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Bryer the Scholar and Storyteller

Margaret Mullett

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BRYER THE SCHOLAR AND STORYTELLER

Bryer was a dazzlingly erudite historian with deceptively esoteric interests matched with an exceptional ability to reach a very wide public. He knew so much about so many things, so entertainingly, with a vast store of anecdote. He chose an unfashionable patch of history (both geographically and chronologically) and studied it in a way well ahead of his time. His taste for the exotic concealed a real concern for economic and agrarian history, monastic cartularies and intellectual history, which at that time in that place might have been expected to focus on the West Midlands or the Chartist movement, but for him was best served by the empire of Trebizond. From the DPhil thesis¹ on, his work on Pontos was really about identity – religious, linguistic, cultural – and in fact a synecdoche for the premodern Mediterranean. The material turn had turned him by the late 1950s, but the *Acts of Vazelon* and the *Seven Brothers of Lazia* were close to his heart. He read the sources with the care and scepticism (“Beware of Steven Runciman”, he warned the young biographer Dinsmore, “when he is laying a false trail”²) which also prevented a rush to print; when he gave the Wiles lectures in Belfast his crabwise advance on the truth impressed his interlocutors; he was indirect, oblique and subtle.

Bryer’s DPhil had been on the empire of Trebizond and at the last minute he was persuaded to leave out (by dint of glueing the pages together) the final chapter on material culture in hopes of meeting the page-limit. His work was holistic, embracing the study of court rhetoric

1. A. A. M. Bryer, *The Society and Institutions of the Empire of Trebizond*, DPhil, Oxford 1967.

2. M. Dinsmore, *Outlandish Knight: The Byzantine Life of Steven Runciman*, London 2016, p. 190.

and history, hagiography, economics and the complex religious loyalties of the Pontos. It was magnificently thorough, scintillatingly innovative, light years ahead of its time.

Sadly he never wrote the magnum opus of the thesis, but the excluded chapter on monuments grew into an acclaimed book, co-authored with David Winfield,³ along with the accompanying *The post-byzantine Monuments of the Pontos*⁴ (Never academically vain, he knew when co-authorship would help) and the two *Variorum* volumes of his reprinted articles, *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos*⁵ and *Peoples and Settlement in Anatolia and the Caucasus*.⁶ These represent the core of his work; learned, exploratory, idiosyncratic, fascinating, and for Pontic scholars, indeed anyone working in Anatolia, regular reading. One piece in particular, “The Pontic Exception” has proved to be of wider and continuing interest.⁷ But, important though this was, he had a great deal more to offer. The Pontic work on crypto-Christians which formed the meat of his inaugural lecture and was published (typically) in the *Deltio Kentrou Mikrasiatikou Spoudon*⁸ showed enormous awareness of the intricacies of religious allegiance in the premodern Mediterranean world which led him to the Wiles lectures in which his scope expanded to the whole of the Near East in the Byzantine and Ottoman eras. His passion for agrarian history, for example the article on “The Estates of the Empire of Trebizond”⁹ led him to a classic article on “Byzantine Agricultural Implements: The Evidence of Medieval Illustrations of He-

3. A. A. M. Bryer – D. Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*, 2 vols [= *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 20, Washington DC 1985].

4. A. A. M. Bryer – D. Winfield – S. Balance – J. Isaac, *The post-Byzantine Monuments of the Pontos: A Source Book* [= *Variorum* CS707, Aldershot 2002].

5. *The Empire of Trebizond and the Pontos* [= *Variorum* CS, London 1979].

6. *Peoples and Settlement in Anatolia and the Caucasus, 800-1900* [= *Variorum* CS, London 1988].

7. “Greeks and Türkmens: The Pontic Exception”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 29 (1975), pp. 113-149.

8. “The Crypto-Christians of the Pontos and Consul William Gifford Palgrave”, *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών* 4 (1983), pp. 13-68.

9. “The Estates of the Empire of Trebizond: Evidence for their Resources, Products, Agriculture, Ownership and Location”, *Αρχαίο Πόντου* 35 (1978), pp. 270-477.

siod's *Works and Days*" in the *BSA*,¹⁰ and a chapter in the *Economic History of Byzantium* on "The Means of Agricultural Production".¹¹ He collected agricultural implements and searched for medieval watermills on all his travels.

His collaborative project funded by Dumbarton Oaks on Rural Settlement, "the Demography Project", was thirty years ahead of its time. He talked about it in classes, a way of getting some hard numbers into the somewhat fantasizing study of Byzantine demography in which the population of Constantinople was taken from a single estimate in a single Crusader historian.¹² Bryer loved charters, and the Acts of Vazelon were his greatest love, and he realised that in some areas of the empire it might be possible to compare monastic charters with Ottoman defters of the same area and compare settlements before and after the conquest. It was a classic case of breadth achieved through depth. He persuaded Giles Constable, the then director of Dumbarton Oaks who was concerned to replace the wonderful fieldwork projects which were so much a feature of the 1960s and 1970s with library-based projects instead,¹³ and was taken on. The first thing Bryer did was to acquire field-workers and send them into the villages of Chalkidike, the island of Limnos and of course the Pontos. He enlisted young museum-workers, and mature textual scholars and inspired them all. He was awed by the energetic criticism of Angeliki Laiou (in those post-Falklands War years he talked of exocet missiles she launched at the symposium in Washington¹⁴ to celebrate the findings of the project) but less pleased when she had half his team sacked and

10. "Byzantine Agricultural Implements; the Evidence of Medieval Illustrations of Hesiod's *Works and Days*", *BSA* 81 (1986), pp. 45-80.

11. "The Means of Agricultural Production: Muscle and Tools", in: *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, ed. A.E. Laiou, Washington DC - Athens, 2002, v. I, pp. 101-113.

12. The population of Constantinople is often taken from Villehardouin's estimate of 400,000 in 1204, Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquête de Constantinople*, ed. E. Faral, Paris, Paris 1961, v. II, p. 54, tr. F. Marzials, London 1908, p. 65.

13. G. Constable, "Dumbarton Oaks and Byzantine Field Work", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983), pp. 171-176.

14. 14-16 May 1982, see *Dumbarton Oaks Annual Report* for 1982, pp. 44-45.

the demography element played down. The volume edited with Heath Lowry is the tangible result.¹⁵

In later years, he wrote about the history of food, in and about which he was always interested, and made the subject of his *Festschrift* an easy decision.¹⁶ His dining club, the Buckland Society, met two or three times a year to reconstruct a historic meal, complete with table settings and entertainment. The menus are preserved for a Byzantine meal (sponsor Anthony Bryer), an Ottoman meal (sponsor Steven Runciman), a Georgian meal (sponsor Antony Eastmond), a Nicaean feast (sponsors Eurydice Georganteli and Dimiter Angelov) and a Ciftlik meal (sponsor Stephen Hill). Where possible he commissioned whole reconstructed dinner services and imported linens from the region concerned; Bryer never did things by halves, never slacked; he was thorough and imaginative and made living history. When I first knew him, he was teaching the Mongols and giving Mongol dinner parties, and lecturing about rhubarb; his classic article “Byzantine porridge” was an offering to R. H. C. Davis a congenial colleague, published in 1985.¹⁷ He was still giving out offprints of this one in the late 1990s.

He was always concerned with the history of the subject, and in later years gave more time to it after his work on the *Blackwell's Dictionary of Historians*, when he overturned the editors' carefully negotiated scale of word-limits in order to promote his view of what was important. He wrote to Rosemary Morris:

I've extravagantly changed the wording to make Grégoire the greatest. Liberal but Walloon; the reason why he epigraphised East from 1905 to Leopold II's death was his damning report on the Belgian Congo. Have you ever read *Le Flambeau*, his mag, before *Byzantion*, first circulated as samizdat during the first German occupation and

15. A. A. M. Bryer – H. Lowry, *Continuity and Change in Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman Society*, Birmingham-Washington DC 1986.

16. “Eat, Drink and be Merry” (Luke 12:19): *Food and Wine in Byzantium*, in *Honour of Professor A. A. M. Bryer*, ed. L. Brubaker – K. Linardou [= SPBS 13, Aldershot 2007].

17. “Byzantine Porridge”, in: *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis*, ed. H. Mayr-Harting – R. I. Moore, London 1985, pp. 1-6.

again in the second? It is a sort of Encounter watered down by the end. 783 publications and not a book: I like that. Diehl merited three times as much on the editors' system and has been reversed. After degeneration into a salon Byzantinist we only put in his first *Ravenna* (1888) – and last *Grands problèmes* books as survivable. Admirable chap: Vasiliev sang rounds with him in Wisconsin.¹⁸

He always wrote obituaries, notably on his teacher Obolensky, but his studies of Steven Runciman, and on archbishop Runcie blend personal appreciation with historical judgment.¹⁹ His “R. M. Dawkins, F. W. Hasluck and the crypto-Christians”²⁰ was pretty much his last serious work and it draws together ebulliently several strands of his previous historical interests. It stands with the inaugural lecture as an example of Bryer at his best.

It could be argued though that his best was not his heavily specialist Pontic work but a very few pellucid, intellectually vigorous and wide-ranging treatments of the place of Byzantium in the middle ages. “Cultural relations between east and west in the twelfth century” in an edited volume²¹ is one such, which found me the topic of my PhD; “The late Byzantine monastery in town and countryside” another,²² and

18. R. Morris, “Bryer the anthropologist”, *Eat, Drink and be Merry*, pp. 12-13. The result may be read in *The Blackwells Dictionary of Historians*, ed. J. Cannon, Oxford 1988: He wrote on Baynes, Diehl, Gregoire, Grote, Ostrogorsky, and Runciman.

19. “James Cochran Stevenson Runciman, 1903-2000”, *PBA* 120 (2003), pp. 365-381 but also “Sir Steven Runciman: The Spider, the Owl and the Historian”, *History Today* 51 (2001), pp. 4-5; “The Bard of Byzantium”, *Cornucopia* 22 (2000-2001), pp. 37-38; “Dimitri Obolensky”, *The Independent* 31 December 2001; “Cruise Control: Runcie at Sea with Swan”, *Runcie: On Reflection. An Archbishop Remembered*, ed. S. Platten, London 2002, pp. 116-124.

20. “R. M. Dawkins, F. W. Hasluck and the crypto-Christians”, *Scholars, Travels, Archives*, ed. M. Llewellyn-Smith – P. Kitromilides, Athens 2007, pp. 59-66.

21. “Cultural Relations between East and West in the Twelfth Century”, *Relations Between East and West in the Middle Ages*, ed. D. Baker, Edinburgh 1973.

22. “The Late Byzantine Monastery in Town and Countryside”, *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. D. Baker [= *Studies in Church History* 16, Oxford 1979], pp. 219-241.

his “Byzantium and the Roman Orthodox world, 1395-1492” picked this strain up again.²³ But there was a brief moment when he was writing these coruscating intellectual pieces alongside the more place-bound Pontic pieces; “Cultural relations” appeared in the same year 1973 as “The Fate of George Komnenos, Ruler of Trebizond”²⁴ in which I seem to remember whether George was eaten not beaten was confused by a proof-reader. Bryer was an intellectual historian who had learned a great deal from his undergraduate tutor R. W. Southern for whom he had worked hard to invent a Byzantine chronicler in an essay (undetected), and for whom he wrote a Festschrift article on real historians.²⁵ He was very happy when the Gibbon bicentenary celebrations came around in 1996, and contributed a perceptive piece on the late empire to a volume on Gibbon and empire.²⁶

Sometimes his interests never made it into print. He was for instance very interested in ceremony and would have been very much at home now with the minor industry in court cultures of recent years. He gave a lecture in 1986 on processions in Constantinople which was not picked up until twenty years later by students of ritual and court cultures.²⁷ But the first signs of that interest were rather different. At the symposium of 1973 he decided to reconstruct three ceremonies of the *De cerimoniis* of Constantine Porphyrogenetos complete with music and acclamations;

23. “Byzantium and the Roman Orthodox World, 1395-1492”, *The New Cambridge Medieval History* 7, ed. C. Allmand, Cambridge 1998, pp. 771-795.

24. “The Fate of George Komnenos, Ruler of Trebizond (1266-1280)”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 66 (1973), pp. 332-350.

25. “Greek Historians on the Turks: The Case of the First Byzantine-Ottoman Marriage”, *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, ed. R. H. C. Davis – J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Oxford 1981, pp. 471-493.

26. “Gibbon and the Later Byzantine Empires”, in: *Gibbon and Empire*, ed. R. McKitterick – R. Quinault, Cambridge 1996, pp. 101-116.

27. At the Twentieth Spring Symposium at Manchester in 1986. It was not published in *Church and People in Byzantium*, ed. R. Morris, Birmingham 1990, the symposium publication. Only in 2019 has Dumbarton Oaks organised a symposium on processions, but before then both of Bryer’s successors at Birmingham, Ruth Macrides and Leslie Brubaker, had published on court culture and processions.

they were the crowning of the empress, the acclamations for a newborn porphyrogenetos and the annual game of the 19 beds, recalling satirically the appearance of Gothic emissaries in Constantinople 400 years previously. Not deterred by the enormous effort, the next year he reconstructed Greek fire with the help of a physicist friend. He was a great pioneer of experimental history.

He loved archives, and kept immaculate minute books for the Buckland Society and for the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies. His childhood Applemore museum has survived only in its meticulous catalogue. Famously he collected the documentation of the 1968 Birmingham sit-in: while professorial colleagues were threatening students, Bryer was in the Great Hall finding flyers which he then deposited at the University Library. Recently his own archives have been accepted by that same University Library.

He was always editing volumes, from the BBC lectures he did with Philip Whitting (which I heard on the radio as a second-year student) to the symposium volumes on Iconoclasm, the Black Sea, *Manzikert to Lepanto*, *The Sweet Land of Cyprus*, and Mount Athos,²⁸ though he was initially unenthusiastic about creating a regular symposium series. He had strong views on indexing and insisted on our doing it by hand with index cards and shoe boxes.

In all this his sheer ability to write helped a great deal. He became University Orator and researched every honorand meticulously, but he could write psogos as well as encomium – here he is on the grand entrance of an academic VIP into the staff bar in Birmingham, who was accompanied by “metronomes, protochancellors, triple-liners, diet-lager bearers and understrappers”²⁹ – and this biting quality makes his letters a prime source for British academic life of the second half of the twentieth century. Both orations and letters (how Byzantine!) should be collected.

28. *The Christian East*, London, 1972; *Iconoclasm*, ed. A. Bryer – J. Herrin, Birmingham 1977; *The Byzantine World and the Turks 1071-1571*, ed. A. Bryer – M. Ursinus, *Byzantinische Forschungen* 16 (1991); *The Sweet Land of Cyprus*, ed. A. A. M. Bryer – G. S. Georghallides, Birmingham-Nicosia 1993; *Mount Athos and Byzantine Monasticism*, ed. A. Bryer – M. Cunningham [= *SPBS* 4, Aldershot 1996].

29. Morris, “Bryer the Anthropologist”, p. 12.

The grand plan of the post-thesis years was to finish the big book on Trebizond and move on to another big book on Cyprus, but he never quite got there. What he did write was elegant, witty, full of ideas, which chased each other around the page. His early articles for *The Guardian* and *The Times*, just like the much later *Cornucopia* pieces on Tamara Talbot Rice and others are jewels.³⁰ He was a stylist with deeply embedded scholarly practices and a journalist's instincts. In person, a brilliant lecturer on his day, his enthusiasm was overwhelming, like standing in a force 10 gale. Robin Milner-Gulland tells the story that he was lecturing in Hagia Sophia Trebizond when Sir Mortimer Wheeler walked in and engaged him on the spot to lecture on Swan's cruises (which he did for forty years). He handled multiple audiences with ease: his earliest articles were in *Sailing Time* and *History Today*,³¹ but schoolchildren at Open Days, a radio audience, engineers in an interfaculty course which out-enrolled "Sex and Society", passengers on Swan's Cruises, The Buckland dining club eating octopus ice-cream off his reconstructed Byzantine dinner service, all were treated to the depth of his learning and the clarity of his communication. And in the university, he taught inspirationally, supervised not technically but omnisciently an astoundingly wide range of topics. And all this while founding all the British national Byzantine institutions: The *Bulletin of British Byzantine Studies*, of which he was the first editor, the Society for Promotion of Byzantine Studies, founded in 1983, the journal *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* (1975-), the annual spring symposium, which has just celebrated its half-century, and its publications series, begun under his chairmanship in 1992. He, more than any of his illustrious predecessors or his contemporaries in the "great generation",³² established Byzantine Studies in the UK academy as a subject in its own right, and its greatest

30. E.g. the piece in *The Guardian on Mt Athos*, 22 January 1959, the series in *The Times* from Athens 1961-1962, and "Santa Sophia", *Cornucopia* 1 (1992), pp. 64-65; "Tamara and David Talbot Rice", *Cornucopia* 4 (1993), pp. 22-27.

31. "The Breton Bisquine", *Sailing Time* 4 (1956), pp. 28-29; "Trebizond", *History Today* 10 (1960), pp. 125-135.

32. M. Mullett, "Byzantine Scholarship: Twelfth-Century Constantinople, Twentieth-Century Britain", *A Century of British Medieval Studies*, ed. A. Dey-ermond, Oxford 2007, pp. 201-234 at 202.

achievement was his Centre of Byzantine Studies (later Centre of Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies) at Birmingham. His was a wider vision of scholarship than most, and he always told the very best stories.³³

33. Stories about Bryer are collected in *Bryeriana; Anthony Applemore Mornington Bryer Remembered*, ed. M. Mullett – R. Macrides – L. James, Brighton 2017.



Anthony Bryer with Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain
(c. 1990)