



GEOFFREY RICKMAN

Geoffrey Edwin Rickman

1932–2010

GEOFFREY EDWIN RICKMAN, Emeritus Professor of Roman History at the University of St Andrews, died on 8 February 2010, aged 77. A man of great wit and humour, he was also a remarkable scholar, an inspiring teacher, a wise administrator, and a major figure in the life of two of great institutions of learning, the University of St Andrews and the British School at Rome.

Geoffrey Rickman was born on 9 October 1932 at Cherāt, a hill sanatorium and cantonment, sixty-five miles from the Khyber Pass and thirty-four miles south east of Peshawar, in what was then Naushahra district of the North West Frontier Province of British India, now the HQ of the Special Service Group of the Pakistan army. His father, Charles Edwin Rickman, was a regular soldier, serving as a Company Sergeant Major in 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment in Naushahra; he had joined the army under age by lying about his date of birth and during the First World War had fought at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia, being Mentioned in Despatches. He remained in the army, serving in North Africa in the Second World War, and was invalided out shortly before the landings in Sicily in 1943, by which time he was a Regimental Sergeant Major. The hill station at Cherāt was the closest place to the Afghan border that families were allowed to be and in later life Geoffrey would attribute the fragility of his teeth to the diet his mother experienced in this remote place. His mother, Ethel Ruth Mary Hill, was born in Ely in Cambridgeshire and after school had trained as a dressmaker before going into service, initially as a schoolroom maid and rising to be lady's maid to the wife of General

Sir Peter Strickland when he was Military Governor of Cork in Ireland during the 'Troubles'. It was there she met Geoffrey's father whom she subsequently married in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral. Geoffrey was the third of four brothers, the second of whom died in India.

When Geoffrey was two years old the family returned to England and settled in Winchester, where his fourth brother, Harry, was born. There he attended a local primary school and then, after passing the scholarship examination at the second attempt, Peter Symonds' School, a voluntary controlled grammar school for boys in Winchester, whence he proceeded with a State Scholarship to Brasenose College, Oxford in 1951. There, after a not particularly distinguished performance in Classical Moderations, he took a first class degree in Literae Humaniores in Trinity Term 1955. At Brasenose he was taught ancient philosophy by J. L. Ackrill, who had recently come as a fellow of the college and who (as he later remarked with nostalgic incredulity) for a time led Rickman to believe that he loved Aristotle. Ancient History Geoffrey claimed to have found 'irritating—a sort of difficult crossword puzzle for superior people'—though his interest in Roman history was awakened when, following the death in 1953 of the Brasenose tutor in Ancient History, Michael Holroyd, he was sent to Eric Gray at Christ Church.

After his graduation he did his National Service from 1955 to 1957, most of which was spent in the Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL), first at Bodmin and then at a disused airfield outside the fishing village of Crail in the East Neuk of Fife. The JSSL was set up after the war to provide intensive courses in foreign languages, especially Russian, for those who showed an aptitude for them in order to provide interpreters for radio surveillance and intelligence work. There Geoffrey achieved a certificate in Russian and also, in occasional respites from the highly pressurised work schedule, his first acquaintance with St Andrews, ten miles north-west of Crail. He was later to recall his first sight of what he described as a magical city from the coastal path, little realising that it was to be his home for nearly fifty years.

In 1957 he returned to Oxford where he studied for the Diploma in Classical Archaeology, which he completed in one year rather than the usual two and which was awarded with distinction in 1958. He was particularly influenced by Bernard Ashmole, the Lincoln Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology, by Ian Richmond, the Professor of the Archaeology of the Roman Empire, and by the newly appointed Reader in Classical Archaeology, William Llewellyn Brown, who was to die at the tragically early age of 34 in 1958. Geoffrey's choice of the classical archaeology

diploma marked a significant change in his approach to ancient history, and one which was to characterise his work from then on. Although he had shown himself a skilled practitioner in the style of history which was then dominant, especially in Oxford, of scrupulous investigation and interpretation of the ancient literary sources, he found himself as a result of his two years away from the world of academic scholarship dissatisfied with it as means of discovering the realities of the ancient world. Now, and increasingly over the rest of his career, he wanted to know not only what the literary remains of antiquity could tell us but also what actually happened; and it was this that directed him towards the examination of the archaeological record. Thus, after his success in the Diploma in Classical Archaeology, he proceeded to the British School at Rome (BSR), aided by the award by the Craven Committee of the Henry Francis Pelham Studentship in 1958, to work on the granaries (*horrea*) of the port of Rome at Ostia which was the basis for a D.Phil. thesis, entitled 'The Design, Structure and Organisation of *Horrea* under the Roman Empire', supervised by Ian Richmond.

His year at the BSR was to prove a turning point in many ways. It took him thirty-six hours by boat, train and bus to reach the School, and his first unnerving sight was of Lutyens' magnificent façade atop the great stairs. Inside was a unique world—John Ward-Perkins, the Director of the School, in the midst of one of Britain's truly great archaeological enterprises, the Tiber Valley Survey; his wife Margaret, described by Geoffrey as universal mother, aunt, nanny, nurse and hostess; and scholars of future renown. In Geoffrey's year the latter included not only Peter Dronke, subsequently a great medieval Italian literature expert, but also, unlike Oxford, artists and architects: 'A different non-verbal world of effort and achievement was opened up,' as Geoffrey wrote later in the School's Centenary volume. A photograph in the BSR's collection shows him seated on a row of ancient lavatories at Ostia, and alongside him: Martin Frederiksen, one of Britain's finest ancient historians, who died far too young; Derek Hill, whose beneficence to the artists of the School was remarkable and remains invaluable after his death; and Sir Anthony Blunt, then simply known as one of the world's great art historians. Amongst others who were there was Eric Gray, who had tutored him at Oxford.

Perhaps more importantly still it was in this year that Geoffrey, returning briefly to England, married Anna Wilson, whom he had first met nine years earlier when she was a pupil at St Swithun's School in Winchester, and they took a honeymoon trip to Greece before returning to the BSR. They stayed on in Rome for an extra month, according to Geoffrey because

they had had such fun that he had forgotten to do what he said he was going to do, which was measure the buildings of Ostia. Geoffrey's engagement with Ostia was the beginning of an intellectual journey which, like his marriage to Anna, was to last for the rest of his life.

They returned to Oxford later that year, and Geoffrey held a Junior Research Fellowship at The Queen's College, Oxford for the next three years. This enabled him to complete his D.Phil. thesis, which was examined by Sheppard Frere and Russell Meiggs, both of whom were to provide invaluable help in the preparation of the publications which emerged from it. The viva took place in February 1963, but by this time Geoffrey and Anna had moved to St Andrews on Geoffrey's appointment to a Lectureship in Ancient History. This was to be his home for the rest of his life.

Classics at St Andrews when Geoffrey arrived there was flourishing, its student numbers assisted by the requirement for almost all those studying for a degree in the Faculty of Arts to take General Humanity, the name for the first level class in Latin.¹ The Chair of Humanity had just been vacated by the formidable Thomas Erskine Wright and his successor in 1963 was Gordon Williams, formerly a Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, who was to be himself succeeded ten years later by Robert Ogilvie, another Fellow of Balliol, when in 1974 he moved to Yale. The Professor of Greek was Kenneth Dover, who again had come from Balliol in 1955. One of the foremost Hellenists of his generation, Dover presided over Classics at St Andrews until his departure to become President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford in 1976, and he returned there in 1986 after retiring from Corpus (he had already been elected Chancellor of the University in 1981). Geoffrey told how in Oxford, after he had been appointed at St Andrews but before he had taken up his post, he met Peter Parsons, later to be Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, in the street, who said to him, 'How brave of you, Geoffrey, to go to St Andrews where Kenneth Dover is. I would not have had such courage.'

When Geoffrey began teaching at St Andrews he was a one-man department, a relatively insignificant island, overlooked by the towering cliffs of Greek and Humanity. However his colleagues in the Classics departments understood better than some in other disciplines the problems he faced. A senior member of the science faculty, to whom Geoffrey

¹It was some time after I arrived at St Andrews in 1972 that a member of the Department of Humanity explained to me that the name derived not from humanity as opposed to inhumanity but Humanity as opposed to Divinity.

had confessed that he really didn't know what to say to first- and second-level students, advised that for the first couple of years he should simply talk about the topic of his doctoral thesis—Geoffrey observed to me much later that the notion of students whose only exposure to the ancient world was detailed knowledge of the measurements of Roman granaries was too horrendous to contemplate. But it was not only his realisation that the two short periods of history that he had studied so intensely at Oxford would not provide the material for the much broader approach expected at St Andrews that presented challenges: the degree structure was unlike any he had previously encountered, with students being required in the six classes they took in their first two years to cover four different subjects before either completing an ordinary MA (still the norm for many) by taking two further classes or entering two further years of Honours classes in one or both of the second-level subjects taken in the second year to complete an MA (Hons). This broad and flexible structure meant that many students in their first two years took first-year classes unrelated to the main subject they intended when they first matriculated, and some were as a result able to change that original intention without the need of any special permission. The MA, both Ordinary and Honours, was still a degree of the Faculty of Arts rather than of any department. Furthermore the teaching methods in St Andrews in 1962 were very different from those Geoffrey had experienced as an Oxford undergraduate. Whereas in Oxford the main focus of teaching was the weekly tutorial and the essays or other work prepared for it, with lectures providing additional support, in the Scottish universities the lecture was the primary mode, supplemented to an increasing extent over the next years by tutorial groups. All these potential hazards Geoffrey was not only to cope with over the next thirty-five years but to turn to positive advantages as he effectively created the Department of Ancient History.

That is not to say that he began the department. The first lecturer in Ancient History at St Andrews was Peter Brunt, appointed to St Andrews in 1947 and later Camden Professor in Oxford, and he was followed by E. S. Staveland and Ursula Hall, both of whom made important contributions to the discipline. Moreover Geoffrey collected around him a remarkable set of colleagues, some of whom remained in St Andrews in the flourishing and supportive milieu which he established, while others went on to be equally successful elsewhere. It is no disrespect to any of these, however, to say that Ancient History in St Andrews, and the esteem with which it is regarded in the world of classical scholarship across the globe, is Geoffrey's creation.

The first additional member of staff was John Davies in 1965, who returned to Oxford to a Fellowship at Oriel in 1968 and in 1977 took up the Rathbone Chair of Ancient History at Liverpool. He was succeeded in 1968 by Michel Austin. My appointment in 1972 was to the third post in Ancient History. In ten years, Geoffrey had increased the size of the teaching staff by 300 per cent, and with Jill Harries's appointment four years later the department had four lecturers. That increase, in a period which was not favourable to growth in universities, least of all in the study of the ancient world, was attributable almost entirely to Geoffrey's brilliance as a teacher. In those years the first year class grew from some twenty to thirty students to well over a hundred, and the reason for this could be seen in what happened every year. In those days, students enrolled for their classes at the beginning of the session and had four weeks in which they could transfer, if they so wished, into a different class. At the end of the fourth week, the curtain came down and students were fixed in their classes for the rest of the academic session. Year after year, the first-year class in Ancient History began with three weeks of lectures by Geoffrey, and year after year our numbers grew dramatically as those weeks proceeded. Even in week 4, when the class was usually addressed not by Geoffrey but by me, the numbers did not fall sufficiently to dent what was, for a department of our size, remarkably large. Geoffrey was able, through a combination of a passionate understanding of the ancient world (even of a period which was not his speciality), an engaging wit and a careful selection of slides (always including one with Anna alongside an ancient monument), to charm his students into an engagement with peoples and civilisations far distant from their own. The results are well summarised in the preface of the volume of essays presented to him on his sixty-fifth birthday: 'For a whole generation of St Andrews students Geoffrey Rickman brought to his subject a unique style and glitter. A master of the spoken and of the written word, he taught that study of the ancient world was enormous fun as well as a rigorous scholarly enterprise that should address fundamental questions. . . . Under his direction, the department grew in size and range of courses, and St Andrews was put on the map.'² And it continued to do so. Michael Whitby was appointed after my departure to the Chair of Classics at Edinburgh in 1987 and stayed, latterly as Head of Department, until 1996, when he became Professor of Classics and Ancient History at Warwick. In 1992, when Geoffrey took up the

² Michel Austin, Jill Harries and Christopher Smith (eds.), *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman* (London, 1998), p. xiii.

major administrative role of Master of the United College of St Salvator and St Leonard, Christopher Smith arrived in St Andrews and remained there until his secondment as Director of the British School at Rome in 2009. Jon Coulston, who joined the department in 1995, brought a new strength in Roman archaeology, and when Geoffrey retired in 1997 the university appointed Greg Woolf to a new Chair of Ancient History.

The success of the department was Geoffrey's doing; but it was not just because he was a fine scholar and a brilliant teacher. He was also astonishingly humane. Academic life in the ancient Scottish universities in the 1970s when I arrived there was still notably hierarchic, a remnant of the time when a department had consisted of the Professor and his (almost always 'his') assistants. Not so the Department of Ancient History, which still in the late 1970s consisted of a senior lecturer and three lecturers. Geoffrey may have been *primus inter pares* but he was more *par* than *primus*. I recall John Davies telling me as I prepared to leave Oxford to move to St Andrews that the department was in theory a hierarchy but in practice a soviet. Geoffrey was always notoriously modest and, if I have a fault to find in this man, it is that he was too modest, too inclined to underrate himself, if not his colleagues. It took considerable efforts on our part to persuade him to assent to being put forward for the professorial chair he was awarded in 1981, and he only agreed then because we insisted that he was undermining our chances of promotion by refusing his.

Within the department, he was immensely generous and concerned about the development of his younger colleagues; and in my case (and, I am sure, that of others) he was hugely influential. As a historian, he was insistent on the significance of the actualities of life in the Roman world, on the *Realien*, the ways in which the ancients actually lived and worked. When I came to St Andrews, I was well-drilled in the methods of ancient history as it was then practised in the University of Oxford, and could analyse the writings of ancient authors and arrange the results into pleasing and not implausible patterns. I remember well Geoffrey's reaction to the first piece that I took to him for advice about possible publication. It was an ingenious article on the silver mines in Spain, dealing in particular with the interpretation of passages in the historian Polybius and the geographer Strabo. 'You have been very clever with the sources,' he said, 'but do you have any idea at all about how they got the silver out of the ground?' My article was radically reshaped and immensely improved by my attempts to find an answer to Geoffrey's question; and since then I have been a determined, if not always effective, follower of the Rickman '*What-actually-happened?*' school of ancient historians, and have attempted to show how

Geoffrey's method should be applied to subjects that I have tried to explore, such as the workings of Roman law and Roman imperialism, though they are quite different from those, such as the investigation of grain-supplies and ports, for which he developed it so successfully.

Outwith St Andrews, Geoffrey's best known academic work is contained in two books and a series of just over a dozen articles. In terms of sheer bulk, this is a not a large output; but its significance is far greater than its size. His first publication, the book *Roman Granaries and Store Buildings* (Cambridge, 1971), was based on his D.Phil. thesis. Such works often reveal their origins only too clearly in a worthy if somewhat stilted style, more suitable for examiners than for subsequent readers, and in a relentless concentration on the topic in hand. These fears were recorded by Peter Salway as he took up the book for review; however, as he went on to say, 'it turned out to be so well written and the author so capable of drawing out the human implications of the buildings that it proved, to the present reviewer at least, one of the most interesting books read recently'.³ The work was divided into two sections, the first on civil *horrea*, with particular focus on Ostia and Rome, and the second dealing with military *horrea*, especially in Britain and Germany, where most are to be found. Throughout the buildings themselves are described in detail and illustrated by excellent plans (and rather less excellent photographs); but this is far from an archaeological catalogue. At the end of each description a brief section is added which places the building in its context and shows how it worked as a store-building at the various stages of its history. This was supplemented by a chapter on the legal processes involved in the hiring out of civil *horrea* in Rome and another on the organisation of military storehouses in the early and late imperial periods. The reviews at the time were not, of course, uniformly favourable (Geoffrey was particularly mortified by the observation by J. K. Anderson that he hoped that the 'Vale of Strathmore' would not become standard usage: 'Strath' was self-explanatory⁴); but the value of the book was widely recognised both for its subject matter and for its accessibility and it was predicted that it would long remain the standard work on the topic. And so it has remained.

Nine years later he produced a second book, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1980), largely written during a three-month spell at the British School at Rome during a period of study leave. Although this is a very different book from his first, covering in a more discursive

³Peter Salway, 'Roman storehouses', *Classical Review*, ns 24 (1974), 117.

⁴J. K. Anderson, *Classical Philology*, 68 (1973), 234–5.

style the vast question of the provisioning of the largest city of antiquity across half a millennium, its basic approach is the same. His preface puts it thus:

This book is a history of the corn supply of ancient Rome. The subject has interested me ever since I was an undergraduate, when I often felt impatient with the traditional topics on which I was asked by kindly tutors to write essays. It was an undeniable exhilaration, in the words of Louis MacNeice: 'to draw the cork out of an old conundrum and watch the paradoxes fizz', but what I wanted to know was how the ancient world really worked.

What he attempted to do was 'to produce a readable narrative, unclogged by too much scholarship but setting out a large selection of the evidence available, and drawing attention to the problems which seem to me particularly important and worth discussion'. In this he undoubtedly succeeded. The book begins with a chapter on the governing factors, following it with three on the Republic, on what he saw as the crucial transition under Pompey, Caesar and Augustus, and on developments in the first two centuries AD. Three chapters on the corn lands, on transport, storage and prices and on corn distributions are followed by another on the late empire and a concluding epilogue. Discussions of a number of detailed questions are included in eleven appendices. This was a remarkable and pioneering piece of work, the first to appear in English on its subject, and has proved its worth, both in giving students access to the complexities of the methods, the politics and the economics of so essential a part of the life of Rome and the Roman world, and in promoting and provoking the studies of other scholars, which have become increasingly numerous in the decades since its publication.

After his work on the corn supply, it was perhaps inevitable that Geoffrey should turn his attention to the ports of the Mediterranean. Between 1985 and 2008 he published ten articles on Roman ports, with the original intention of writing a book on the subject. As time went by (and as he was increasingly engaged with the administration of his university) he became ever more aware of the immensity of his project and, although he has left copious notes as well as the typically vivid and astute accounts to be found in his preparatory publications, it became increasingly unlikely that it would ever be finished. After the onset of the pulmonary fibrosis which led to his death two years later, he wrote no more on the subject. By then he knew (though was surprised to know) the respect in which he was held by his colleagues. He had been a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London since 1966 and twice served on the Council of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies (in 1970–2 and 1988–91),

but was genuinely astonished to be elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1989. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2001.

In 2002, in his speech at his retirement as Chairman of the British School at Rome Council, Geoffrey Rickman declared 'I have been a very lucky man. I have loved two institutions and one woman in my life, and it has been my good fortune to have spent most of my life with all three—the University of St Andrews, the British School at Rome, and my wife Anna.' The importance to him of the BSR has already been noted but his support and untiring work for the School went far beyond the early years in which he found such inspiration there. A regular visitor at the School and a continuing encourager of those whom he met there, he became a member of the Faculty of Archaeology, History and Letters there in 1979 and Chairman of the Faculty from 1983 to 1987. He also strongly supported one of the BSR's most significant recent archaeological projects, the investigation of the site near Fiumicino simply known as *Portus*, the Port, and the network of ports connected to it. Following his retirement at St Andrews in 1997, he became Chairman of the School's Council in 1997 and, with the then Director, Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, oversaw and enabled the most significant development of its buildings since the original construction in 1916: a library extension, and a new lecture theatre, internal redevelopment and external improvement, utterly transformed the School.

At St Andrews his acute intelligence and sense of duty, and above all his integrity, made him an outstanding administrator. When the three departments of Greek, Humanity and Ancient History were brought together in a single School in 1990, he was the obvious choice for its first Head; and two years later, he was appointed to the office of Master of the United College, which had in earlier years involved the responsibility for discipline of students in the Faculties of Arts and Science but which now included far wider responsibilities. As such he oversaw major changes in the university, including the restructuring of the teaching patterns, and achieved them with his inimitable combination of tact, incisiveness and good humour.

As a scholar (a word he would have hated), an educator and an administrator Geoffrey Rickman was outstanding; but that gives only a partial picture of the man. Though he always claimed to be inherently lazy, his zest for the exploration of the realities of the ancient world and for communicating them to his students and his love for and practical devotion to the University of St Andrews and the BSR give the lie to this oft-repeated misapprehension of himself. He was cultured in ways that are not always those of a university professor, with a particular and abiding love of

opera. He swam whenever he could (including visits to the elderly Infirmary Street baths when visiting Edinburgh as an external examiner); and he would regularly take himself down to the West Sands at St Andrews to walk up and down its two-mile length to clear his head and sort out problems, whether academic or administrative. He was a rich and complex man, and an essential part of that complexity was a simple integrity. He was, to quote again from the preface to his Festschrift of 1997, a connoisseur of life, a man who mastered the art of human relations to an uncommon degree.

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Note. In compiling this memoir I have been greatly helped by Mrs Anna Rickman, by Geoffrey's brother, Harry Rickman, and by Professors Jill Harries and Christopher Smith.

