

## The Hon. Sir Steven Runciman, C.H., Litt.D., LL.D., F.B.A. (1903-2000)

Steven Runciman first saw the skyline of Istanbul, marching out of the mist from the gasworks at Yedikule to the minarets of Ayasofya, from the deck of his grandfather's three-masted schooner, the *Sunbeam* (itself a historic yacht) in April 1924. For a twenty-year-old Cambridge undergraduate, it was the only way to arrive. He never forgot the scene. True, he missed meeting the last caliph (for they had inconsiderately deposed the sultan's heir a few weeks before), but he complained rarely, and camels still swayed over the Galata Bridge, there were rather fashionable veils on the Grand'Rue de Pera, and families such as the Whittalls flourished all over the place. Outside the then still unencumbered Theodosian Walls, a gypsy told him that he would have illnesses but would 'survive to a ripe old age'. The fortune-teller was right.

A visit in March 1928 was a come-down. Cloth caps had replaced the fez, as once the fez had replaced the turban: Runciman was all for Union, but was sometimes less sure of expressions of Progress. Istanbul was cold and drab, uncertain of its fortune in the new Turkey. But Runciman was already (as he told Eleftherios Venizelos, who happened to be on the boat) a proclaimed Byzantinist.

In the summer of 1937 he 'did' Turkey properly. He was now an established Byzantinist, with books behind him that are still classics — *Romanus Lecapenus* (1929), on the tenth-century emperor, and *The first Bulgarian Empire* (1930). His instincts for place and people were acute. In Istanbul he clambered up ladders in St Sophia with Thomas Whittemore and down trenches in the Great Palace with Professor JH Baxter — both rather dodgy pursuits. He started following the progress of the First Crusade across Anatolia on the ground, later exploring the tactics of 1097 at Dorylaion (Eskişehir). On the Zigana Pass, above Trabzon, he was overtaken by a military detachment sweltering up the mountain, which gave him an indelible idea of the smell, as well as the sight, of an army on the march: 'The aroma that they left behind somewhat ruined our picnic.'

Back in Istanbul, Runciman met President Atatürk in the Dolmabahçe Palace, where the clocks were to stop when he died on November 10, 1938. 'He was stocky and upright, but obviously sick, with a complexion that was pale olive-green. His eyes, however, were unforgettable. They were steely blue in colour, and they seemed

to pierce right through you. He was very gracious. My father [Viscount Runciman] had recently arranged a trade treaty with Turkey, and Atatürk spoke of it with appreciation. When I told him that I was a Byzantinist he expressed his approval...'

A consequence was that, in March 1942, President İsmet İnönü summoned Dr Runciman to be Professor of Byzantine Art and History at Istanbul University. Steven then happened to be a member of the Government Information Service of Palestine, living in the House by Herod's Gate in Jerusalem, where I first found him. He recalled that, when I was summoned to display my fluent Arabic, learned by artless rote from the kitchen boy, the appalled Miss Freya Stark adjusted her hair-piece as she explained what this child was telling her to do until the thirteenth generation. I confess I have no recollection of this event — though I like Runciman's.

Steven's recollection was impeccable. His repertoire of stories became canonical. True, the matter of Byzantine, Ottoman and any court history is good gossip — who met whom and what the consequence was. But do not be deceived. His tales were an illustration of, rather than a diversion from, what he really did. Professor Runciman was a historian who bestrode the Bosphorus before there were bridges between the Byzantine and Ottoman empires.

He served over three years in Istanbul, from 1942 to 1945, when the university examinations were still oral. Here he lived mostly in old Bebek and lectured and examined with an interpreter. (In fact his Turkish was to be quite good enough to converse with Rudolf Nureyev, the dancer from the steppes of Central Asia, and his Arabic was good enough for him to be offered — along with Abba Eban — the assistant directorship of the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies in Lebanon.) Yet at Cambridge his only supervisor had been JB Bury, who, on a walk round the Backs, was satisfied that Runciman's Bulgarian came up to scratch (Classics were assumed).

Istanbul was the only university in which Runciman held a chair. He necessarily had to write his lectures, which he took more seriously than he admitted — as anyone knows who invited him over the next half century to speak to an audience, however modest, from Lockerbie to Los Angeles. Are there survivors among

his pupils in Istanbul? He was proud to have as a student a Gagauz, an original Turkish Christian from Dobrudja in Romania. But in Istanbul during the Second World War, it was assumed that Runciman was a spy — well, everyone else was.

True, the Italian embassy reported him as '*molto intelligente e molto pericoloso*', and in Ankara Runciman's shirt was laid out by 'Cicero', the British ambassador's personal valet, who doubled as a German spy. Indeed as late as the Ninth International Congress of Byzantine Studies at Salonica in 1953, Runciman found an agent in the queue after his lecture, asking for instructions. Yet, I must say that if Runciman had been a spy, he would have made a better story of it. Rather, he observed *moeurs*, in the spirit of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*.

His assistant at the university was the wife of the *Mevlevi Çelebi Efendi*, through whom he became an honorary dervish (a story too long for us here). Other friends were Osman Okyar (the economist), Princess Marthe Bibesco (who did *not* dance with Proust), the papal legate Monsignor Roncalli (Pope John XXIII from 1958 to 1963) and, soon after, Patriarch Athenagoras (1948-72).

This was a truly catholic circle, with exotic titles all round. But of all his own honours, I believe that Sir Steven treasured most the honorary office to which the great Patriarch Athenagoras elevated him in 1969: that of Grand Orator of the Great Church of Constantinople. This was serious, and arose from Runciman's *The Great Church in Captivity* (1968), a moving and then unfashionable study of the Orthodox Church as an integral component of the Ottoman Empire.

Runciman never lost his affection for Istanbul, where, with Turkish friends, he last returned to his favourite mosque, Sinan's Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, in 1986. But he chose to write his most impressive and best-loved work, *A History of the Crusades* in three volumes, on the island of Eigg, which is one of the Small Isles of the Inner Hebrides of Scotland. His father had bought the then depressed island in 1926, and in retrospect the crofters of Eigg, who do not touch caps, now regard the benevolent reign of the Runciman dynasty until 1966 as a golden age.

It was not a convenient place to write the last history of the Crusades to be attempted on such a scale by a single hand. Yet accounts of this shy but gregarious scholar's working methods may be compared with those of Gibbon. At the pier of Eigg, sheep were exchanged for consignments of books from the London Library for the postman to deliver. An islander reports that 'He arrived with a suitcase full of books and another full of groceries, and did his own cooking and shopping, walking to the shop with his basket under his arm. He even picked up a few words of Gaelic which he tried on the postman, and never forgot to throw a party for the island children every Easter... His favourite form of relaxation from writing was to play his Bechstein grand piano, and in the summer he would invite his friends to share the beauty of the island. They included diplomats, members of the Royal Family and musicians such as the famous Yehudi Menuhin, whom he took to the islanders' dances — "a handy man for the ceilidh".'

In 1966, Steven Runciman moved from Eigg to a tower on the Scottish Borders near Lockerbie, where he preserved the *nargile* presented to him by Çelebi Efendi (though he actually preferred Winterman's Café Crème cigarillos), along with tales of Old Turkey — though, always alert to something fresh, he relished *Ararat*, his great-nephew's poem on Ağrı Dağı published in the last issue of *Cornucopia*.

As the gypsy predicted, he died at a ripe old age. He was buried with the simple rites of the Church of Scotland. For someone who gave so much pleasure to others, that is felicity.

*President of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara (1962-1975)*

*Vice-President of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara (1975-2000)*

*Sir Steven was an early member of the Institute and an active supporter of it for over fifty years, being first elected to the Council of Management in 1949.*

*This obituary, by Anthony Bryer, is an appreciation of his Turkish interests and originally appeared in Cornucopia 22 (2001).*