

Fergus Millar FBA FAHA

1935-2019



Australian Academy of the Humanities archives

Professor Sir Fergus Millar FBA FAHA, Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford (1984-2002), was a titan in the study of the Ancient World. As a Roman historian his standing among all time greats like Theodore Mommsen, Sir Ronald Syme, Arnaldo Momigliano and A.H.M. (Hugo) Jones is unchallenged. He also had strong connections through friends and family with Australia, making him an ideal choice as the first Corresponding Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Fergus Graham Burtholme Millar was born in Edinburgh on 5th July 1935 and remained throughout his life a proud Scotsman and one who would have loved to prove his prowess on Murrayfield for his beloved national rugby team. He went to the prestigious Edinburgh Academy but unforeseen changes in family circumstances meant that he had to complete his schooling at Loretto School. In both these 'Dùn Èideann' institutions Fergus excelled in Classics and a scholarship at Trinity College to read Literae Humaniores at Oxford came as no surprise. Like so many linguistically gifted young persons of the Cold War generation, he did his National Service before university and acquired considerable proficiency in Russian.

After graduation in 1958, Fergus won a Prize Fellowship at All Souls College Oxford where he remained until 1964. Instead of launching into an academic career on the basis of this prestigious fellowship, he studied for a Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil) degree in Ancient History under the tutelage of Sir Ronald Syme, FBA OM (Camden Professor 1944-70). He would later become the first Camden Professor to have an earned doctorate. For his dissertation he undertook a study of the Roman senatorial historian Cassius Dio. Like Syme, Fergus endeavoured to understand Cassius Dio as a politician as well as a man of letters of his time as Syme had done so brilliantly with Tacitus. Although some books of Tacitus's *Annals* have not survived, the loss-rate of the

Roman History of Dio is far greater and this poses huge challenges to any historiographical assessment of his work. Unlike the lost books of *Annals* which are lost to us for good, the lost books of Dio are partially preserved in a later summary by Xiphilinus and in the *Roman History* of the Byzantine chronicler Zonaras. Fergus's dissertation, published as his first book (*A Study of Cassius Dio*, 1964), won instant acclaim. Although much of the work is focused on the Augustan period for which Dio is one of our main sources, it also deals authoritatively with Dio as a senatorial historian of the Severan Era, then a little studied period of Roman History at Oxford. Later in life when Fergus (and Susanna) visited Sydney in 1997, he was amazed and bemused to see that Macquarie University Library had (and still has) on its open shelves more than ten copies of his book on Dio in its original OUP format. More than thirty years had passed since its publication and yet the book remained for many Australian undergraduates unsurpassed as a model contribution to Roman historiography.

In the same year as Fergus published his first book he was appointed to a much sought after Tutorial Fellowship in Ancient History at The Queen's College – a post he would hold with distinction until 1976. His many outstanding students include Professor Alan Bowman FBA who would succeed him as Camden Professor. At my first meeting with him at The Queen's College in 1973, we had lunch at the High Table and he pointed to an undergraduate whom he told me, prophetically as it eventuated, to watch out for in Roman History. The said person was the late Simon Price who would make a significant contribution to the study of Roman religions in a tragically short academic career. As I had taken the undergraduate special subject on the Severan Emperors under the tutelage of John Crook FBA and Chris Whittaker at Cambridge and had specialized on the subject of emperor as legislator, Fergus and I had a

great deal of research interest in common. Although the distinguished Augustine scholar, Peter R. L. Brown FBA, then at All Souls College, would eventually become the official supervisor for my Oxford DPhil, Fergus took great personal interest in my research on the Roman Near East as well as on the history of Manichaeism because his own research interest was already steadily moving eastwards.

In 1959 Fergus married Susanna Friedmann, a clinical and experimental psychologist and later Fellow of St. Hugh's College Oxford, who was the daughter of a former cantor of the main Synagogue in Berlin before the Second World War. The marriage was a blissfully happy one and the present author well remembers the pride Fergus took in their three children's achievements at school. He would always finish his research at the then Ashmolean Library in time to return home to be around to discuss their school work even though they would go on to distinguished careers in the sciences and not in the Classics. At their home in North Oxford, Fergus and Susanna were legendary in their hospitality for friends and students. Though not one of his official research students, I was nevertheless invited to their home for Hogmanay, which for me as someone from the Far East, was a complete eye-opener.

Fergus's second book, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours* (1967), is a useful survey history of the Roman Empire from AD14 to 284 to which he contributed the central chapters on government and administration. His chapters are supplemented by four others by specialists on the Parthians and Sasanians, Dacians, Scytho-Sarmatians and Germans. The book remained for many years as one of the most recommendable introductions to the history of the Roman Empire, especially to students interested in the Empire as a global phenomenon and not just as another period of Roman history.

His marriage to Susanna directly led to a serious academic interest in history of the Jews in the Roman Empire and this was reflected in his next major project – a complete revision of the English version of the monumental German work of Emil Schürer (*Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*) first published in 1886 and translated into English (1885-91). This work he undertook with the distinguished Jewish historian Professor Geza Vermes FBA and assisted by a cohort of specialists including Geza's eventual successor in the Chair of Jewish Studies at Oxford, Professor Martin Goodman FBA. The work took more than a decade to complete and the four volumes of *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (1973-87) containing innumerable added passages and appendices became a major landmark in the study of the subject. Fergus demonstrated the skills of Schürer foremost as a historian of the Roman Empire and secondly of the history of the Jews who lived under Roman rule. For his new research focus Fergus acquired a good working knowledge of the main Semitic languages with the exception of Arabic and after his retirement he would prove to be an indefatigable student of the Syriac language. He was the only Roman Historian of note I have met who knew that the oldest dated Syriac manuscript (now in the British Library Add 12150) contains the *Adversus Manichaeos* of Titus of Bostra – a polemical work translated from Greek into Syriac (c. 380 CE) which remains one of most extraordinary feats of translation from Greek into a Semitic language.

Sir Ronald Syme retired from the Camden Chair at Oxford in 1970 and Fergus would have appeared to many as Syme's obvious successor, but the Electors chose Peter Brunt FBA, eighteen years Fergus's senior. Though a highly innovative social and economic historian, Brunt never showed the same breadth of interest Fergus had in the Roman

Empire, especially in the history of the provinces other than those in Italy. However, Fergus's reputation was already so high that he was the automatic choice to succeed Arnaldo Momigliano KBE FBA (1908-87) in the Chair of Ancient History at University College London in 1975. Fergus quickly adapted to the vibrant research culture of London and he moved Momigliano's regular Roman History seminar from the Warburg Institute back to the Institute of Classical Studies where it was formerly held in the 1970s under the guidance of Prof. Keith Hopkins (FBA), then at Brunel University. The seminars became a national focus on research in Roman history and Fergus's enthusiasm for new ideas and his tolerance of scholarly disagreements made him the ideal chairperson. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1976.

Since 1975 Fergus had been editor of the *Journal of Roman Studies* to which he had contributed regularly articles on the Roman Emperor and on aspects of the Roman East. The first of these series of articles led to the longest book (636pp.) he would publish in his lifetime. *The Emperor in the Roman World 31 BC – AD 337*, which appeared shortly after he had taken up his Chair in London, is an unapologetic top-down view of the Roman imperial system. Imperial lives have long been the mainstay of books by Anglophone Roman historians of the Empire and we have a surfeit of excellent biographies in English on Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, Constantine and Justinian. With the outstanding exception of John Crook's slim volume *Consilium Principis* (1955), there are few studies of 'The Emperor at Work' in English. Fergus's new tome, was therefore the first full-length study of the political and administrative role of the Emperor against a rapidly evolving political scene making full use of his vast and authoritative knowledge of literary (including Christian), legal and epigraphic material.

Brunt retired early from the Camden Chair in 1982 at the age of 65 for health reasons and Fergus was by then showing signs of strain from his regular commuting to London, 'starting out' during term time at 'an unearthly hour of the morning — like six. He also often drove back quite late' as one of his UCL colleagues well remembers. Although there were a number of strong candidates for the Camden Chair, the result of the election for Brunt's successor was not in doubt and Fergus was in due course appointed to the Camden Professorship of Ancient History at Oxford and to a Fellowship at Brasenose College — a college to which the Chair is customarily tied.

Since his personal research had long been conducted on a seat nearest to the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* at the Ashmolean (now the Sackler) Library, the move back to Oxford meant business as usual. Following a series of well-researched articles and of visits to Israel, Jordan and Syria, came his next landmark volume. *The Roman Near East 31 BC – AD 337* (1993) was based on the Carl Newell Jackson Lectures he delivered at Harvard University in 1987. The book is another first in that no other holder of an Ancient History Chair at Oxford or Cambridge had till then written a substantial monograph on the impact of Roman rule on the Semitic Near East (excluding Egypt). Fergus was always keen to remind his readers and students that the Near East had come under Greek influence for more than half a millennium before Rome became fully established politically in Near Eastern regions such as Syria, N. Mesopotamia and Palestine. The dominance of Greek language and culture over the entire area could not therefore be under-estimated. Throughout the work, Fergus shows a total mastery of the literary and epigraphic evidence both in Classical and in a variety of Semitic languages.

The study of the Roman Near East had long been dominated by Francophone scholars like Cantineau, Seyrig and Sartre because of two centuries of political involvement of France in Syria and Lebanon. The comprehensive nature of the new work and the status of its author gave huge respectability to a burgeoning new area of research Roman provincial history and frontier studies among Anglophone scholars. However, not all scholars, especially archaeologists and art historians, would agree with Fergus's Hellenic world-view. Warwick Ball, the prominent Australian archaeologist with personal familiarity of a great many sites in the Roman East, wrote an equally lengthy and prize-winning work *Rome in the East* (2000) as a riposte to *The Roman Near East*, arguing that Hellenization and Romanization in a region which had boasted cultures far more ancient than those of Greece and Rome was a veneer which the Arab Conquest would promptly remove. The scholarly world now benefits from not one but two outstanding works on the subject, albeit written from very different standpoints. Fergus's final major book before retirement, *The Crowd in the Late Republic* (1998) challenges the view that Republican government was dominated by the Senate and explores the consequences of a political system in which offices could still be gained through election by the democratic process. The book proves without doubt Fergus's mastery of all major periods of Roman history and that he would not be remembered purely as a historian of the Empire.

After retiring from the Camden Chair in 2002, Fergus moved his office to the Oriental Institute around the corner from the Sackler Library and frequently met up with his friends and colleagues in the Institute's well-used tea-room. Aply assisted by Priscilla Lange, the last two decades of his life saw him producing a stream of major articles, monographs and collected essays. He played a full part in the academic life of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew

and Jewish Studies as well as accepting visiting fellowships and delivering distinguished lectures at home and overseas. *A Greek Roman Empire – Power and Belief under Theodosius II (408-450)* (2006) stems from his Sather Lectures which he delivered in the first year of his retirement, and *Religion, Language and Community in the Roman Near East* (2013) was based on his Schweich Lectures to the British Academy in 2010 – works equally valued by specialists and Roman historians in general. In the same year he was finally knighted, much to the relief of his many friends and admirers.

Prior to his retirement in 1997, Fergus and Susanna made a joint academic visit to Australia and spent sometime at the Australian National University in Canberra. The visit was a great success for both Fergus and Susanna. With scholars active in research on the Roman Near East in at least four cities in Australia (Canberra, Perth, Melbourne and Sydney), Fergus was very happy to be among research colleagues and friends. A conference was held in his honour at the Humanities Research Centre Canberra (10-12th November) attended by a large number of Fellows of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The proceedings (*Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean in Antiquity*) edited by Professor Graeme Clarke AO FAHA, were published as a special volume of *Mediterranean Archaeology* (Vo. 11, 1998). It was also about this time that friends of Fergus in the UK and Australia who specialise in the history and archaeology of the Roman Near East decided to publish a volume of essays in his honour. Due to problems of editorship and the pressing needs of the Research Assessment Exercise (UK) – one of the few innovations at which Fergus regularly vented his ire – the volume had to be divided into two with the first half consisting of UK contributors appearing in 2007 in a new Australian monograph series on the *Ancient World* (R. Alston and S.N.C. Lieu (eds), *Aspects of the*

Roman East I – Papers in Honour of Professor Fergus Millar FBA, Studia Antiqua Australiensia 3, Turnhout, 2007). The second volume containing papers by scholars based in Australia, was published after Fergus had received his knighthood (S.N.C. Lieu and P. McKechnie (eds), *Aspects of the Roman East II – Papers in Honour of Professor Sir Fergus Millar FBA*, Antiqua Australiensia 7, Turnhout, 2016).

Besides having a daughter-in-law from Australia, Fergus has one other family connection with Australia little known to his friends. He was the son of a ‘Gallipolitan’ because his father, J.S.L. Millar, along with many Scottish volunteers from the Lowlands, landed in Suvla Bay in August 1915 and fought on the left flank of the ANZACS through to the end of the Gallipoli campaign. Fergus was delighted to learn that I was researching for a series of studies on Roman and Byzantine (Thracian) Chersonese (Gallipoli Peninsula) and we had some interesting conversations on the topic, both ancient and modern. I was able to direct him to one publication which gives a fuller than usual account of the exploits of the 52nd (Lowland) Division at Gallipoli using the diary of at least one Scottish officer by the name of ‘J. Millar’ which intrigued him greatly.

As a scholar and as a person Fergus was completely free of rancour and rarely if ever expressed negative views of other scholars in conversation or in writing. He was a humanist par excellence and stood for everything that is positive and good in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. He was generous to a fault in supporting friends and colleagues with his time, his knowledge and his productivity. Two of his final publications are contributions to Festschriften of Fellows of our Academy: ‘Imperial letters in Latin from the time of Cyprian’ in E. Minchin and H. Jackson (eds.), *Text and Material World – Essays in Honour of Graeme Clarke* (2017) 267-80 and ‘Historical Fiction in Syriac and the clash of religions and

cultures in the Late Antique Near East' in P. Edwell et al. (eds), *Byzantium to China, Religion, History and Culture on the Silk Roads – Studies in Honour of Samuel N.C. Lieu at Seventy* (to appear 2021).

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