

# George C. Boon (1927–1994)

George Boon, who died on 31 August 1994 at the age of 66, was one of the foremost Roman archaeologists of his generation. His excavations, primarily at Silchester and Caerleon, were complemented by a remarkable knowledge of Roman artefacts of all kinds, and great skill as a numismatist. For over thirty years he dominated Roman studies in Wales, producing a stream of books and papers on all aspects of the subject, and inspiring a generation of students and colleagues.

He began his archaeological career while still a student with the excavation of the Kings Weston Park villa in Bristol; the city in which he was born and where he read Latin under Arnaldo Momigliano. On graduation he rejected post-graduate study, preferring to take the post of Archaeological Assistant in Reading Museum, thus beginning a life-long association with Silchester and the great collection of artefacts from that site. In the six years which he spent in Reading he catalogued large parts of the collection and undertook a series of excavations on the site itself, most notably on the then newly recognised early defences (the 'Inner Earthwork'). His work on Silchester culminated in two definitive books, *Roman Silchester* (1957) and *Silchester: The Roman Town of Calleva* (1974).

It was at Reading that many aspects of his future work were first developed. His duties involved dealing with objects of all periods and it was a training which served him well, laying the foundation of that remarkable width of knowledge and wide-ranging interest in all periods of history which was one of his most notable characteristics.

In 1957 he moved to Cardiff to succeed V.E. Nash-Williams in the National Museum of Wales, where he stayed for the remainder of his career, initially as Assistant Keeper and then, from 1976, as Keeper of Archaeology. Within days of his arrival in Cardiff he began the first of many rescue excavations at Caerleon, the site with which, after Silchester, he was to become most closely associated. Over the years he made a major contribution to our knowledge of the fortress, both by his own excavations and by his reinterpretation of earlier discoveries. His field-work in other parts of Wales was more limited, but his excavation of the mithraeum at *Segontium* in 1959 was a major contribution to mithraic studies.

Along with a general responsibility for rescue excavations at Caerleon, he had charge of the site museum which contained a rich collection of material housed in an inadequate and decrepit building. Its replacement by a suitable new building was one of his most cherished projects, and it is a measure of his tenacity and ability to achieve his objectives that the collections are now displayed in a spacious new gallery with excellent storage and curatorial facilities. Over the years Caerleon and its collections were the subject of many papers and monographs, including his magisterial survey of the site, *Isca* (1972). By then Boon had ceased to excavate himself, although he maintained a close interest in work on the site for the rest of his life. He had always preferred to excavate on a relatively small scale, and the increasing size of rescue excavations in the late sixties had little appeal for him.

His position in the National Museum meant that many of the most important Roman finds from Wales passed across his desk, and he usually seized the chance to publish them in a series of characteristically erudite papers. A glance through his long list of publications on Roman topics alone (and he published also on both prehistoric and medieval subjects) shows him writing authoritatively on glass, pottery, metalwork,

inscriptions, tile stamps, mosaics, sculpture, pastrycook's moulds, domestic shrines, coal, Graeco-Roman anchor stocks, gold and other mines, the evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain, and the funding of Edwardian excavations. Despite the width of his interests he was well able to appreciate the deeper significance of his studies; thus it was his work on the pottery found in the nineteenth century at Usk which led to the recognition of the Neronian fortress there. Occasionally he allowed his impish and erudite sense of humour (so familiar to his friends) to appear in his publications; who could resist reading a paper entitled 'Clement of Alexandria, Wookey Hole, and the Corcyrian Cave' (*Proc. Univ. Bristol. Spelaeol. Soc.* xiv.2 (1976)).

Unlike most archaeologists he was also a skilled numismatist. His early numismatic publications are mostly on Roman topics, but his work in the National Museum involved dealing with coins of all periods, and alongside his papers on Roman coins and coin hoards are a series of major studies of medieval and later coins. He looked on coins as documents which have much to tell us of their period and of the people who used them, and he applied the same high standard of scholarship to them as he did to his Roman studies. An outstanding example of this is his book on *Cardiganshire Silver and the Aberystwyth Mint in Peace and War* (1981), which is as much concerned with the history of the mines and the mining companies as with the coins themselves. By a programme of judicious purchases he turned what had been a random collection of site finds in the National Museum into a major numismatic collection.

His work resulted in his involvement in many learned societies, both numismatic and archaeological. He served as a Vice-President of the Roman Society from 1977 to his death, and of the Society of Antiquaries from 1980 to 1984, was a Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute, and played an active part in several local societies.

He was always conscious of the fact that it was the duty of the professional to share his expertise with his amateur colleagues. He was not concerned with the distinction between professional and amateur; what interested him was the quality of their work. He had very high standards himself, and had little time for work which did not measure up to his own criteria – the slovenly or the pretentious met with very short shrift, and fools were not suffered at all gladly. But when he detected promise in anyone, particularly in the young, he was unstinting in his support and help.

WILLIAM MANNING