



ERIC BIRLEY

Eric Barff Birley 1906–1995

HE PREFERRED TO BE KNOWN as Eric Birley. In fact he insisted that he be called Eric by everybody, including students. The family name Barff was not used by him, and the second initial was often omitted after the Second World War. He was born on 12 January 1906 at Swinton in Lancashire, the youngest of four sons, with two younger sisters. His parents were J. Harold Birley and Edith Gladys Fernandes Lewis. His father, to whom he was very close, died in 1940, his mother not till 1976, aged 96. Harold Birley was an Alderman in Manchester. He came from a textile manufacturing family, the family firm being Charles Macintosh. The original Charles Macintosh had discovered how to use rubber to make waterproof fabrics, gone into partnership with Birley Bros., who owned a mill, and given a new word to the English language. Hugh Birley, Eric Birley's great-grandfather, was second-in-command of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry at Peterloo; he later became Borough Reeve of Manchester.

Birley went to preparatory school at Bakewell, where an early interest in archaeology was kindled from visiting prehistoric caves in the Peak District. He was intended for Rugby, but his brother Robin, who was due to be head boy at Clifton, persuaded him to try harder for Clifton, where he went with a scholarship. There he came under the influence of Norman Whatley as headmaster, who had been a friend of G. L. Cheesman, who wrote a basic work on *The Auxilia of the Roman Imperial Army*, published in 1914. Cheesman was killed in the First World War, and Norman Whatley presented Birley with his notes, including the texts of all the inscriptions relating to the *auxilia* then known. (The *auxilia* were the non-citizen troops of Rome, organised into *alae* and *cohortes*.) Birley also dated to this time his interest in the legions. Whatley is said to have predicted that his tutors at Oxford might find he would

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spend too much time studying the Roman army and too little time doing anything else.¹

His first interest then was the Roman army, to which he added at Oxford, in his own words, ‘the fascination of epigraphy . . . and the attractiveness of Roman nomenclature, hence also the study of prosopography’.² He went to Brasenose College. His later actions as Master of Hatfield College in the University of Durham were to be greatly influenced by his experiences at Brasenose, and he cherished the distinction of being made an Honorary Fellow of Brasenose in 1987. His tutor in ancient history, Michael Holroyd, compelled him to learn German for his very first essay: Birley recalls that the first word he learnt was *Schlacht*.³ Birley’s knowledge of written and spoken German was to play a significant part in building up his wide acquaintance with scholars abroad, one of his most distinguishing characteristics, and with his military interests led directly to the form of his war-time service. He was to make regular visits abroad in the years before the Second World War, beginning in 1926, looking at pottery but also exploring military sites in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, including those on the Rhine–Danube frontier, the closest parallel to Hadrian’s Wall.

His first excavation was at Bainbridge in Wensleydale in 1926. Under the influence of R. G. Collingwood he soon became involved in excavation on Hadrian’s Wall, initially at Birdoswald in 1927. Here he was to work with and revere F. G. Simpson. It was on the Wall in 1928 that he learned he had achieved a Double First in Greats.

He observed sites in the city of London for the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1928–9, meeting there Mortimer Wheeler and J. A. Stanfield, the latter being important for the development of his interest in Samian ware. His report on work at the Midland Bank site in Princes Street was his first archaeological report.⁴

The year 1929 was to be significant. He was at Birdoswald alongside Ian Richmond, who was co-director with Simpson, when the two inscriptions were discovered that were to form the basis of thinking about the Wall from then on, virtually unchallenged for forty years and still with influence today. There was an element of drama here, for Collingwood, visiting the excavation, was placed before a mock-altar and photographed, standing on a Roman stone-slabbbed floor. When the slabs were raised and cleaned it was discovered that Collingwood had been standing on a worn inscription, face-up, the ‘altar’ on another, face-down. The two inscriptions, one of AD 205–8 and the other of AD 296–306, attested

¹ Arthur Moyes, *Hatfield 1846–1996* (Durham, 1996), p. 205.

² E. Birley, *The Roman Army: papers 1929–86* (Amsterdam, 1988), p. vii.

³ E. Birley, *Überlegungen zur Geschichte des römischen Heeres* (Heidelberg, 1987), p. 1.

⁴ E. Birley, ‘Report on recent Excavations in London. I The Midland Bank site, Princes Street, E.C.’, *Ant. J.* 9 (1929), 219–28.

reconstruction in a Wall fort. It was already accepted, mainly on the basis of J. P. Gibson's and F. G. Simpson's work at Poltross Burn milecastle, that there were three periods of occupation on Hadrian's Wall, with a fourth in the forts alone. The first was assumed to end in disaster in AD 180, the second somewhere after AD 270, with no clear historical context. The new inscriptions from Birdoswald prompted Birley, after discussion with Collingwood, to put forward new dates for the end of periods I and II. He first published these in *Archaeologia Aeliana* for 1930; the inscriptions and pottery from Birdoswald, the supporting evidence for these views, were published by him later that same year.⁵ These new dates were closer to the construction work attested by the inscriptions. They were *c.* AD 195, later refined to AD 197, for the end of period I, and *c.* AD 295, later refined to AD 296, for the end of period II. Most importantly, the notion of destruction occasioned by disaster was transferred to these dates. Simpson's third period could also be lengthened to AD 368, later AD 367, for the whole of the Wall, not just the forts. In subsequent thought the effects of 'disasters' in AD 197 and AD 296 were extended to the whole of Roman Britain, and it tended to be assumed that structural periods on individual sites would correspond to the 'four Wall periods' even if the evidence from them was insufficient for or contradictory to such a possibility. Collingwood accepted these ideas wholeheartedly; he had stressed the significance of AD 197 in 1930, and was the first to refine the end of period I to AD 197, in 1931.⁶ Richmond hesitated a little. In the Birdoswald report, in his discussion of the structures, Richmond does not decide between AD 181 and AD 196–7.⁷ Thereafter all three expounded the views initially put forward by Birley. The influence of Collingwood, Birley, and Richmond, the latter two at the beginning of their academic careers, greatly assisted in the general acceptance of these views, and the dating of the Wall periods put forward was not seriously challenged till the late 1960s, by Birley's own pupils as it happened.⁸ The debate was thus re-opened, and continues.

Also in 1929 Birley took a step of significance for his immediate and long-term future. With the Chesters estate on the market, he purchased Vindolanda,

⁵ E. Birley, 'Excavations on Hadrian's Wall west of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1929', *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., 7 (1930), 143–74; the crucial section is 164–74; (with I. A. Richmond), 'Excavations on Hadrian's Wall in the Birdoswald–Pike Hill Sector, 1929': part II 'The pottery' (175–98), part III 'The inscriptions' (198–202), *Cumb. & West.*, 2nd ser., 30 (1930), 169–205.

⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1930), p. 85; 'Ten Years' Work on Hadrian's Wall 1920–30', *Cumb. & West.*, 2nd ser., 31 (1931), 87–110 especially 106.

⁷ I. A. Richmond (with E. Birley), 'Excavations on Hadrian's Wall in the Birdoswald–Pike Hill Sector, 1929', part I 'Birdoswald Fort', 173.

⁸ These early challenges are summarised in: D. J. Breeze and B. Dobson, 'Hadrian's Wall: some problems, part IV: The three destructions of Hadrian's Wall', *Britannia*, 3 (1972), 200–8 with references; J. P. Gillam, 'The frontier after Hadrian—a history of the problem', *Arch. Ael.*, 5th ser., 2 (1974), 1–15.

with an eye to its potential for excavation, and almost as an afterthought decided to live near the site in what had been the home of Anthony Hedley, the site's first excavator. He remained here till he finally moved to Durham.

In 1930 Simpson resigned his directorship of the Durham University Excavation Committee, so it could be given to Birley. In 1931, on Michael Holroyd's suggestion to Sir James Knott, Birley was appointed lecturer at Armstrong College, Newcastle, then part of the University of Durham. (That same year he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London.) He grew a moustache to try and look older than his students. In 1935 Ian Richmond had to return to Britain and give up his Directorship of the British School at Rome, and at Birley's suggestion a second lectureship was created in the Durham division of the university, to which Birley moved, Richmond being appointed to the Newcastle post. Apart from the observation on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries of London referred to above and war service Birley's only employment was in the service of the University of Durham, from which he retired in 1971; he and Durham were imperishably linked.

There are many aspects to these pre-war years. Pride of place should naturally go to his marriage in 1934 to Margaret Isobel Goodlet, his pupil from 1931 onwards. She was to be known to generations of students as Peggy. The honeymoon was in Germany. Robin was born in a Corbridge nursing home in 1935, Tony at Chesterholm in 1937. Robin was named after Collingwood, Tony after Anthony Hedley, the antiquarian and excavator of Vindolanda who had lived at Chesterholm. There were important friendships formed, C. E. (Tom Brown) Stevens, his best man, Ronald Syme, whom he first met in 1929 and always admired, John Charlton, Percy Hedley, Ian Richmond, and Mortimer Wheeler, whom he first met at the London Museum in 1929. These extended to the Continent; he met Kurt Stade, assistant to the doyen of frontier studies, Ernst Fabricius, in 1929 at Birdoswald.

In his development as a scholar, there are three important aspects, his excavations, his publications, and his students. His publications in both the local journals, *Archaeologia Aeliana* of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne and the *Transactions of the Antiquarian and Archaeological Society of Cumberland and Westmorland*, began in 1930; he wrote regularly in both for 30 years, as can be traced in the published bibliography of his writing from 1928 to 1974.⁹ They include his work on the Wall itself, Vindolanda, and Housesteads. Most notable at the last-named site was his work on the civil settlement, virtually unparalleled till Robin Birley began to explore the one at Vindolanda. A section of the fourth report in 1935 was devoted to civil settlements of Hadrian's Wall, and drew instructive comparisons with the Saalburg, an important site in Germany.¹⁰

⁹ A full bibliography of his work 1928–74 was published in *Britannia* 6 (1975), xi–xxviii, to which a general reference is given.

¹⁰ *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., 12 (1935), 205–26, reprinted in E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953), pp. 69–86.

His guide to Housesteads, published in 1936, with a second edition in 1952, was not replaced till 1989. In 1936–7 he dug at Birrens, in Roman Scotland though an outpost fort of Hadrian's Wall. His interest in the problems of Scotland had emerged in lively debates with Sir George Macdonald in the pre-war years over in particular the dating of the Roman withdrawal from Scotland in the first century AD, although there were also differences, long unresolved, over the respective chronologies of Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall, and Birley's assertion that Birrens went on into the third century. The Birley contributions, with T. D. Pryce, appeared in the *Journal for Roman Studies*, and were based largely on the evidence of Samian ware.¹¹ More recent work has tended to support Birley's earlier dating of the withdrawal from Scotland, but not the occupation of Birrens in the third century, and shed fresh light on the respective chronologies of the two Walls, without solving all the problems.¹²

In 1935 he had turned his attention to Corbridge, writing the guide and re-interpreting the pre-First World War excavations in the light of Birdoswald 1929. A third edition in 1954 took account of more recent work, and it was only replaced in 1989. In 1936 he began a co-operation with Ian Richmond on excavating the site, concentrating himself on the finds. This was to continue till 1973, John Gillam replacing Richmond as director of excavations on Richmond's translation to Oxford in 1957. In 1939 he dug with Richmond at Carzield in Scotland.

His publications in these pre-war years show a wide range of interests. The full bibliography of his work 1928–74 (see above n. 9) may be consulted. Where he is not responsible as director for reporting on the structures, his preference was clearly for inscriptions and for pottery. He ranged widely with his studies of inscriptions, though still within Roman Britain. A particular concern was with the units stationed on the Wall, culminating in his paper in 1939,¹³ 'The Beaumont inscription, the Notitia Dignitatum, and the garrison of Hadrian's Wall', originally intended for the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies that he was planning, to be linked with the 1940 Pilgrimage, aborted by war. His work on pottery shows an early interest in the red-gloss ware known as Samian, with its stamps and decoration, the latter often identifying a particular potter's work. He had

¹¹ E. Birley (with T. D. Pryce), 'The First Roman Occupation of Scotland', *Journ. Rom. Stud.* 25 (1935), 59–80; 'The Fate of Agricola's Northern Conquests', *Journ. Rom. Stud.* 28 (1938), 141–52.

¹² B. R. Hartley, 'The Roman occupations of Scotland: the evidence of samian ware', *Britannia* 3 (1972), 1–55 (the early withdrawal; the chronology of the two Walls); A. S. Hobley, 'The Numismatic Evidence for the Post-Agricolan Abandonment of the Northern Frontier in Northern Scotland', *Britannia*, 20 (1989), 69–74; Anne S. Robertson, *Birrens (Blatobulgium)* (Edinburgh, 1975), p. 286.

¹³ *CW*, 2nd ser., 39 (1939), 190–226.

also a considerable interest in coarse pottery, including again stamped wares, *mortaria* and *amphorae*. Finally, his paper in 1932 on the Roman fort at Brougham¹⁴ was to set a pattern in the methodical survey of all known evidence for sites, particularly that from antiquaries, reproduced in numerous papers for CW, in *Research on Hadrian's Wall* and in his paper on the Hinterland of Hadrian's Wall referred to below.

In all of this is missing more general work on the Roman army. He himself attributes this to preoccupation with the problems of work on and near the Wall.¹⁵ It is noteworthy, however, that his first published work, in 1928,¹⁶ was on the legionary title *Gemina*, still a crucial contribution, and that his review and discussion of volume XVI of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, on diplomas, certificates of citizenship for auxiliary soldiers, in 1938,¹⁷ aroused considerable interest, making his reputation on the Continent. Finally, a major paper on the origins of legionary centurions, of enduring value, arguing that they followed largely the recruitment of the legions, and the centurionate was not artificially restricted to men from Italy, was to be published in Budapest in 1941, as part of a *Denkschrift*.¹⁸

Birley's attitude to his pupils was distinctive from the beginning. He gave them freely of his time, his library, and his collected materials. Not uncommonly he was content to resign to them the further methodical pursuit of a topic in which he was interested. He was dealing with small numbers, thirty-four students before the Second World War. Yet out of them came John Gillam, later Reader in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, who was to establish himself as an expert in Roman coarse pottery as well as in Wall and frontier studies, George Jobey, later Professor in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, who was to be a 'one-man Royal Commission' for native settlement in the Roman and pre-Roman period in Northumberland, Kenneth Steer, who after a notable doctoral thesis on Roman Durham became eventually Secretary of the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Peter Wenham, with a long association with St John's College, York, and excavations in York, and Ronald (G. R.) Watson, whose doctoral thesis on Roman Military Book-keeping led eventually to his book *The Roman Soldier* (London 1969). Maurice Callendar's doctoral thesis was on Roman *amphorae*, a typical development by a pupil of a Birley interest.

¹⁴ CW, 2nd ser., 32 (1932), 124–39.

¹⁵ E. Birley, *The Roman Army: papers 1929–86* (Amsterdam, 1988), p. vii.

¹⁶ *Journ. Rom. Stud.* 18 (1928), 56–60=*Army: papers*, pp. 311–15.

¹⁷ *Journ. Rom. Stud.* 28 (1938), 224–29.

¹⁸ 'The origins of legionary centurions', *Laureae Aquincenses Memoriae Valentini Kuzsinszky dicatae*, ii (Budapest, 1941), pp. 47–62, repr. in *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953), pp. 104–24, and in *Army: papers*, pp. 189–205.

There are a number of interesting features of Birley's output before the Second World War. It reposed of course on the methodical assembling of data, in notebooks, card indexes, and files, on all his many interests. Many of his books he had rebound with interleaving, and they were meticulously annotated. There is no attempt at this stage, and little at any time, to produce a monograph. His publications were mainly articles, with a few reviews each year. They appear predominantly in the two local journals already referred to, the reviews often in the *Proceedings* of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, and the *Durham University Journal*. *The Antiquaries Journal* carried some of the reviews, and the controversy with Sir George Macdonald featured in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, but otherwise there is little in national journals. *Archaeologia Cambrensis* received offerings in 1936, and *Proceedings* of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society Transactions* had a small amount of material relating to excavations in Scotland.

On the eve of war Birley was already known as an authority on Hadrian's Wall, with a considerable record of excavation. He was a noted epigraphist, largely writing on British material, with a number of pottery specialisms. His interest in the Roman army was well evidenced for the units on Hadrian's Wall, but his wider interests had hardly appeared, except in one review and a not yet published paper which was to appear in an unlikely place under wartime conditions.

War came suddenly and strangely to him. He was attending a congress in archaeology in Berlin in August 1939, where he made new acquaintances. He was summoned back by a telegram apparently from Peggy but in reality from the War Office. He was a Territorial officer, and his interest in military matters and his command of German had been registered at the time of the Munich crisis. He left in such haste that he left his pyjamas behind with the Nesselhaufs (Herbert Nesselhauf was author of CIL XVI, notably reviewed by Birley, and had become a personal friend). Frau Nesselhauf preserved them for him till after the war. Birley was to spend the entire war with British Military Intelligence. He was a careful observer of the Official Secrets Act, and information on his work is sparse. It was concerned with the study of the careers of German officers, and attempting to discover the reasoning behind their promotions, and with the strength, distribution, and movements of German divisions. He headed the Military Intelligence Research Section and ended the war as Chief of the German Military Document Section with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. In *The Code Breakers*, cited by A. Moyes in his history of Hatfield,¹⁹ Robert M. Slusser, an American army officer who worked in the Military Intelligence Research Section, speaks of Birley's

¹⁹ Moyes, *Hatfield*, p. 206.

contribution to Anglo-American intelligence in the Second World War as of fundamental importance, and notes that he had access to the Ultra decodes from the very beginning of the war. Milton Shulman in an article in the *Evening Standard* (24 November 1995), who worked under him, opined ‘that Eric Birley was pre-eminent among those who gave our commanders the information needed to defeat Hitler’. This was with special reference to D-Day. He quotes Birley as writing to him: ‘My main help was that I had been used to reading German views on the Roman army. And that I suppose put me on the right wavelength. I came across sufficient captured German army documents to make me realise that they were far more valuable than MI6 reports, most of which were nonsense or works of fiction.’ Birley first went to America in mid 1943 to prepare for D-Day. By the time hostilities in Europe ended Birley was able to assemble at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, 300 tons of German military documents, including the records of the *Heerespersonalamt*, and a cageful of more than a hundred German officers and NCOs. He was able to check then or some other time that his estimate of German divisions in 1940, shortly before the fall of France had been correct at 130 (actually 128 plus two *Waffen-SS* divisions), as compared to the French estimate of 80. To complete his military experiences the lectures he gave on Roman history and archaeology at Featherstone Park to prisoners of war, some later to become noted archaeologists, among them Professor D. Hafemann, should be mentioned. There is a description of him sitting by the Rhine with his opposite number in German military intelligence, watching the barges go by. After five or so he accurately predicted the number of the next barge, having cracked the system of numbering and the sequence. The story is not irrelevant—as Arnaldo Momigliano, the distinguished ancient historian, once observed of him, Eric Birley could reconstruct history from a pair of used railway tickets.²⁰ He did in fact crack the London Transport numbering system from collecting bus tickets when he was at the War Office. He was a great observer of patterns, whether in figured Samian, where he could link up a newly found piece at Corbridge with others found in the pre-First World War excavations and on widely separated parts of the site by memory alone, or in Roman and German military careers.

He received the MBE in 1943, the Order of Polonia Restituta in 1944 from the Free Polish Government, and the Legion of Merit from the President of the United States in 1947. An unwelcome legacy from his wartime experience was the wrecking of his eyesight. He had always had very low blood pressure, and the pressure of work in the War office clearly exacerbated it. At one point he had a collapsed lung. He had also lost years from his academic career, but he had acquired new insights into the way that armies worked, in selection of officers and deployment of units.

²⁰ J. Wilkes, obituary in *Independent*, 26 October 1995.

On his return to Durham Birley took on responsibilities enough for three or four men. He had been promoted Reader in Archaeology and Roman Frontier Studies in 1943. To this he joined in 1947 the post of Vice-Master of Hatfield College in the University of Durham. This was no ordinary appointment. The Durham colleges do no teaching but are responsible for the final selection of their students, and each has its own ethos. Hatfield had existed since 1846, but under wartime conditions had lost its own Master and its buildings, sharing both with University College. Its separate existence was threatened. There was a vigorous rally of its old students at the celebrations of the centenary of the college in 1946, and Birley's appointment as Vice-Master was in part a response to it. He worked towards the re-establishment of the college on an independent basis, and was appointed Master in 1949. From then till 1956 he continued with the energetic re-creation of the college, being in effect its second founder. He introduced moral tutors on the lines of Brasenose. He also followed the methods of his Brasenose College Principal in gathering to his College the best of sportsmen, albeit those who were quite capable of obtaining good degrees. Birley spent these years fighting vigorously on behalf of Hatfield, often with the Warden of the Durham Colleges, Sir James Duff, as well as with the difficulties of inadequate accommodation and catering facilities, accentuated in the immediate post-war years. His Vice-Master, Professor Fisher, wrote that 'The current fortunes of Hatfield reflect his devotion and sagacity, his sound appreciation of financial and academic exigencies, and his steady pursuit of an ideal and the development of a distinctive College ethos.'²¹ The choice to give up the mastership and go on as professor to concentrate on archaeological work and teaching was a hard one.

Academically he broke new ground. He continued old interests, pottery, particularly Samian and mortarium stamps and surveys of the evidence for forts in *CW*, but also began a series of papers on general aspects of the history of Roman Britain and on the organisation of the Roman Army. They would have graced any national or international journal, but he chose to publish them in *Durham University Journal*. Their quality was extraordinary, and as he himself notes they were from the starting-point of epigraphic or literary evidence; the archaeological influence was indirect.²² Notable were papers on Britain under Nero, under the Flavians, and after Agricola, but of equal or greater significance were the papers on the Roman army, particularly the equestrian officers, who commanded the auxiliary regiments and supplied the majority of legionary tribunes. Birley was able to show that these officers fell into three main groups, men in their late teens or early twenties, men in their thirties, and older men. Those in their thirties were the largest group,

²¹ Moyes, *Hatfield*, p. 235.

²² E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953), p. vii.

normally commissioned after serving as municipal magistrates. Initial selection and promotion were discussed, and the *ab epistulis*, the man in charge of the emperor's correspondence, had an important input. Most important of all, equestrian officers were civilians except when in post, and would revert to civilian life if not offered a further appointment. A further article on equestrian officers discussed how geographical origins might be teased out by prosopographical methods, making the point that the conclusions of Alfred von Domaszewski in his *Rangordnung des römischen Heeres* (Bonn, 1908) were too sweeping. His interest in names comes out clearly. The papers are best read in his collection, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*, referred to below.

So far he had dealt with the centurionate and the equestrian officers. He extended his interest in initial selection and promotion to the senatorial officers in his British Academy lecture, published in 1954, on 'Senators in the emperor's service'.²³ Here again he laid emphasis on the early selection of men of talent, as shown by which of the four colleges they were assigned to within the vigintivirate, the twenty junior magistracies that began the senatorial career. Their subsequent careers bore out or showed modifications of that initial judgement. The themes of selection and promotion, of social and geographical origin, are repeated, and show the insights garnered from the *Heerespersonalamt*.

A year earlier he had taken a significant step, in publishing a number of his articles in *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953). This was on the urging of several of his friends, notably Herbert Nesselhauf and H. G. Pflaum, and made available his papers to a far wider audience. It was to be through his papers, not through any monograph, that he made his impact. Hans Georg Pflaum was to be a valued friend, who applied in his study of the procurators the seeking of patterns in individual careers arranged on a chronological basis with the evidence fully detailed, an approach that naturally appealed to a number of Birley pupils. Birley was to include his review of Pflaum in his major collection of papers on the Roman army, cited below.²⁴

A year earlier still Birley had set out to the Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy in Paris in 1952 a programme of desirable work on the epigraphy of the Roman army, emphasising the way the army worked, the prosopographical approach, the importance of geographical and social origins, and recruiting. Much of it he was to carry out through his pupils, as M. Speidel 'the Elder', himself a leading Roman army scholar, points out.²⁵

His archaeological programme had changed significantly. While still

²³ *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 39 (1954), 197–214=*Army: papers*, pp. 75–92.

²⁴ *Army: papers*, pp. 165–72.

²⁵ *Actes du deuxième congrès int. d'épigraphie grecque et latine, Paris 1952* (Paris, 1953), 226–38=*Army: papers*, pp. 3–11. M. Speidel, *Roman Army Studies*, ii (Stuttgart, 1992), p. 13.

keeping up an interest in Samian and mortarium stamps he gave up excavation, except for his continuing link with the Corbridge training courses. His last excavation otherwise was a small one at Brough under Stainmore in 1954. He contributed to Wall studies the editing of the Handbook to the Centenary Pilgrimage in 1949 (Kendal, 1949), which although intended as a daily guide to pilgrims gave him some opportunity to discuss sites and give some general conclusions. It was no substitute for a book on the Wall.

The major venture of 1949 was the creation of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, a gathering of international scholars interested in these topics. It was a project which he had hoped to realise in 1940, and he set it up by dint of much correspondence. Here his earlier contacts with Continental scholars were of great importance; Birley already knew everyone concerned. He edited the transactions in 1952 (*The Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, 1949*, Durham, 1952). It was arranged to coincide with the Pilgrimage, and Congresses were to be held in Britain alongside the Pilgrimages in 1959, 1969, 1979, and 1989 in addition to those abroad. This brainchild of Birley's has led to seventeen Congresses so far, and their value has lain not simply in the volumes of papers produced but in the opportunity offered for scholars to meet and discuss informally with others working on the different frontiers of the Empire. Birley in 1974 became Honorary Life President of the Congress, an honour richly deserved.

Birley's energy seemed inexhaustible in these years. For eight years, 1948/9–1956/7, he edited the Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Society, and continued his magisterial surveys of the evidence for Roman forts in its area of interest. In 1956, as already mentioned, he had to choose between Hatfield and archaeology, and followed archaeology, with a chair in archaeology. It was a year of illness also, as his body rebelled against overwork. During his years at Hatfield he had carried on the work of the department of archaeology in a hut above the tennis court. But now he transferred his activities to the Old Fulling Mill, so often visible in the foreground on the river bank on photographs of the west end of Durham Cathedral. As Geza Alföldy put it, it became 'the headquarters of the Roman army'.²⁶ His teaching method had long been established. He simply gave freely of his time, his library, open to all including undergraduates, and his materials. He did not favour a first degree in archaeology, so was content to teach undergraduates following other courses, chiefly though not exclusively in Modern History and in Classics. Numbers were still small, so he was free to teach them virtually on a one-to-one basis. They were encouraged to do research, but all equally enjoyed his attention and support. Room was found for research students in strange places, a desk in

²⁶ G. Alföldy, *Laudatio auf Eric Birley* in: E. Birley, *Überlegungen zur Geschichte des römischen Heeres* (Heidelberg, 1987), p. 13.

the master's office at Hatfield, later in every nook and cranny of the Mill. He acquired some colleagues. John Gillam was shared with the Newcastle division of the university from 1948, till John Mann was appointed to a full-time post in Roman archaeology in Durham in 1957. He had already been impressed by Birley's writing and meeting him at Corbridge. In 1955 Rosemary Cramp introduced Anglo-Saxon archaeology to the department, and in 1966 Dennis Harding the Iron Age. Rosemary Cramp was to succeed Birley as head of department, expand the department considerably, and introduce a first degree in archaeology. She has spoken feelingly of Birley's courtesy and generosity to her, allowing her first choice of rooms in the Old Fulling Mill. The department that Birley founded has gone on from strength to strength.

Birley drew his pupils, formal and informal, from many sources. Examples only can be given here, mainly illustrating the way in which Birley handed on topics in which he had an interest to his pupils for the fuller treatment for which he himself lacked time. From modern history Brenda Heywood did a major Ph.D. project on the Vallum, unhappily still unpublished, presented in 1954. In 1955 Brian Dobson, from Hatfield, which made for a double tie, presented a thesis on the *primipilares*, the senior centurions of the Roman army, noted as needing attention by Birley in his paper to the Congress of Epigraphy. The thesis was long after published as *Die Primipilares* (Köln, 1978). He was also to be given the task on Birley's recommendation of re-editing the text of Domaszewski's *Rangordnung* of 1908, published in Köln in 1967, Domaszewski being the great Roman army scholar to whom Birley was the natural successor. Michael Jarrett, also a modern historian from Hatfield, produced a doctoral thesis in 1958 on Roman municipal aristocracies in the West. He went to University College Cardiff, eventually as professor, and published the second edition of *The Roman Frontier in Wales* (Cardiff, 1969) and *Maryport, Cumbria* (Kendal, 1976), a fort he first studied for a BA thesis at Birley's suggestion. David Breeze, a modern historian, was one of the last to follow this path, producing a doctoral thesis in 1970 on the soldiers below the rank of centurion in the Roman army. Of his many publications may be singled out *The Northern Frontiers of Roman Britain* (London, 1982) and *Roman Scotland* (London, 1996). With Brian Dobson he published *Hadrian's Wall*, an account of its history now in its third edition (1987).

Roy Davies came from classics to make himself an operational papyrologist and wrote on peace-time routine in the Roman army, his doctoral thesis of 1967. He died tragically early in 1977; a selection of his papers was published by Breeze and Maxfield, both Birley pupils, in 1989.²⁷ Birley also drew in students following other honours courses; Iain MacIvor, a Hatfield man when

²⁷ Roy Davies, *Service in the Roman Army*, David Breeze and Valerie Maxfield, (eds.) (Edinburgh, 1989).

Birley was master, ended up as a consequence as Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments in Scotland, a post in which he was succeeded by David Breeze. Graduates came from other universities. Valerie Maxfield came from Leicester to take the diploma in archaeology, later re-assessed as of MA status, and went on to do a doctoral dissertation on the *dona militaria* of the Roman army in 1972, published as *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army* in 1981. Other doctoral theses in these years were on Roman Cavalry (S. H. Bartle, 1961), the Later Roman Army (J. Hepworth, 1963), and Mauretania Caesariensis (R. I. Lawless, 1969). J. E. H. Spaul contributed a M.Litt. on Mauretania Tingitana.

Most archaeologists found their way to Corbridge till the training courses closed down in 1973. There often Birley introduced himself to them. John Mann has already been referred to, and John Wilkes came from University College London via Corbridge to submit a doctoral thesis on Dalmatia in 1962. He is now Professor at the London Institute of Archaeology, and wrote a book on *Dalmatia* (London, 1969), based on this thesis. Norman McCord from the Newcastle division became a regular site supervisor at Corbridge and developed an interest in aerial photography alongside his continuing basic interest in history which brought him a chair.

Honours students taking archaeology as a subsidiary course, and graduates of other universities drawn to Durham, often via Corbridge, do not begin to exhaust the number of people influenced by Birley. He took an interest in all scholars, often inviting them to Durham for visits. Margaret Roxan was so invited, for ten days, and given unlimited time. She received much stimulus and support, in effect supervision, in correspondence in completing her doctoral thesis on the *auxilia* of the Iberian Peninsula, a topic suggested by Birley. She was to become the logical successor to Herbert Nesselhauf in the study of Roman Military Diplomas. The late Hubert Devijver recalled in a letter the impact of an invitation to Durham for a fortnight in response to a request for advice. 'I learnt more in that fortnight than one can learn in years of self-study.' His great work was to be a prosopography of the equestrian officers of the Roman army, a Birley interest since he acquired Cheesman's papers. Geza Alföldy, now Professor of Ancient History in the University of Heidelberg, was reached first through correspondence, then a meeting, then a welcome to England 'as a son'. The same pattern is there: the steady, friendly criticism, the careful reading through of articles in typescript. The adjectives are typical: approachable, unassuming. The breadth of Birley's correspondence was enormous, his contacts with scholars, particularly the young, uncountable. This often formed the subject matter of the epigraphy seminars he introduced into the department for post-graduates and interested undergraduates. His pupils, in the widest sense, expressed their appreciation of him in publishing *Britain and Rome*, edited by Michael Jarrett and Brian Dobson (Kendal, 1966), containing

thirteen papers, to be presented to him on his sixtieth birthday. He was honoured similarly by dinners on his seventieth and eightieth birthdays by his pupils and friends.

His outreach was not confined to academics. Reference has already been made to his support of the local societies with his writing and editing. This was also exemplified by his continuing willingness to drive for miles on winter nights to talk to every form of society all over northern England and southern Scotland, refusing even travel expenses. He taught adult education classes also, and afforded a warm welcome to local amateur archaeologists; the department was always open to them.

These 'pupils', a title claimed by many who had no formal instruction from him, formed a distinctive 'Birley-school'. They were trained in a particular way, to seek out the basic evidence, and they found kinship with one another in a shared teaching and a shared affection for their teacher, which often led to co-operation in publications, as David Breeze has noted. They have been accused of arrogance, but would argue this only means that they were taught to look at the evidence for a hypothesis, not at the reputation of the scholar advancing it.

Turning back to his activity and publications after his professorship in 1956, an increasing interest in the writing of antiquaries and the history of research is clear, alongside his other interests. Thus his inaugural lecture in 1958 looked at the history of archaeology in the north of England, with a warm tribute to F. G. Simpson, and the interesting comment that 'my own first academic interest is in Roman history—more particularly in the history and organisation of the Roman army—and that for me archaeology has always been a diversion, and not the real string to my bow'.²⁸ In a burst of activity regarding his Wall interests he produced the fourth Horsley memorial lecture, on John Horsley and John Hodgson²⁹ and a paper on the Hinterland of Hadrian's Wall,³⁰ drawing on his files and his already published profiles of forts in the C and W area. The year 1958 saw also the publication of *Central Gaulish Potters*, prepared by Grace Simpson in the Department of Archaeology with his support.

1959 was again a year of the Hadrian's Wall Pilgrimage. Birley was to preside over it as President both of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne and as President of the Antiquarian and Archaeological Society of Cumberland and Westmorland. An unfortunate accident limited his activity. The Handbook for the Pilgrimage also had to be postponed, and appeared in 1961 as *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (Kendal, 1961). This characteristically

²⁸ E. Birley, *Archaeology in the North of England* (Durham, 1958), p. 19.

²⁹ Horsley lecture: *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., 36 (1958), 1–46.

³⁰ *Dur. NAAST*, 11 (1958), 45–63.

was not Birley's view of Hadrian's Wall but a magisterial compilation of all that could be extracted from antiquaries and other earlier research on the Wall. As such it cannot be superseded.

He rounded off his contributions on the Wall with a guide to Chesters, in 1959, not replaced till 1990, and a survey of excavation at Corbridge, 1906–58.³¹ His contributions to the two local journals dry up in the 1960s for the first time since the 1930s. He became President of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland in 1959, thus serving all three local societies as President.

Notable papers on the Roman army continued. In 1955 he had reflected on 'Hadrianic Frontier Policy',³² at a Frontier Congress. In 1958 he published 'Beförderungen und Versetzungen in römischen Heere', concerned with senatorial and equestrian officers, and in 1965 he published the second part of the article, dealing with the centurionate, 'Promotions and Transfers in the Roman army II: the Centurionate'.³³ Again it was the theme of promotion and transfer and the reasons behind them. In 1966 in '*Alae and Cohortes Milliariae*'³⁴ he established that these larger auxiliary units came into being at a particular time, and those promoted to command them had distinctive careers. In 1969 a paper on 'Septimius Severus and the Roman army',³⁵ analysed this emperor's distinctive contribution, and he covered twenty years of frontier research in the 1969 Frontier Congress volume, which he helped to edit, published in Cardiff in 1974.³⁶

One disappointment of these years needs perhaps to be chronicled, as a fact, not in criticism of any individual. Richard Wright had been chosen by R. G. Collingwood to take on the burden of *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*. During the war years in particular he and Sir Ian Richmond grew close together. Richmond rightly received special praise when Wright drew his great labour to a conclusion in 1965. It was frustrating to Birley that it had not proved possible to involve him to a significant extent, and a loss to scholarship

³¹ *Arch Ael.*, 4th ser., 37 (1959), 1–31.

³² *Carnuntina: Vorträge beim internationalen Kongress der Altertumsforscher Carnuntum 1955, Römische Forschungen in Niederösterreich Band III* (Graz-Koln, 1956), pp. 25–33=*Army: papers*, pp. 12–20.

³³ 'Beförderungen und Versetzungen in römischen Heere', *Carnuntum-Jahrbuch* (1957), 3–20=*Army: papers*, pp. 93–114 (in translation as 'Promotions and Transfers in the Roman army: senatorial and equestrian officers'); 'Promotions and Transfers in the Roman army II: the Centurionate', *Carnuntum-Jahrbuch* (1963/64), 21–33=*Army: papers*, pp. 206–20.

³⁴ *Corolla Memoriae Erich Swoboda Dedicata* (Graz, 1966), pp. 54–67=*Army: papers*, pp. 349–64.

³⁵ *Epigraphische Studien*, 8 (Dusseldorf, 1969), 63–82=*Army: papers*, pp. 21–40.

³⁶ 'Twenty years of *Limesforschung*', in Eric Birley, Brian Dobson, and Michael Jarrett, (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 1969, Eighth International Congress of Limesforschung* (Cardiff, 1974), pp. 1–4.

that his knowledge of the Roman army and administration could not be fully utilised. His review published in 1966 reflects that loss and that frustration.³⁷

Birley had always valued teaching as his major activity, and to give it up on retirement in 1971 was a wrench. His great web of correspondence continued, though there was necessarily some diminution of energy. Notable among his later publications, which continued to flow, were contributions to the massive *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*. One of these was on the religion of the Roman army, reviewing work since that of Domaszewski, in 1978. It was reprinted along with other army papers, including the early ones already reprinted in *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*, in *The Roman Army: Papers 1929–86* (Amsterdam, 1988). Other contributions included a major paper on the Deities of Roman Britain (1973) and one on Law in Roman Britain (1980).³⁸

It is impossible to follow these later publications in detail, though the publication of *The Roman Army: Papers 1929–86* is noteworthy as representing Birley's own judgement on which of his army papers deserved a wider audience. Twenty-six of the forty-five papers were published after his retirement, and he continued writing till 1993. No bibliography of his post-1974 works has yet been published. Some of those reprinted in 1988 were given to the *Bonner Historia-Augusta Colloquium*, a regular meeting of scholars interested in the problems of the *Historia Augusta*, a collection of biographies, of Roman emperors. Others who came were his friends Ronald Syme, H.-G. Pflaum, J. F. Gilliam, and H. von Petrikovits. Birley attended these meetings from 1965 to 1986. Pflaum used to show him the proofs of *L'année épigraphique* on these occasions.

A major preoccupation in retirement was the Vindolanda Trust, founded in 1970. This was to explore the civil settlement at Vindolanda under the direction of Robin Birley, his elder son. There were two major results that can be identified. Vindolanda developed into a major Wall site, from being simply the consolidated remains exposed by Eric Birley between the wars. This was made possible not only by the structures of the civil settlement and the fort walls being exposed and displayed, but by the wealth of associated finds. Unusual oxygen-excluding conditions led to the preservation of much that is normally lost, leather, textiles, wood. Above all, a whole category of documents were added to the written record. These were wooden tablets inscribed in ink, yielding a mass of information on the official and unofficial activities of officers and men, with information on the development of hand-

³⁷ *Journ. Rom. Stud.* 56 (1966), 226–31.

³⁸ 'The Religion of the Roman Army 1895–1977', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ii. 16, 2 (1978), pp. 1506–41=*Army: papers*, pp. 397–432; 'The Deities of Roman Britain', *ANRW*, ii. 18, 1 (1986), pp. 3–112; 'Law in Roman Britain', *ANRW*, ii. 13 (1980), pp. 609–25.

writing and of the Latin language. Eric Birley as Chairman of the Trust from its inception to his death in 1995 took a close and eager interest in all these developments.

Honours came in these years. He had been made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1969, shortly before his retirement. His Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London went back into his earliest years, to 1931. He had been a Vice-President of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies since 1951. His honorary Fellowship of Brasenose came in 1987. He became an honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1980. In 1970 he became an honorary Dr Phil. of the University of Freiburg, in 1971 an honorary D.Litt. of the University of Leicester, and in 1986 Dr *honoris causa* of the University of Heidelberg. This last was particularly appropriate, as he was recognised as the spiritual heir of Alfred von Domaszewski, doyen of Roman army studies, who spent so much time at Heidelberg. He received a moving tribute from Professor Geza Alföldy on that occasion, who claimed for Heidelberg the honour of belonging to the Birley-school.³⁹

His reputation was always greater abroad than in this country, partly because archaeology and epigraphy are not an integrated discipline in Britain. He figured little on the national scene; he was not a political animal, and his chosen channels of publication were such that a reader of national journals only would hardly know his work. He was a man of the Roman Military North, extending into Scotland and Wales, with his heart ever in the north-west. Abroad it was a different matter, and there he always found it easier to relax. He never gave any priority to publication; he thought of teaching as his main job. Tony Birley has pointed out that Michael Holroyd, Birley's tutor at Oxford, only published one paper. Birley of course published far more, and articles of lasting significance, but his basic attitude was the same. Much that was important was hidden away in its place of original publication. He was able to support and stimulate much more effective and original work than he could ever have undertaken himself, even though given the time he could probably have done it better. His pupils, and again the term must be used in its widest sense, were always conscious of their debt to him. Often materials and thinking were handed on for others to complete and put their individual mark on. The nearest he came to writing a monograph was perhaps *The Fasti of Roman Britain*, a study of the major officers and officials of Roman Britain, which he worked on for years but finally handed over to his son Tony as a project in progress in 1965. It was published, with Tony's distinctive marks upon it, in Oxford in 1981.

He had a long and happy marriage. His sons inevitably lost time with him

³⁹ G. Alföldy, *Laudatio*, p. 16. He expanded on this *Laudatio* in his obituary of Birley, *Saalburg Jahrbuch*, 48 (1995), 140–4.

because of the war years, but he was always there for them, and they have enjoyed distinguished careers under his sage counsel. His grandchildren were ever a delight to him. He listed his recreations in *Who's Who* as archaeology, significant for the amount of time he put in working and also for his attitude to archaeology. When not working he delighted in a quiet game of dominoes with a few close friends in Corbridge. Essentially he was a shy man, with difficulty in expressing his emotions, who found dogs easier to get on with than humans. He enjoyed composing light verse, publishing *Fifty-one Ballades* in 1980, some dating back to the pre-war years; on the Frontier Congress in 1969 he had composed limericks.

Peggy is crippled with arthritis, and he devotedly cared for her in the various homes they occupied after he left Hatfield. Illness weighed heavily on him in the last years, particularly the increasing loss of sight. He died in his bed in Carvoran, their last married home; his ashes are buried at Vindolanda.

Eric Birley played a major part in the study of Roman Britain, particularly Hadrian's Wall, and of the Roman army, through his own work and that of his 'pupils'. In the University of Durham he founded a department of archaeology that continues to play a distinguished role, and he was the second founder of Hatfield College. He was the founder of the International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies. In Roman army studies he was recognised as the successor to Alfred von Domaszewski, as the foremost scholar of his time, with papers of enduring influence. But with all the enormous importance of the writing, it is as an outstanding teacher of all with whom he came into contact that he will be remembered. It has been pointed out that he taught under the shadow of Durham Cathedral, where is the tomb of the Venerable Bede. Birley, like Bede, also a European scholar, made it his delight 'to learn or to teach or to write'.

May the last words on him be those of the late Hubert Devijver on behalf of all Eric Birley pupils: 'The sight of E. B. with his pipe, and always in the company of his faithful dog, will stay with me, forever.'

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University of Durham

Note. I should like to acknowledge the considerable help given to me in compiling this obituary by Professor A. R. Birley, Dr R. E. Birley, Professor D. J. Breeze, and Professor J. Wilkes, who read and commented on earlier drafts, and by Professor G. Alföldy, the late Professor H. Devijver, Emeritus Professor J. C. Mann, and Dr M. Roxan.