



ROBERT CARSON

Robert Andrew Glendinning Carson

1918–2006

ROBERT CARSON, who died at the age of 87 on 24 March 2006, spent his career at the British Museum, where he rose to be Keeper of the Department of Coins & Medals, and was the leading British expert in Roman numismatics of his generation.

I. Life

Early career

Carson gave an account of his early life, until he joined the staff of the British Museum in 1947, in a statement which he deposited at the British Academy when he became a Fellow in 1980, and we reproduce that here in full.

Robert Andrew Glendinning Carson was born on 7 April 1918 at the farm of Glenterry in the parish of Borgue, Kirkcudbrightshire in Scotland. He was the younger son of Andrew and Mary Carson, and had an older brother and sister. His was a farming family which had farmed in the Glenkens area of Kirkcudbrightshire from at least the mid-eighteenth century.

His first education was at the village school in the nearby village of Twynholm, and later, when the family moved to the north of the county, at the village school in Balmaclellan. At the age of 12 he took what was known as the Qualifying Examination in all the standard subjects. This he passed with an average mark of 93 per cent which was then a record for this examination, and which gained him the Glenkens Bursary, entitling him to continue his education at Kirkcudbright Academy.

There his favourite subject immediately became Latin, taught by a superb teacher, John Mackenzie, who encouraged him to take up Greek as well at the

age of 15. As the sole pupil taking Greek in his year he had the benefit of individual tuition in Greek for three years. In his fifth year at the Academy he gained the Dux Prize in Latin, French, English and History, and in 1936 was Dux of school.

In 1936 he sat the Bursary Competition at both Edinburgh University and Glasgow University. Since he gained a higher place in the latter competition, it was to Glasgow University that he went in 1936 to study Classics. At that time at Glasgow a student studying for an M.A. with Honours in a particular subject had to study for a year and pass the requisite examination in other complementary subjects to broaden his education. In this case the subjects he took were Modern History, Philosophy and Political Economy.

In his time at Glasgow, the Professor of Humanity was Christian Fordyce, the specialist in Catullus, and, in Greek, Professor Rennie, whose love was Aristophanes. In Greek, too, he had the good fortune to study under H. D. F. Kitto and W. H. Gomme. He had the benefit, also, of the special classes in Roman History with S. N. Millar, who provided an introduction to epigraphy and archaeology, particularly the archaeology of Roman Britain. Part of this course was a series of lectures on Roman numismatics, given by Anne S. Robertson, Curator of the Hunterian Museum. Here he had his first experience of studying an outstanding and organised collection of Roman coins, something which was to influence his ultimate career.

In 1939 he had his first experience of travel abroad when he accompanied his mother on a visit to Canada and the USA, where a number of his father's and mother's family had settled. He was still abroad in September 1939 when war broke out and had great difficulty in making his way back to Britain in October 1939. After much heart-searching and with reluctance he was urged and persuaded to finish his studies at Glasgow, and in 1940 he gained the degree of Master of Arts with First Class Honours in Classics. At the same time he gained the Foulis Scholarship for further study at Oxford. This he was allowed to hold over until after the war, but, in the event, he was never able to take this up.

In 1940 he joined the Royal Artillery, and began his training in the Anti-Aircraft Command. He was sent to the Anti-Aircraft Officers Training Corps at Llandrindod Wells and was commissioned in July 1941. Like many mobile Light Anti-Aircraft units his battery led a peripatetic existence, seeing active service all over Britain from the North-East of Scotland to the South of England. [This was not always without incident: Marion Archibald notes that Carson used to recall an occasion when, early in his war-time career, he was in charge of a consignment of heavy anti-aircraft equipment vital to the defence of Cambridge when he managed to lose his way down a cul-de-sac. He was only able to extricate the convoy by flattening the hedges and flower-beds of several houses.] Eventually with the D Day invasion in 1944 his regiment crossed to Normandy, moving with the advance through northern France, Belgium and Holland. The excellent academic French which he had learnt at school and kept up by later reading proved a great help in acquiring a reasonable fluency in French in the first months on the Continent, but Flemish in Belgium and Dutch in Holland were quite new languages. These languages appealed to him and in

the course of the campaigns he acquired a working knowledge of these tongues. When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, his regiment was part of the force brought back to take over the surrender of the German army in Holland, and during some three months' stay there familiarity with Dutch was increased.

In July 1945, by this time promoted to Captain, he was posted to the Light Anti-Aircraft regiment of 3 Division which was being re-grouped in Belgium in preparation for being sent to the USA, for training for the war in the Far East. When, in August 1945 the war there ended, this plan was scrapped and the whole Division was sent to Palestine for security duties in the circumstances of the unrest at that time. It was an uncomfortable and tense period, but duty was such that it gave the opportunity of covering much of Palestine, and visiting many famous archaeological sites and historically famous places—Haifa, the old city of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Tiberias and Jericho, and even further afield to Damascus, into Lebanon and across to Amman in Jordan.

While still in the army in Palestine he took the first open examination for candidates for the Diplomatic Service and the First Division Civil Service, and at the same time he applied for a post as an Assistant Keeper in various departments of the British Museum. After demobilisation in August 1946 he successfully took further eliminating examinations for the Diplomatic and the First Division Service. He survived to the final interview stage but just failed to secure an appointment. However, in December 1946 he was interviewed for the British Museum posts along with a couple of hundred other hopefuls. Because of university studies and interests he had applied for available posts in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities which included Roman Britain, and almost as an afterthought for the Department of Coins and Medals. It was in this latter that he was offered an appointment as Assistant Keeper to specialise in Roman Coinage, a post made vacant by the retirement of Harold Mattingly, the doyen of Roman numismatics. He took up this appointment in the British Museum in April 1947.

Carson later described how his duties as Harold Mattingly's research assistant would include chasing up classical references for footnotes which Mattingly wrote without ever needing to consult sources. Carson's background would not normally have led him to an academic career and it was only due to the exceptional promise he showed from a very young age that he followed this path. But he never forgot his origins and colleagues recall how he used to talk in later years about his upbringing on a family farm in Kirkcudbrightshire.

Career at the British Museum

Carson arrived at the British Museum a few months after his life-long colleague Kenneth Jenkins, an expert in Greek coins. Their arrival coincided with the start of the slow recovery of the Museum from the effects of the Second World War when most of the staff had left to take part in

the war effort and the collections had been evacuated from London. The fabric of the Museum had been much damaged by bombing and the offices of the Coin Department were completely destroyed by a bomb in May 1941. It was not until 1959 that the department was able to return to permanent accommodation when its offices were finally rebuilt so, for his first twelve years, Carson and his colleagues had to work in a series of temporary offices which, in the 1950s, were in the South East Residence of the British Museum.

When Carson first arrived in 1947, John Allan, an orientalist of very broad interests, had been Keeper of the department since 1931. Carson subsequently remembered him as the finest numismatist that he knew. Allan retired in 1949 and was succeeded by Stanley Robinson, a Greek specialist, who was Keeper for just three years, when John Walker, another orientalist, who specialised in Islamic coins, took over from 1952 until his death in 1964.

Carson was joined in 1951 by Michael Dolley, an expert on British coins, and two years later by the mercurial John Kent, another expert on Roman coins whose responsibilities actually included the department's collection of modern coins and medals.¹ In 1963 Dolley left to take up a position at Queen's University Belfast and was replaced by Marion Archibald, while in 1962 Nicholas Lowick, a specialist in Islamic coins, and in 1966 Martin Price, an expert in Greek coins, were recruited. Together they formed a very disparate but vibrant group of colleagues, all very different in character and temperament, who collectively rebuilt the pre-war traditions of numismatic scholarship in which the Department had been pre-eminent, above all through the publication of monumental catalogues of the collection which are still standard reference works today.

Carson was perhaps the most level-headed and sensible of the group and as a result he gradually took on a heavier administrative burden. Although there were personality clashes between some of his colleagues, Carson was trusted by all sides and often had to act as peacemaker. When, in 1965, Kenneth Jenkins was appointed Keeper in succession to John Walker, it was Carson who effectively ran the Department as Deputy Keeper. Jenkins retired at the age of 60 in 1978, five years before he needed to, and it was believed that he did so in order to give Carson the opportunity to hold the Keepership before he retired.

¹ Andrew Burnett and Marion Archibald, 'John Philip Cozens Kent, 1928–2000', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 115 (2002), 259–74.

The staff of the British Museum underwent a rapid expansion in the mid-1970s² and Carson acted as mentor to a whole generation of young specialists in Roman numismatics, including Edward Besly, now at the National Museum Wales, Ian Carradice, now at St Andrews University, and the two authors of this memoir. Other staff who also joined in this period and who have occasion to remember Carson's paternal influence with gratitude include Mark Jones, who went on to become Director of the National Museums of Scotland and the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the current Keeper of the department, Joe Cribb, who joined in 1970.

Carson's term as Keeper of the department from 1978 to 1983 should have been the culmination of his career but in many ways it proved to be a difficult time, as the Museum's financial situation was very tight after 1980 and he worked hard to keep his department together. He had earned his retirement in 1983.

Retirement years

On Carson's retirement he and his wife decided to follow their son who had settled in Australia a few years earlier and they moved to Sydney in 1984; however, that did not mean the end of his research into Roman coinage and we are grateful to Ken Sheedy for this account of his activity in retirement.

A quiet retirement in the northern seaside suburb of Newport was his intention but he took a kindly interest in local numismatic affairs (becoming patron of the Australian Numismatic Society) and expressed a willingness to help with any 'minor' tasks relating to Roman coinage. He was invited down to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart to assess a fine collection of Roman coins which had been donated by an Irish peer. He also found time to contribute some notes on coins to a catalogue for a visiting exhibition on Pompeii.³ In 1988 he was invited by Pat Boland, honorary numismatist at the Powerhouse Museum, to put their Roman collection into order. Thus began Robert's regular weekly visits. The collection largely consisted of small Roman bronze coins from the third and fourth centuries AD which had been brought back to Australia from the Levant by returning soldiers and then donated to the Australia Museum. For the author and editor of *LRBC* [*Late Roman Bronze Coinage*] and *RIC* [*Roman Imperial Coinage*] this was a pleasant chance 'to keep his hand in' as he once remarked, and he would bring along his own copy of *LRBC* to check details of this standard and indispensable work on the subject.

² David M. Wilson, *The British Museum. A History* (London, 2002), p. 278.

³ J.-P. Descoudres (ed.), *Pompeii revisited* (Sydney, 1994).

He began a new project on Pella. In 1985 Dr Anthony McNichol, field director of the University of Sydney excavations at Pella in Jordan, had died after a prolonged battle with cancer. McNichol had been responsible for the publication of the excavation coins. In 1988 Ken Sheedy was asked to take over this responsibility, and having seen the poor preservation of some of the Roman coins from the site (the soil of Pella is highly corrosive) he quickly realised that completion of the work within a reasonable time span would only be possible if Carson agreed to share the project. Carson was indeed interested, provided he didn't have to travel to Jordan (coming to Australia was enough!). Fortunately, the Jordanian government permitted all of the coins to come to Sydney before they were finally to be lodged in Jordan. And so began the weekly visits of Carson and Sheedy to Sydney University and the Pella excavation room, which would last over three years. Sheedy would attend to the Greek, Jewish, Roman Provincial and Byzantine coins, while Carson marched with confidence and the eye of an expert through the much larger Roman section.

A good many coins from the Pella excavations survive merely as worn bits of metal without any marks. Carson was able to identify some 849 Roman coins; without his vast experience and endless patience the number would have been much smaller. The publication, *Pella in Jordan 1979–1990. The Coins* (Adapa Monographs 1, Sydney, 2001), was the first final report of the excavations at Pella, and only the second detailed account from Jordan of a major excavation's coins. Carson confirmed the remarkable dominance in the region of coins minted by Constantius II (348–61), as well as the fact that the finds tail off quite sharply in the latter half of the 5th century after Theodosius II. He also brought into focus the very large amount of small bronze coins of the 4th and 5th centuries recovered from Pella. The legacy of Carson's work with these excavation coins is substantial: it will serve as a crucial guide to those who must now write the reports on the stratigraphy of the site, and it will also stand as a basic text for scholars studying the history and character of Roman coin circulation in the Levant. This, his last work, is also to be recognised as an important contribution to the emerging study of Roman occupation in the Jordan Valley.

In 1949 Carson married Meta Fransisca De Vries, from the Netherlands, whom he met when she came to London to study English. They had one son, Jeremy, and a daughter, Elizabeth.

In 1993 Carson returned to England to receive the volume of *Essays in Honour of Robert Carson and Kenneth Jenkins*, presented to him and his long-term colleague Kenneth Jenkins at a party at the British Museum. 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.'

II. Work

Contribution to Roman numismatics

Carson was a prolific scholar and his bibliography runs to more than 350 items.⁴ He had been set high standards by his mentor, Harold Mattingly, who served as Curator of Roman coins at the British Museum from 1910 to 1947 and who had initiated two of the most influential catalogues of Roman coins that still set the standards today: *Roman Imperial Coinage (RIC)* and the *British Museum Catalogues of Coins of the Roman Empire (BMCRE)*.

The first volume of *RIC*, which Mattingly wrote jointly with E. A. Sydenham, appeared in 1923, while *BMCRE* I appeared in the same year. The relationship between these two series has long puzzled non-specialists. The *BMCRE* volumes follow in a tradition of catalogues of the collection of the British Museum which go back to the early nineteenth century, and E. A. Grueber had catalogued the Museum's Roman Republican coins in three volumes in 1910. Mattingly was clearly expected to continue the tradition and he produced five volumes, taking the coinage down to the reign of Elagabalus. These are very substantial works of scholarship with detailed descriptions of each individual coin, lengthy introductions discussing attributions, typology etc., and illustrating each coin type. Mattingly also tried to break away from the tradition of just cataloguing the British Museum's collection which, extensive though it is, can never include every single variety, and he added descriptions of types from other coin cabinets which are not represented in the Museum's collection. However, this was a slightly awkward compromise, as *BMCRE* remained a catalogue of a single collection rather than a complete listing of all known types, generally agreed to be the most useful type of reference work for Roman coins.

For this reason, Mattingly also devised the *Roman Imperial Coinage* series to sit alongside *BMCRE* and provide a corpus of all known types in a much more abbreviated format, with only minimal illustration: Mattingly described the *RIC* volumes as 'light-armed skirmishers' compared with the 'heavyweight infantry' of *BMCRE*. By the time Carson arrived at the British Museum, seven volumes of *RIC* had already

⁴ R. Bland, 'Bibliography. Published work of R. A. G. Carson 1947–1981', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1982), 195–212, updated in M. Price, A. Burnett and R. Bland (eds.), *Essays in Honour of Robert Carson and Kenneth Jenkins* (London, 1993), pp. 285–96 (hereafter cited as 'Bibliography').

appeared and Carson's great contribution in bringing this series to completion as an editor is discussed below.

Carson also contributed a further volume to *BMCRE* VI covering the coinages of Severus Alexander, Maximinus, Gordian I and II and Balbinus and Pupienus (AD 222–38), published in 1962. This is a work of patient and thorough scholarship in the tradition of Harold Mattingly. As with the earlier volumes, it contains a detailed discussion of the coinage in the introduction, but Carson went further than Mattingly had done through developing a detailed classification of the coinage into roughly annual issues, working on the assumption that the mint was divided into six *officinae* or workshops and that each *officina* struck one reverse type (see below). Although scholars now believe that there are exceptions to this framework and this rule cannot be applied rigidly all the time, as there are many exceptions to it, the underlying model is sound and Carson's recognition of this phenomenon and his working out of it in this volume must stand as a major contribution to the study of Roman coinage. Another very sensible modification that Carson introduced was to list all the coins of all metals together by issue, rather than separating them into gold and silver on the one hand and bronze on the other, as Mattingly had done. It is also ironic, given our observation below that his 1990 volume, *Coins of the Roman Empire*, omitted any discussion of Roman provincial issues, that in *BMCRE* VI Carson departed from Mattingly's model in that he included a conspectus of the provincial issues of the period. In this respect, Carson was ahead of his time.

It is strange to reflect that this was almost certainly the last volume of *BMCRE* to be published, as current thinking is to continue to develop and produce new and fuller editions of *RIC*, and the concept of a single collection catalogue for Roman coins is no longer in favour.

But perhaps Carson's most influential contribution to the study of Roman coins lay in the work he carried out in collaboration with John Kent in establishing a definitive and above all usable guide to the classification and dating of the prolific issues of base metal coinage of the fourth and fifth centuries AD. Coins of the period from the reform of Diocletian in 294 to the reform of Anastasius in 498 are much the commonest Roman coins to be found in sites across much of the Roman Empire, but, with the honourable exception of a few scholars such as Otto Voetter (in his catalogue of the Gerin collection) and J. W. E. Pearce (a schoolmaster by profession, who wrote in a series of articles on the coinage of 364 to 423 in *Spink Numismatic Circular*, 1931–3 and then *RIC* IX: see below), they had traditionally been overlooked by numismatists as being

too uninteresting and poorly struck, with too complicated a series of issue-marks, to merit detailed study.

Carson's first contribution was in a paper that he published with John Kent in 1956 ('Constantinian hoards and other studies in the later Roman bronze coinage', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 1956, 83–161: the authors were very pleased that the title of this paper could be abbreviated as 'CHAOS'). This was a catalogue of four hoards of coins of the reform of Diocletian, known then as 'folles', although numismatists now prefer to call them 'nummi', dating from 294 to 324. Building on the work of Voetter and E. T. Leeds,⁵ Carson and Kent established a chronology of the successive issue-marks from each of the western mints, using the evidence of the succession of rulers (their turnover was high during this period), the terminal dates of the different hoards, and the series of reductions in weight of the coinage. One of the most important features of this paper was that it broke away from the conventional classification by ruler, which becomes impossibly complicated in the fourth century when sometimes there could be up to six emperors in power at any one time, to a classification by mint, the approach that had already been pioneered by Pearce in *RIC IX* (see below). Important though this was, this was a publication of a group of hoards rather than an attempt to provide a complete corpus of the coinage: that had to wait until Humphrey Sutherland and Patrick Bruun published volumes VI and VII of *RIC*, covering the period from the reform of Diocletian (294) to the death of Constantine I (337) in 1967 and 1966 respectively: they made heavy use of the pioneering work of Carson and Kent (see below).

In collaboration with Philip Hill, another scholar at the British Museum, John Kent went on to publish a classification of all the base metal coinage of the period from 324 to 346⁶ in a series of articles in Spink's *Numismatic Circular*. He then continued this series of articles, with Carson as his co-worker, taking the coinage from 346 down to the reform of Anastasius in 498. These articles were subsequently published in book form in 1960 as *Late Roman Bronze Coinage (LRBC)*,⁷ providing a complete classification of all late Roman base metal and bronze issues in a single slim volume.

⁵ E. T. Leeds, *A Hoard of Roman folles found at Fyfield, Berks.* (Oxford, 1946).

⁶ In *LRBC* the authors believed that the VICTORIAE DD AVGGQ NN/VOT XX MVLTTXXX coinages were replaced by the reformed FEL TEMP REPARATIO issues in 346; Kent subsequently demonstrated that this change occurred in 348.

⁷ R. A. G. Carson, P. V. Hill and J. P. C. Kent, *Late Roman Bronze Coinage, A.D. 324–498* (London, 1960).

It is hard to overstate the influence of this book. Its extraordinary concision was achieved through great use of abbreviations, with different systems in use in Part I (324–46) and Part II (346–498), making it a hard book to use for the uninitiated. But within a volume only 118 pages long, and published at only £5, it included a complete classification of 170 years of coinage. Since it was eminently portable, it could be taken into the field to be used to classify coins from excavations and in museum collections. Three and half volumes of *RIC* are needed to cover the same period and are anything but portable: they amount to over 1,800 pages, although *RIC* catalogues the gold and silver coinages as well as the base metal issues.

LRBC led to a revolution in the standard of coin reports from excavations and from hoards, as exploited by Richard Reece among others, and this in turn has made possible a whole new area of study, that of coin circulation. Reece recalls that Carson played a crucial role in helping him at an early stage on his future path of study. Speaking of his first substantial paper on Roman coin finds he notes:⁸

If I had not known Robert and John [Kent] in 1965 my first trip to study museum collections abroad would have been very different: Robert helped with introductions in France, but was totally honest about not knowing anything outside Paris. But then, the Parisians said exactly the same: 'Who Knows? Go and find out and report back.' And rather more importantly if he had not been Editor of *Numismatic Chronicle* at the time, and had not been part of the idea, it would probably never have been published, and could well have withered away. He turned what could have been a travelogue into a respectable article, and took Italy and Northern France as well in due course. And he was my External Examiner—and presumably approved.

Although Carson's numismatic research was mainly focused on questions of classification and attribution of Roman coinage, rather than on circulation, for some twenty-five years he himself provided a steady stream of reports of coins from excavations (Bibliography, 50–87) and published over fifty hoards (Bibliography, 1–49).

Carson had an unrivalled knowledge of the coinage of the third century AD, largely founded on the study of coin hoards, and in a series of articles he provided important insights into the study of the complex coin issues of this period, including the coinage of AD 238,⁹ of Trebonianus

⁸ Richard Reece, 'Roman coinage in southern France', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1967), 91–105.

⁹ 'The coinage and chronology of 238', in H. Ingholt (ed.), *The Centennial Publication of the American Numismatic Society* (New York, 1958), pp. 181–99.

Gallus and Volusian,¹⁰ of Postumus,¹¹ and the reform of Aurelian.¹² His publication of the hoard of mid-third century radiates of Valerian and Gallienus from Hama in Syria in the National Museum in Copenhagen included an important classification of the eastern issues of those two emperors,¹³ and he made other important contributions on the eastern coinage of this period.¹⁴

As Curator of Roman coins at the British Museum, it was perhaps inevitable that Carson should take an interest in the coins of the British usurpers Carausius and Allectus and he published a series of papers on their coinages, providing for the first time a classification of the issue marks of their coins in two papers in 1959 and 1971,¹⁵ and two detailed studies of the coins that Carausius issued in the names of himself and of Diocletian and Maximian.¹⁶ He also was proud to have acquired the only two known bronze medallions of Carausius;¹⁷ indeed on one famous occasion he even signed his name as 'R. A. G. Carausius'. It is perhaps unfortunate that he never had the time to complete a more extended catalogue of the coinage, something that is still much needed, even though two less than satisfactory studies of his coinage have been published together with John Casey's important historical treatment of the British Empire of Carausius and Allectus.¹⁸

One of Carson's core responsibilities was to study hoards of Roman coins reported under the common law of Treasure Trove. Although many of these hoards were fairly unremarkable, some were of considerable

¹⁰ 'Mints in the mid-third century' in R. A. G. Carson and C. M. Kraay (eds.), *Scripta Nummaria Romana. Essays Presented to Humphrey Sutherland* (London, 1978), pp. 65–74.

¹¹ 'Internuntius Deorum: a new type for Postumus and its place in the series', *Congrès international de numismatique, Paris, 1953, 2. Actes* (Paris, 1957), pp. 259–71.

¹² 'The reform of Aurelian', *Revue Numismatique* (1965), 225–35.

¹³ 'The Hama hoard and the eastern mints of Valerian and Gallienus' *Berytus*, 17 (1967), 123–42.

¹⁴ 'Antoniniani of Zenobia', *Quaderni ticinesi di numismatica e antichità classiche*, 7 (1978), 221–8; 'The date of the capture of Valerian I', in T. Hackens and R. Weiller (eds.), *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of Numismatics, Berne, September, 1979* (Luxembourg, 1982), pp. 461–5.

¹⁵ 'The mints and coinage of Carausius and Allectus', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 22 (1959), 33–40, and 'The sequence marks on the coinage of Carausius and Allectus' in R. A. G. Carson (ed.), *Mints, Dies and Currency. Essays dedicated to the Memory of Albert Baldwin* (London, 1971), pp. 57–65.

¹⁶ 'Carausius et fratres sui: a reconsideration' in S. Scheers (ed.), *Studia Paulo Naster Oblata I. Numismatica Antiqua* (Leuven, 1982), pp. 245–58 and 'Carausius et fratres sui . . . again', in H. Huvelin, M. Christol and G. Gautier (eds.), *Mélanges de numismatique offerts à Pierre Bastien* (Wetteren, Belgium, 1987), pp. 145–8.

¹⁷ 'Bronze medallions of Carausius', *The British Museum Quarterly*, 37, 1–2 (1974), 1–4.

¹⁸ P. J. Casey, *Carausius and Allectus: the British Usurpers* (London, 1994).

importance, among which we may single out the thirty-seven gold aurei of the first century AD from Bredgar in Kent, which may be associated with the Roman invasion of AD 43,¹⁹ or the hoard of fourth-century gold aurei and multiples from the Mediterranean, published in 1980.²⁰ Coin hoards from Britain had traditionally been published in *Numismatic Chronicle*, but as the number of hoards increased in number and space in that journal became scarcer, Carson helped to found a new series of volumes just devoted to hoards of Roman coins: *Coin Hoards from Roman Britain*.²¹ Eleven volumes have been published so far. He also published an important discussion of late Roman gold and silver coin hoards from Britain, one of his few excursions into a broader discussion of coin circulation.²²

During the 1970s the rate of discovery of hoards increased as metal detectors became widely available, serving to highlight the inadequacies of the medieval common law of Treasure Trove. Under this law only objects made of gold or silver that had been deliberately buried by their original owner with the intention of recovery could qualify as Treasure Trove and so become Crown property.²³ Carson became frustrated by the irrationality of the law under which hoards of gold and silver coins qualified as Treasure Trove whereas those of bronze coins did not and he sought to extend the coverage of the medieval doctrine of Treasure Trove.

His way of doing so made use of the work of Lawrence Cope, which demonstrated for the first time that the base metal coins of the late third and fourth centuries contained measurable quantities of silver in their alloy, at least down to AD 364.²⁴ On the basis that the relative value of

¹⁹ 'The Bredgar treasure of Roman coins', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1959), 17–22.

²⁰ 'A treasure of aurei and multiples from the Mediterranean' in P. Bastien *et al.* (eds.), *Mélanges . . . offerts à Jean Lafaurie* (Paris, 1980), pp. 59–73.

²¹ R. A. G. Carson and A. M. Burnett, *Recent Coin Hoards from Roman Britain*, British Museum Occasional Paper 5 (London, 1979).

²² 'Gold and silver coin hoards and the end of Roman Britain', *British Museum Yearbook 1: The Classical Tradition* (London, 1976), pp. 65–74.

²³ See R. Bland, 'Treasure Trove and the case for reform', *Art, Antiquity and the Law*, I, 1 (Feb. 1996), 11–26. Carson had himself published a note entitled 'Treasure Trove' in *Spink Numismatic Circular* (1954), 193–5.

²⁴ Carson took a close interest in Lawrence Cope's research, which culminated in a Ph.D., *The Metallurgical Development of the Roman Imperial Coinage during the First Five Centuries A.D.* (Liverpool, 1974), although his full data were only published subsequently in L. H. Copeř, C. E. King, J. P. Northover and T. Clay, *Metal Analyses of Roman Coins minted under the Empire*, British Museum Occasional Paper 120 (London, 1997). Cope, a chemist by profession, used wet chemical methods, involving the physical destruction of a part or the whole of a coin

silver to copper at this time was 100:1,²⁵ Carson proposed that even a coin with a silver content of as little as 1 per cent was intended by the Roman authorities as a silver coin. Applying this principle to hoards of late third- and early fourth-century coins, he argued successfully that many of these should be Treasure Trove, and so Crown property, since the coins in them should be regarded as silver. This enabled a proper record to be made of many hoards that would otherwise have been dispersed unrecorded, and museums were able to acquire some or all of the coins. The first find for which he successfully made this case was a large hoard of 5,357 radiates of the period 211 to 282 found at Hollingbourne in Kent in 1959,²⁶ and over the next two decades many more hoards of third- and fourth-century base metal coins were declared Treasure Trove.

However, in 1982 the practice had to stop when, as a result of a legal challenge in relation to another hoard of base silver radiates from Coleby in Lincolnshire,²⁷ the Master of the Rolls, Lord Denning, decided that only objects with at least 50 per cent of gold or silver could be Treasure Trove.²⁸ It took another fourteen years before a new law, the Treasure Act, finally brought in an objective definition of Treasure which embraced all hoards of coins, regardless of their metal content.

Carson was responsible for some important additions to the British Museum's collection of Roman coins and he was assiduous in publishing them (Bibliography, 88–101): in addition to the two medallions of Carausius mentioned above, he also acquired the gold stater of Flamininus,²⁹ and gold medallions of Claudius II and Maxentius.³⁰ He had a good eye for identifying modern forgeries which were submitted to the Museum for an opinion and he made an important contribution to the corpus of forgeries of Roman coins in his paper on the 'Geneva

(non-destructive techniques of analysis only started to be used on coins in the 1970s) and Carson supplied him with unregistered duplicate coins from the British Museum's collection for his use.

²⁵ This is the ratio in Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices: see T. Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, vol. 5, text and translation of Diocletian's edict by E. R. Graser (Baltimore, 1940).

²⁶ 'Hollingbourne Treasure Trove', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1961), 211–23.

²⁷ R. F. Bland and E. M. Besly, 'Coleby, Lincs: 7767+ antoniniani to AD 281' in A. M. Burnett (ed.), *Coin Hoards from Roman Britain*, V, British Museum Occasional Paper 54 (London, 1984), 22–60.

²⁸ *Attorney-General of the Duchy of Lancaster v G E Overton (Farms) Ltd.* [1982] 1 All ER 524–31.

²⁹ 'The gold stater of Flamininus', *British Museum Quarterly*, 20 (1955–6), 11–13.

³⁰ 'Roman coin acquisitions', *British Museum Quarterly*, 24 (1961), 30–3 and 'Gold medallions of the reign of Maxentius', *Congresso internazionale di Numismatica, Roma 11–16 Settembre 1961. Vol. II, Atti* (Rome, Istituto Italiano di Numismatica, 1965), 347–52; see also 'Roman coins acquired by the British Museum 1939–1959', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1959), 1–16.

forgeries', cleverly made fakes of coins of rare emperors of the third and fourth centuries AD.³¹

General works

Carson was an unusual scholar for his time inasmuch he had a great concern to ensure that the fruits of his and other specialists' work reached a wider audience. There were two aspects of this. In the first place he wanted to ensure that numismatics, very much a *Hilfswissenschaft* as he saw it, should be given a greater airing among scholars in other disciplines. For that reason he supported for many years the publication of *Surveys of Numismatic Research*. The surveys began to be published every 5–7 years to coincide with the holding of the International Numismatic Conference. These surveys have now become the standard route by which other specialists and generalists, often ill at ease with numismatic literature and methodology, keep themselves up to date with the discipline. Carson's initial contribution was to write the relevant chapter concerning Roman numismatics for the survey of 1953,³² but as Secretary and President of the International Numismatic Commission he oversaw an expansion of the Survey and a strengthening of its critical selectivity.

He also wrote works for the general public. There were three main projects. The first, and in many ways most ambitious and successful, was his detailed account of coinage of all ages and from all parts of the world; modestly, but also with deadly accuracy, entitled *Coins*. His early career at the British Museum had perhaps made him the ideal person to pull off such a project, since for many years after he joined the British Museum it fell to him to sort out the new acquisitions of coins from all over the world and incorporate them into the Museum's extraordinarily comprehensive collection. The work, running to 560 pages, was first published in 1962 and reprinted several times over the next two decades, being fully revised in 1970 and issued on one occasion as a set of three volumes—*Coins of Greece and Rome*, *Coins of Europe*, and *Coins of America, Africa, Australasia and Asia* (London, 1971). The more or less equal split between these three categories may seem out of date by modern perceptions, but the coverage was much fuller than any previous work. And it was probably the last time that any single author could undertake a

³¹ 'The Geneva forgeries', *Numismatic Chronicle* (1958), 47–58.

³² R. A. G. Carson, 'A report on research in Roman numismatics, 1936–52', *Congrès international de numismatique*, Vol. 1, *Rapports* (Paris, 1953), pp. 31–54; see also R. A. G. Carson and G. K. Jenkins, 'Greek and Roman numismatics, 1940–50', *Historia*, 2, 2 (1953), 214–34.

project of such breadth; for example, successors—such as Martin Price (ed.), *Coins: an illustrated survey* (London, 1980) and J. Cribb, B. Cook and I. Carradice, *The Coin Atlas* (London, 1990)—were either joint or team efforts. *Coins* remains in print and has been influential for two decades; it was standard reading for new would-be recruits to the British Museum, several of whom now hold high positions in the academic and museum world.

His second and third projects for the general reader were more closely focused on his personal specialism, Roman coins. He conceived the project *Principal Coins of the Romans* (*PCR*, London, 1978, 1980 and 1981) following the model of Barclay Head's *Principal Coins of the Greeks* (*PCG*), a BM project of the late nineteenth century. *PCG* was intended as a distillation of its more extensive but more error-prone French predecessor, T. E. Mionnet's *Description de médailles antiques* (Paris, 1806–13), which was intended to introduce the general reader to Greek coinage by combining a descriptive text with reproduction of the coins with casts of the original ('plus de vingt milles empreintes en soufre, prises sur les pieces originales'). *PCG* developed this approach by adding high quality images using the still relatively new method of photography and also by replacing Mionnet's rather dull plaster casts, often made of unpleasantly brown sulphurous plaster, with replicas made by the exciting new technique of electrotyping. An electrotype is essentially a 'cast' in metal, but the electrotyping process allowed the reproduction of much finer detail to be achieved; British Museum electrotypes of the nineteenth century, made by the Ready family, father and son, are still prized acquisitions by collectors and museums today.

PCR was a selection of very interesting and often beautiful coins from the British Museum's Roman collections which Carson made available to a wide audience with short descriptions and pithy Carsonian comments, though the illustrations were not of the highest quality, as off-set litho had not yet managed anything like the quality of pre-war collotype reproduction. It was published in three chronological volumes between 1978 and 1981 and was a great success, being reprinted several times. But the coins it documented and which had been taken out of the main collection into a separate *PCR* cabinet available in the department's Students' Room for collector and general public alike had to be returned to the main trays in the 1980s for security reasons. In a world of increasing untrustworthiness it was deemed too much of a security risk for a single coin to have two theoretical homes, in the main trays and in the *PCR* cabinet. Possible

confusion about where it should be might have contributed to a failure to frustrate any attempt at theft.

Carson's third and final book for the general reader, *Coins of the Roman Empire* (London, 1990), was written and published during his retirement. It was part of the general series *The Library of Numismatics* undertaken by Methuen (which later became part of Routledge), a series that, though well-conceived, remains for reasons of history incomplete and of variable quality. Carson's volume remedied some of the problems of *PCR*, in some respects its predecessor: the illustrations were extremely good and the text provides a magisterial discussion of the whole coinage from Augustus to the end of the fifth century, as well as chapters on coinage metal and coinage production, monetary systems, mints, iconography and forgeries, both ancient and modern. Few other numismatists could have written such a broad and connected account of the whole sweep of Roman Imperial coinage and much of it draws on Carson's own research. However, the book has perhaps fallen victim to changes in approach. There is no discussion at all of coin circulation, now a principal topic of numismatic investigation, and this is surprising given Carson's own extensive experience in publishing both hoards and site finds. Likewise, no general account of Roman coins should nowadays ignore the extensive bronze coinage made by the cities of the Greek-speaking eastern Roman empire. Regarded previously as 'Greek Imperials' (a rather quaint name confusingly implying that they were the product of some undefined empire of the Greeks) they have now become 'Roman provincials' and a greater awareness of their interrelationship with the 'Roman imperial coinage proper' has enabled us to see both elements in different ways; but they are both parts of a single whole. Yet it would be churlish to deny the book's qualities—the product of all his years of experience made it a very considered account of the material, and much more usable than the book it replaced, Harold Mattingly's idiosyncratic *Roman Coins* (London, 1928, and subsequent revisions).

Carson's wide knowledge of the Roman world was also in demand in popular periodicals: during the 1950s he wrote a series of articles on aspects of Roman history for *History Today*, as well as contributing a chapter on Roman history to a volume on the ancient world, edited by Michael Grant, and publishing in classical journals such as *Greece and Rome* and *Didaskalos*.³³ He was an assiduous book reviewer and for many

³³ "A city of the scattered earth": from Tiber's seven hills to world dominion', in M. Grant (ed.), *The Birth of Western Civilisation* (London, 1964), pp. 209–40; 'Caesar and the monarchy', *Greece*

years reviewed all books on coins for the *Times Literary Supplement* (Bibliography, 248–339).

Carson as editor

One of Carson's greatest qualities was the support and help he gave to others. He co-supervised two Ph.D.s, one of which, by John Drinkwater, resulted in the publication of the most authoritative historical treatment to date of the Gallic Empire.³⁴ One aspect was the way that several new recruits entering the department under his leadership in the 1970s were to benefit from his help, whether patiently teaching them something about Roman coinage or forgeries or supporting and advising them as they developed their own academic careers. His care for the individuals in the subject can be seen from the series of sympathetic obituaries he wrote for his peers—great figures like Mattingly, Walker and Sutherland (Bibliography, 200–12). It is typical of his selfless generosity, as well as his skills as an editor, that he edited no less than two *Festschriften* in honour of Mattingly and Sutherland and a memorial volume for Albert Baldwin (Bibliography, 233, 239 and 244).

This aspect of his character also found an expressive outlet as an editor—in particular as editor of the *Numismatic Chronicle* and, above all, the *Roman Imperial Coinage* series. He began as assistant editor of the *Numismatic Chronicle* in 1964 and became its sole editor from 1966 to 1973, a period which saw the journal in full flow again after its wartime lull. In part his success can be measured by page count—during his years as editor the volumes always contained over 400 pages of articles, except in his last year as editor when the effects of the oil crisis and inflation on the Royal Numismatic Society's finances meant that the 1973 volume consisted of only 280 pages.

Roman Imperial Coinage

Of even greater importance, since it utilised both his academic and his personal skills to their very best, was his long editorship of *Roman*

and Rome, 2nd ser., 4 (1957), 46–53; 'Roman history and the Roman coinage', *Didaskalos*, 3 (1965), 153–64.

³⁴ J. F. Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire*, *Historia Einzelschriften* Heft 52 (Stuttgart, 1987).

Imperial Coinage (RIC), the principal reference book then and now for Roman numismatics and widely used by the scholarly community.

In many ways he was the unsung hero of the series for the whole of the second half of the twentieth century. Unsung in the sense that none of the many volumes that were published in the period was formally authored by him, but all reflect his deep engagement and almost none of them would have appeared without his involvement.

The first volume to benefit from his attention was *RIC* IV part III, covering the period from the accession of Gordian III to the death of Aemilian (AD 238–53) published in 1949. The understanding of the period had been greatly advanced by Mattingly, principally through his studies of the great Dorchester and Plevna hoards, both acquired in large quantities for the British Museum. Mattingly had realised that the mint was working in a system of six *officinae* during the period and it was in fact Carson himself who set out this system most clearly in his contribution to the *Essays in Roman Coinage Presented to Harold Mattingly*.³⁵ So the combination of the two scholars, when Carson took over the volume on Mattingly's retirement from the British Museum, was very auspicious. It is disappointing, therefore, that this structure is not reflected in the arrangement of the catalogue, which simply lists the reverses in alphabetical order, and one has to refer to the introduction to gain an understanding of the pattern and significance of the coinage.

It was a similar story with volume IX, covering the accession of Valentinian I to the death of Theodosius I (AD 364–95). The work was by J. W. E. Pearce, who had an unrivalled grasp of the coinage of the period and whose expertise is best seen in the series of articles he wrote, principally in the *Numismatic Chronicle* during the 1930s and early 1940s. (His bequest of his collection to the British Museum tells the same story—an extraordinarily rich collection whose potential has not really been realised since.) Pearce was to die in 1951, at the age of 86, just after seeing *RIC* IX appear in print. After Carson's arrival at the British Museum, the editors of *RIC*, Harold Mattingly and Humphrey Sutherland, knowing that Pearce did not have many years left to him but anxious to ensure his knowledge of the coinage did not die with him, turned to Carson for help. Carson worked patiently with the declining Pearce to turn his notes on the coinage into a book. Legend has it that when Pearce could not recall

³⁵ 'System and product in the Roman mint', in R. A. G. Carson and C. H. V. Sutherland (eds.), *Essays in Roman Coinage Presented to Harold Mattingly* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 227–39.

where he had seen a particular coin, he attributed it to the important Gotha collection, which was then in the Soviet zone of Germany and inaccessible to scholars at the time. As mentioned above, it was the first volume in the *RIC* series to be organised geographically by mints rather than chronologically by emperor, following the example set by Voetter in his catalogue of the Gerin collection, breaking from the tradition of organisation based on emperor, otherwise more generally in use, for example, in Britain or France. Since the appearance of *RIC IX* it has become common ground among scholars of all traditions that the fourth-century coinage is best treated in this way and Carson and Kent followed this approach in *LRBC*. The volume remains a standard reference, and has stood the test of time even though Kent had plans for a revision before his death. Our understanding of the period has advanced and there have inevitably been new discoveries; in addition the somewhat rigid adherence to a close chronological frame within each chronological block is now recognised to have obscured rather than elucidated the pattern of coinage which tended to be produced in bursts rather than regularly, and, in the case of the gold and, to some extent, the silver coinage generally followed the location of the emperor and his *comitatus*.

A pause in the production of *RIC* volumes after 1951 was followed by a renewed burst of energy, which saw two volumes: volume VI by Sutherland, covering the period from the reform of the coinage by Diocletian in about 294 until the death of Maximinus in AD 313, and its continuation, volume VII by the Finnish scholar Patrick Bruun, which took the account of the coinage down to the death of Constantine I in AD 337. Both volumes have survived well, for forty years, and both benefited greatly from Carson's involvement. Carson and Sutherland seemed great friends, and, though Sutherland tended to work very much on his own, the tetrarchy was not his 'home' period and the volume benefited enormously from Carson's advice and input into a field with which he was more familiar. It was a similar story with volume VII, although Carson questioned some of Bruun's more controversial opinions, such as the date of the battle of the Milvian Bridge.

Carson's benign influence on the series continued for another two decades. He had less input into Sutherland's revision of volume I (1984), covering the Julio-Claudian period, for the reasons mentioned above. But

it was he who made the decisive contribution to the appearance of volume VIII by his British Museum colleague John Kent, covering the period AD 337–64, from the death of Constantine to the accession of Valentinian I. Kent was a very able scholar with an intuitive and detailed knowledge of the coinage, but he was the first to admit that the work of systematic cataloguing was not his forte. As a result Carson roped in a series of assistants (he would fondly and with deliberate inappropriateness refer to them as *amanuenses*, including the two authors of this memoir) to draft the catalogue entries; and would himself sit down with John Kent to bring them to completion. The combination of the two, as with the earlier *LRBC*, was winning, and the appearance of *RIC* VIII in 1981 more than lived up to its long-awaited promise.

He initiated the same process with John Kent's other great volume, volume X (1994), covering the period from the death of Theodosius I in 395 to the fall of the western empire which they regarded as taking place in 480 with the death of Nepos (rather than in 476 with the end of the reign of Romulus). But retirement was upon him and he handed the baton, which he had managed to refashion as a cudgel, on to new hands.

The seminal role he had played for almost fifty years is clear; and the product of no less than six major volumes is a record to which any of us would be happy to aspire. If *RIC* was Harold Mattingly's creation, it was Carson who was its shepherd and nurse for such a long period and who has handed it over to a new generation in such good shape.

Wider recognition

Carson had an international reputation: he was actively involved in the organisation of International Numismatic Congresses from the 1950s. These were held at intervals of between five and seven years in a different city, and from 1979 to 1986 Carson served as President of the International Numismatic Commission, which oversaw their organisation. He played an important role in securing the 1986 Congress for London, the first time it had been held in Britain for fifty years. Carson justly took pride in this event, which was attended by more than 700 numismatists from all over the world.

An interesting insight into Carson's approach to these Congresses is given in a curious numismatic *roman à clef*, *The Coin Collectors*

(Wetteren, Belgium, 1997, pp. 120–2) by the French scholar Pierre Bastien. He starts with the following portrait of Carson (under the pseudonym of Kenneth Foster): ‘The chief-curator was tall, with blond hair, and an angular face brightened by piercing eyes. His personality radiated kindness, tempered by a slight coolness, rather characteristic of the well-educated Englishman [Carson was, of course, a Scot, and proud of it].’ Bastien’s character, Dereux, has come to London to meet Kenneth Foster who

was to preside at the approaching International Congress . . . During lunch, Kenneth Foster showed he was in great form. Preparations for the Congress had caused him many concerns, but by now everything seemed to be in good order, and he was in a good mood. He had confided that he had made sure that the British delegation would consist only of top numismatists. That had not been easy because the British Museum lacked the means to pressure the other centres of numismatic research, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow and other less important ones. However, an agreement reached between all the curators had made it possible to put together a series of presentations that would allow Great Britain to play a fundamental role during the working sessions of the Congress. Dereux admired this national spirit, so lacking in French numismatic circles. At the same time, he knew the continentals would undoubtedly find ways to criticize the work of the Englishmen. Such was the numismatic climate.

Even allowing for the fictional nature of this account, it does capture the feel of the times. It is hard to imagine the Keeper of the Coin Department at the British Museum working in this way today.

Carson was also actively involved in the affairs of the Royal Numismatic Society, serving in most of the Society’s offices and frequently reading papers at its meetings. He edited its journal, *Numismatic Chronicle*, for ten years and served as President from 1974–9. He was awarded the Society’s medal in 1972 and was made an Honorary Fellow in 1980. He also, with Hugh Pagan, wrote the history of the Society.³⁶

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;

³⁶ R. A. G. Carson and H. Pagan, *A History of the Royal Numismatic Society, 1836–1986, with a Record of Members and Fellows* (London, 1986).

in 1980 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy; and in 1983 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow.

ANDREW BURNETT

Fellow of the Academy

ROGER BLAND

The British Museum

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