

PROFESSOR SIR FERGUS MILLAR

1935–2019



(Photograph: Andrew Millar)

With the death of Fergus Millar on 15 July 2019, the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies lost one of its brightest stars. Fergus was the outstanding Roman historian of his generation: Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford (1984–2002), a Fellow of the British Academy (elected in 1976) and a Knight Bachelor (in the Birthday Honours 2010). Among his many other honours and achievements, too numerous to list here, was his term (1989–1992) as President of the Roman Society, the culmination of a long association with a body that meant a great deal to him throughout his career. He joined the Society in 1959, and served as an elected member of Council from 1966 to 1968. For two decades from 1973, when he was elected to the Editorial Committee, he was a dominant figure in the direction of the Society's activities, as editor of *JRS* (1975–1979), chairman of the Editorial Committee (1980–1988) and President. Much of what follows (inevitably a very selective account) is focused on his links with the Society during these years.

The inception of Fergus Millar's term as editor of *JRS* coincided with his appointment, in 1975, to the Chair of Ancient History at University College London in succession to Arnaldo Momigliano. The nine years he spent in this job had a decisive impact on his intellectual development, but have not always received the attention they deserve. At UCL, Fergus became a member of a Department of History in which Ancient History was seen not as a branch of Classical Studies, but as part of a historical continuum which extended in time and space far beyond the Graeco-Roman world. It would be hard to deny the significance of the fact that he found himself administering a degree course that included the ancient Near East as an integral element, with courses taught by

Margaret ('Peggy') Drower and later Amélie Kuhrt. One consequence was that he insisted on the inclusion of the Near East in the Routledge History of the Ancient World, of which he was general editor; the result was Kuhrt's two-volume masterpiece (*The Ancient Near East*, c. 3000–330 B.C. (1995)). The central importance of the Near East in Fergus' own work needs no demonstration.

Another aspect of his time in London was his exposure to a radically different kind of research culture in which historical methods and approaches were openly and publicly discussed and debated in frequent and regular public meetings, lectures and seminars organised by the Hellenic and Roman Societies and the Institute of Classical Studies, and centred on the Societies' Joint Library, the large seminar room, and above all the tea room on the sixth floor of the building they occupied together in Gordon Square. The weekly Ancient History seminars on Thursday afternoons became famous, and were the setting for many memorable occasions involving a distinguished international cast of speakers and attended by a vocal and enthusiastic audience. It was Fergus who insisted that graduate students should attend and be encouraged to take an active part. He also made it into a social event, with everyone present (including students) being invited to the bar of the Housman Room at University College, followed by dinner at a local curry house in Euston or Fitzrovia.

At one of these events in 1978, Keith Hopkins (who was always there) presented a full-length critique of the methods Fergus had used in his recently published *The Emperor in the Roman World* (1977). The criticisms were savage; but in the ensuing discussion, Fergus gave as good as he got. It was an astounding spectacle, deeply memorable for all who witnessed it. One of these was Mary Beard, who recalled (in her *TLS* blog, 'A Don's Life') that soon afterwards the two protagonists and their audience were buying one another drinks at the bar. It was a lesson in how to disagree, and went a long way to explain why Fergus was held in such affection even by those who rejected his methods and approach. It is also significant that it must have been Fergus, the then editor of *JRS*, who invited Keith to publish his critique as a review discussion and make it available to the world at large ('Rules of Evidence', *JRS* 69 (1979), 178–86). Fergus later replied to his critics in an afterword to the 1991 reprint of his magnum opus, pp. 636–52. Note also his withering review of Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (1978) in *TLS*, 21 December 1979, 170–1.

It is worth repeating that the years Fergus spent in London from 1975 to 1984 were a uniquely important period in his life and career. They revolved around an axis with the Joint Library, the Institute and the sixth-floor seminar and common rooms at one pole, and University College and the Housman Room at the other. It was above all the atmosphere of the seminars, their scholarly intensity and their social companionship, that was so unforgettable. Fergus once remarked to me, years later, that in spite of many attempts he had never been able to recreate anything like it in Oxford.

Both before and after his term as editor (but not, of course, during it) Fergus was a regular contributor to *JRS* — he ranks alongside Ronald Syme as one of the most prolific. He first became known to readers in 1963, when his article on the imperial fiscus appeared; from then on articles by him were published in *JRS* every year through the sixties, and frequently thereafter. It was in these papers that Fergus outlined his distinctive approach to problems in Roman history, and first tried out ideas that were subsequently developed in his major studies. It is well known that some of his most important books were extensions and elaborations of ideas that first appeared as articles in *JRS*: *The Emperor in the Roman World*, 31 B.C.–A.D. 337 (1977), *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (1989) and *The Roman Near East*, 31 B.C.–A.D. 337 (1996).

Less noticed is the fact that this pattern was first established with a book aimed at students and general readers, first published in German in the Fischer Weltgeschichte series (1966), and then in English as *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours* (London, 1967). The book was given little attention by the scholarly community and received only lukewarm reviews (although the one in *JRS* 1969, by John Crook, is an exception, and notice Keith Hopkins' positive comments in *JRS* 69 (1979), 179 and 185), and the publisher's decision to include chapters on neighbouring cultures by different 'area specialists' was a disaster for this and other books in the series. They were not integrated with the main text and only succeeded in further marginalising the peoples concerned, even though Millar himself had stressed the interpenetration of local cultures and languages in his own section of the book. His own later work, culminating in *The Roman Near East*, showed how the job should have been done.

The Roman Empire and its Neighbours illustrates what seems to me to be a fundamental and enduring feature of Fergus Millar's scholarship and personality. This is his instinctive empathy — his habit, that is, of seeing things from other people's point of view. Fergus sought to imagine what it was like to live in the Roman Empire for a wide range of people from different social classes; these questions were pursued in the many specialised articles published during these years. The classic statement of this approach was his later demonstration that the most realistic description of daily life in the Roman provinces occurs in a novel ('The World of the Golden Ass', *JRS* 70 (1980), 63–75). So too in *The Emperor in the Roman World*, Fergus analysed the working of Roman 'government', not from a traditional abstract standpoint, but by examining what actually happened from day to day, and the impact of the emperor's actions on the very diverse range of people who were directly and indirectly affected by them.

In the same way he later asked himself what it must have been like to be a part of the crowd listening to an orator in the Forum during the Roman Republic. This unique perspective allowed him to raise fundamental questions about Roman political culture (as it is now called) and the role of the people in it. One might have serious reservations about his answers — indeed they have proved highly controversial and have given rise to a vigorous debate that continues unabated to this day. But what no one denies is that this vast and stimulating discussion of the political culture of the Roman Republic could not have happened if Fergus had not first thought to ask his very distinctive question.

As in scholarship, so too in life. Many will remember, as one of his most endearing traits, Fergus' efforts to welcome newcomers and outsiders, whether overseas visitors, first-year students, newly appointed lecturers or indeed anyone who turned up to the gatherings he held every morning at coffee time. He greeted everyone as friends and tried to make them feel at ease; and he was insistent that everyone who swam into his ken was introduced. Rumour has it that two people he once introduced to each other were actually husband and wife. I particularly remember him instructing me, when I was a junior lecturer in his department, that the welcoming party for new students was not a trivial nuisance to be endured by staff on sufferance, but the most important event of the academic year. To us it might have seemed a tedious chore to have to entertain a group of freshers; but Fergus reminded us that they would remember their first day at university for the rest of their lives. This was a small example of his regular habit of seeing things from other people's point of view, and his way of looking at the world that seemed so obvious when it was explained, but was actually a sign of his unusual and profound understanding of human nature.

Fergus Millar was a great scholar and a great man. We miss him.

President of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies
tim.cornell@manchester.ac.uk

TIM J. CORNELL