



ELLIS MINNS

ELLIS HOVELL MINNS

1874-1953

ELLIS MINNS was the son of the Revd George William Walter Minns, FSA, Vicar of the country parish of Weston near Petersfield in east Hampshire. As he acknowledged in the dedication of his magnum opus, he owed much to his father's support during the years of preparation and not least to his generous aid towards the cost of ensuring adequate illustration. He owed even more to his upbringing. Throughout his life he combined an attachment to the familiar and the local with a vivid appreciation of the exotic and remote. He adopted Cambridge and Pembroke College in particular as his parish but extended his missionary activity over a hundred degrees of latitude from eastern Europe across the Russian Empire to the Far East. If he viewed life through two lenses his vision was consistently focused on the individual and the particular. Although he could be merciless in deploying his wit to puncture pretension, he was generous in his appreciation of sound scholars and showed christian forbearance towards the ignorance of the young. Again, he had and conveyed a deep sense of the sanctity of the modes, styles, customs, and beliefs of human communities of whatever provenance.

Proceeding from Charterhouse to Pembroke he duly obtained Firsts in each part of the Cambridge Classical Tripos. By what alchemy he was led to devote himself after graduation to Slavonic rather than to Classical studies remains one of those mysteries which universities ought never to be surprised to encounter among the ablest of their younger members. It is precisely this which as much as anything distinguishes them from institutions devised for technical training. However it came about Minns was determined to qualify himself for a career in Slavonic studies. His first task was to master Russian. This he achieved under Professor Paul Boyer at the *École des Langues Orientales Vivantes* in Paris. He then headed for Russia where he spent the years 1898-1901 laying the foundations of his career. From his place in the library of the Imperial Archaeological Commission at St Petersburg he acquired the knowledge of Russian archaeological literature on which he was able to build for the rest of his life. In conjunction with this he made a close study of the material evidence housed

in museums. Beginning with the Hermitage he went on to study in the Historical Museum at Moscow as well as in the archaeological collections at Kazan, Kiev, and Odessa and at many smaller centres in south Russia. He supplemented his library and museum studies by visiting some of the key sites. In the course of his travels he acquired that first-hand acquaintance with the topography of the country which informed his appreciation of its archaeology. No less important were the lasting friendships he formed with many Russian scholars. It was through correspondence with these and the exchange of publications that, despite the fact that he never revisited the country, he was able to keep up with new discoveries as they occurred and to follow changes in scholarly views on their interpretation. His regard for his Russian hosts was reciprocated. He was not merely presented with recent publications of the Commission but continued to receive them long after returning to Cambridge. He also received an Honorary Doctorate of Greek Letters from the University of S. Vladimir in Kiev and was elected to the Society of History and Antiquities at Odessa as well as to the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society. Minns's love for Russia and the Russians outlived the Revolution. However much he deplored some of its accompaniments he was fond of maintaining that at the deepest level it affected the character and life of the Russian people a good deal less than was commonly supposed in the West. He not only maintained correspondence and the exchange of literature in respect of individuals, but was happy to accept Corresponding Membership of the Academy of the History of Material Culture. It was doubly appropriate that he should have been called upon to compose the inscription on the sword presented by George VI to the heroic citizens of Stalingrad.

On his return to Cambridge Minns met with disappointment when the University appointed another candidate to the newly established Lectureship in Slavonic Studies. Fortunately for him and for scholarship he had graduated in a collegiate university. His college recognized his particular bent by appointing him college lecturer in Slavonic Studies, fellow and librarian. The University for its part appointed him to the Lectureship in Palaeography in the Faculty of Classics which he continued to hold until in 1927 he was elected the first full-time holder of the Disney Professorship of Archaeology. Minns was a conscientious man and amply discharged his obligations to both institutions, while at the same time maintaining the flow of his own scholarly production. As those who took advantage of his teaching in the

Classical Faculty have testified, he was meticulous in attending to their needs. The depth of his attachment to Pembroke is symbolized by the fact that he occupied the same rooms as undergraduate, research student, fellow and librarian, president (1928-47), and senior fellow (1947-53). His devotion is also reflected in his publications. At the outset in 1905 he contributed a handlist of the printed books to the year 1500 in the college library to M. R. James's *Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Pembroke College, Cambridge*, and in 1951 he issued what proved to be his last publication, an account of an Evangelistarium in the college library written in a miniscule hand. In between he had joined with Geoffrey Webb in describing Pembroke College chapel for the Bicentenary Volume for Sir Matthew Wren and had contributed a piece on the college plate for M. R. James's *Catalogue of the Silver Plate from the University and Colleges of Cambridge exhibited in the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1931*. Above all Minns repaid his college by writing and publishing his massive *Scythians and Greeks* in 1913 to be followed thirty years later by his British Academy lecture on 'The Art of the Northern Nomads'.

As a scholar Minns had an exceptionally wide range. As a linguist he served during the First World War with Professor N. B. Jopson in the Uncommon Languages Department of the British Censorship, and we have it on the authority of Dame Elizabeth Hill that 'he mastered Old Church Slavonic and Russian as few Englishmen have done'. For over twenty years he taught Greek and Latin palaeography in the Cambridge Classical Faculty and in 1915 he published two Greek parchments discovered in a stone jar at Avroman in Kurdistan in 1909 which showed that Greek was still being written by non-Greeks in the Parthian Empire as late as the first century BC. His fascination with the alphabet led him to compose the entry for the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and towards the end of his life to write the foreword to Dr David Diringer's book, *The Alphabet*. His involvement with bibliography was recognized by his appointment as Sanders Reader in Bibliography for 1925. His interest in art history was reflected in his concern with icons as well as in his writings on early archaeology. As the translator of V. P. Kondakov's book, *The Russian Icon*, he was the obvious choice to prepare the catalogue for the exhibition loaned by the government of the USSR to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1929.

As an archaeologist Minns contributed through his scholarship rather than by personal exploits. He undertook no explorations of unknown territories. He conducted no excavations. Nor did

he pioneer or promote new methods of analysing or interpreting the primary data of archaeology. He was content to study the tangible evidence afforded by archaeology for the life-styles of the several peoples occupying the territories in which he was interested and took particular pleasure in seeking to identify the contacts which enriched their applied arts. *Scythians and Greeks* was written to summarize 'the archaeology, ethnography and history of the region between the Carpathians and the Caucasus'. It opened up a vast field of archaeology which because of its geographical remoteness and the language in which the primary materials were published had previously been little known in the West. As it happened the volume appeared just in time before the First World War and the Russian Revolution foreclosed direct access to the material for a generation. In his preface to *Iranians and Greeks* which appeared in 1922 M. I. Rostovtzeff acknowledged Minns's kindness in reading his proofs and went out of his way to emphasize that their books, although overlapping chronologically and geographically, were in large measure complementary. Whereas Rostovtzeff used archaeology as a source for writing ancient history, Minns in his larger book was more concerned to direct attention to the artefacts recovered by archaeology. Like a true archaeologist he had a strong feeling for objects. Even as a palaeographer he delighted in the instruments used to make inscriptions and was himself a practised exponent of calligraphy. As Sandars Reader he chose to lecture on the impact on scripts of the materials on which they were inscribed. His work as an archaeologist gave him great scope as a draughtsman. By drawing things, more especially objects with intricate decoration, he found it easier to apprehend and convey idioms and styles. The effectiveness of this approach is to be seen in the illustrations he made in pen and ink for his book and for his Academy Lecture on 'The Art of the Northern Nomads', in which he took pleasure in tracing contacts with the settled civilizations of Greece, Iran, and China and with the prehistoric creators of Celtic and Teutonic art. He concluded his lecture with a characteristic flourish by juxtaposing his drawing of a design on a brick from a Chinese tomb of the Wei dynasty with that on a Viking stone relief from St Paul's churchyard. On occasion he was prepared to go further. Stimulated perhaps by the astonishingly well preserved wooden carvings from the frozen tombs of the Altai, he concluded that a group of Scythic gold ornaments characterized by slanting planes intersecting to form an arris was most probably based on carving organic materials. To test this he personally carved in wood a

reproduction at a scale of $c.\frac{5}{8}$ of the famous Kostromskaya deer. When painted in gold paint this proved more eloquent than words.

One of Minns's most attractive features and certainly one of those most valuable to his pupils was his attitude to fellow scholars. Whereas some academics working ostensibly in the field of humane studies are not above deriding colleagues as a way of holding the attention of juvenile audiences, Minns was invariably courteous in his references to genuine scholars even when disagreeing with their conclusions. He consistently sought to generate a feeling for the republic of letters and stressed the advantage of advancing knowledge in concert with rather than at the expense of colleagues. No wonder he valued so highly his appointment as a corresponding member of so many learned bodies from Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, and Russia. Most of all he valued the tribute from colleagues in seventeen countries offered on his sixtieth birthday and embodied in a special volume of *Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua*. The contributors headed by the editor A. M. Tallgren, the first Professor of Archaeology at Helsingfors, included eminent exponents of anthropology and ancient history as well as a number of archaeologists ranging in their fields of expertise from the Old Stone Age to Early Mediaeval times, all told an apt and comprehensive tribute to the author of *Scythians and Greeks*. It was appropriate that this volume marking the summit of his career should have been presented in the library of Pembroke College, of which thirty years previously he had been appointed librarian.

Although written a third of a century after his death, this notice is based primarily on personal knowledge as pupil and junior colleague. When I first met Professor Minns it was as an undergraduate seeking to embark on archaeology for the second part of my Cambridge tripos. He handed me a Japanese *tsuba* or sword-guard. Although ignorant of the word, it sufficed that I recognized the aperture as corresponding to the section of a sword blade. As a Bye-Fellow of Peterhouse I was present when he received his Festschrift in 1934 and as an Assistant Lecturer in his department he gave a colleague and me private tuition in reading Russian while we awaited our call-up. Years later I attended what must have been among his last feasts in Pembroke as his successor but one in the Disney chair. Personal impressions have been enriched by study of his archaeological publications. In his will he was thoughtful enough to bequeath me a book of my choice from his personal library. Since his copy of *Scythians*

and Greeks with his personal annotations was very properly left to the University Library, I chose his copy of Rostovtzeff's *Iranians and Greeks* and made do with A. B. Cook's copy of his own book. During his lifetime he had generously endowed me with inscribed copies of his Festschrift and of his British Academy lecture.

I have also profited from the following secondary sources: M. C. Burkitt's notice in the *Cambridge Review*, lxxv, no. 1817 (1953); Dame Elizabeth Hill's in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, xxxii (1953), 236-8; and E. D. Phillips' in *Artibus Asiae* (1954) pp. 168-73.

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