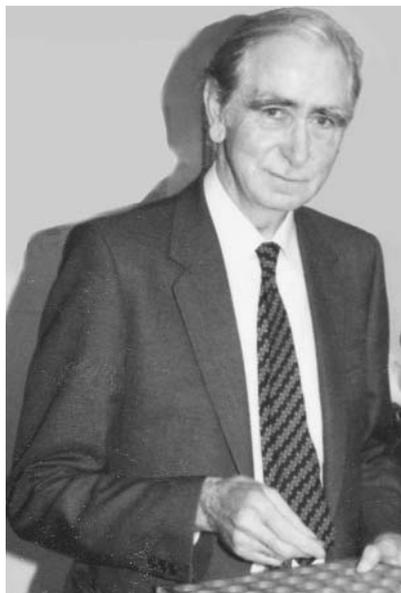
## **Robert Carson (7 April 1918 - 24 March 2006)**

Robert Andrew Glendinning Carson (“RAGC”) was born on 7 April 1918 in Kirkcudbright. His name was synonymous with Roman numismatics for the post-war generation and his career at the British Museum lasted 36 years, culminating with his five-year tenure of the Keepership of Coins and Medals between 1978 and his retirement in 1983.

Education at Kirkcudbright Academy and the University of Glasgow (First Class Honours in Classics) was followed by six year’s war service in the Royal Artillery, and he was promoted to Captain in 1946. He talked little of his wartime experiences to his later colleagues, though a jeep trip around the Near East in the immediate aftermath of victory, when there were no active national frontiers, enabled him to develop his interest in the remains of classical antiquity.

In 1947 he joined the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum as an Assistant Keeper with responsibility for Roman coins, as the successor to the great Harold Mattingly. It is hard for us to imagine the climate of those days; the offices of the department had been destroyed by a bomb in May 1941 and, although the collection had been removed to a place of safety, the work of the staff in those years was to rebuild, both literally and metaphorically, the department. They did not move back to their traditional premises until 1959. The Keeper at that time was John Allan, the Sanskrit scholar, and the two classical numismatists were Mattingly and (Sir) Stanley Robinson, the outstanding Greek numismatist of his age. A role in succession to these great scholars must have been more than a little daunting for the young Carson, and indeed for his lifelong friend, Kenneth Jenkins, who had joined the department only a few weeks earlier, with responsibility for Greek material.

Carson quickly established his reputation as an authority of Roman coinage. He began by publishing new hoards and acquisitions, and developed an interest in the coinage of the third century AD, whose understanding was at that time shrouded by misattributions and misunderstandings. It was, and remains, a difficult period. Written evidence is limited, both in quantity and reliability, and so coinage has seemed to offer the only systematic body of evidence on which even the most basic political and military history could be written. The “crisis” of the 3rd century may



nowadays be downplayed by historians, but it was a period of short-lived and competing emperors and a period when the coinage saw a dramatic decline in purity, provoking much discussion of the reality of an economic crisis alongside the political ones. Robert's approach was pragmatic and straightforward: he marshalled the evidence and drew sensible, but not over-ambitious conclusions. His work can be seen at its best in his 6th volume of the *Catalogue of Coins of the Roman Empire*; published in 1962, it set out a systematic and convincing account of the coinages of the years from 222 to 238, and was a good application of his more theoretical studies of the *officina* system of the mint of Rome, where he showed how one should often group six different reverse designs together as contemporary products of different workshops or *officinae* of the mint. He never completed the systematic studies he planned for the even more complicated years of the middle and later part of the century, but we have many of his preliminary studies to guide us, such as his work on the eastern mints of Valerian and Gallienus, on Zenobia, or on the (still!) poorly understood coinage after the reform of Aurelian, the latter especially in the light of the enormous hoard of relevant coins found at Gloucester in the 1960s.

He had a very specific interest in the coinage of the British usurpers Carausius and Allectus who established a separate empire in Britain in the 280s and 290s AD, and he sorted out the pattern of mints and chronology in a way that had not previously been achieved with a scheme which is essentially in use today. He became very excited at the appearance of two unexpected large bronze medallions of Carausius – which he was delighted to ensure got a safe future home at the Museum – and even once was notoriously observed to sign a letter as “R A G Carausius”.

He had a keen interest in conveying his wide and detailed knowledge of Roman coinage to an audience wider than the academic one, and he approached this in two main ways. He was a regular and popular lecturer to many different audiences, and he produced two general books. *Principal Coins of the Romans*, published in 3 volumes between 1978 and 1981, followed the pattern which had been established for Greek coins, and remains a methodical account of 800 years of Roman coinage, fully illustrated and with detailed commentaries; and it was supplemented by his *Coins of the Roman Empire* (1990), where he gave a much fuller, narrative account of the subject. He similarly took coinage in general to a wider audience; his early experience in the department, where he was called on to work on the coinage of almost every era and culture, stood him in good stead when he was invited to write *Coins – Ancient, Medieval and Modern*. First published in 1962 it went through numerous reprintings and revisions over two decades, remaining the best single account of the coinage of the world as a whole.

As well as his own work, he was instrumental in ensuring that many other important works by other scholars also saw the light of day. As editor of the *Roman Imperial Coinage* series, he can take much credit for the eventual appearance of 3 volumes, the first by the late J.W.E. Pearce, the second by the Finnish scholar Patrick

Bruun, and the third by his Museum colleague John Kent. Indeed, after Kent had joined the Department in 1953, they often collaborated, most effectively on the classification of the bronze coinage of the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Their article, with its telling acronym on “Constantinian Hoards and Other Studies”, was followed in 1960 by their joint (also with Philip Hill) *Late Roman Bronze Coinage*, a short but indispensable reference book. *LRBC* is still used by a new generation of archaeologists, numismatists, historians and collectors. A generation of scholars, familiar with a world of large and expensive reference works, were bemused to discover that for £5 they could buy a slim book that would enable them to identify almost any of the thousands of bronze coins surviving from the two hundred years from Constantine I to Romulus.

Carson’s work on identifying coin finds, whether they were from hoards or from excavation, occupied much of his time and led him to contemplate the arcane common law of Treasure Trove, whereby hoards of gold and silver belonged to the Crown; in return for paying the finder a reward equivalent to their market value, they could be studied and acquired for the Museum. This led to many publications, including an influential analysis of the pattern of hoarding in late Roman Britain, and indeed to an enormous scale of acquisition for the museum: the trays of coins of the later Roman empire were built up in a way that is now impossible and which has already provided an indispensable reference collection to a new generation of scholars. Carson also argued successfully in the (Coroners’) courts that ‘silver’ meant ‘intentionally made of silver’ and so persuaded many Coroners to hold that hoards of very base silver coins, sometimes containing as little as 2% of silver, were also Treasure Trove.

Carson was a tall, thin and elegant man; he was quiet and self-effacing, but determined. He devoted much of his time to ensure the smooth running of the department and of the Royal Numismatic Society. In the department he took on a broad administrative role, and his diplomatic approach was much to the benefit of the department and its staff, who at times could be difficult; later he welcomed and ‘bedded in’ the new generation of curators that arrived in the 1970s – consequently a much easier start for them than he himself had had. Departmental ‘parties’ – regarded as something of an ordeal by junior staff – were enlivened by the presence of Robert and his wife Fransisca.

For the Royal Numismatic Society, he did sterling work as editor of the *Numismatic Chronicle*, the principal numismatic publication in the world, and the volumes for 1966 to 1978, for which he was responsible, take up a vital half-metre of many research libraries. He was also influential in the organisation of the International Numismatic Congress of 1986; as President of the International Numismatic Commission, the body with overall responsibility for its organisation, he took pride in such a memorable event, attended by over 700 numismatists from all over the world.

It was a wonderful culmination of Carson's career in Britain, and he decided thereafter to emigrate to Australia, where his family had moved, and spent many happy years living near Sydney, being naturally adopted as the patron of numismatics in Australia. The down side was that it was difficult for him to pursue his research and writing, but nevertheless he published several articles and his *Coins of the Roman Empire*.

A regular stream of honours and prizes flowed in. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1965, President of the Royal Numismatic Society in 1974 and Honorary Fellow in 1980. He was awarded the medal of the French Numismatic Society in 1970; the Silver Medal of the Royal Numismatic Society in 1972, and the Huntington Medal of the American Numismatic Society in 1978; other honours were bestowed from Finland, Romania, Luxembourg and Australia. In 1977 he was awarded a Silver Jubilee Medal by the Queen; in 1980 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1983 he received an Honorary Doctorate from his University of Glasgow. Perhaps he took greatest pleasure in the receipt, together with his friend and colleague, of the volume of *Essays in Honour of Robert Carson and Kenneth Jenkins*, which was presented to him at a party at the British Museum in 1993. As the editors observed in the Foreword: "to all of us it seems only a moment ago that [he was] helping, encouraging, inspiring and befriending us".

He died on 24 March 2006, and is survived by his wife Fransisca and his two children.

Andrew BURNETT