

William St.Clair

At times, William St.Clair seemed to have lived more than one life. Even in our supposedly 'globalised' age, it came as a revelation to many of his fellow campaigners for the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, to learn that he was also an acclaimed literary and historical authority on the Romantic Era - to the point where, on the strength of this, he had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy back in 1992. The same may have been partly true in reverse; and to both parties, it was surprising to find that he had served for years as a senior civil servant in the Treasury, whose research was at first a side-line. His later academic appointments are too numerous to list in detail here, but they covered Trinity College, Cambridge, All Souls at Oxford, the School of Advanced Study in London, Harvard and the Huntington Library in California.

With such a record, William must have seemed a 'safe' figure to the less progressive wing of the British Establishment (from which the Trustees of the British Museum were then often drawn): a scholarly, objective authority who could be relied on not to upset apple-carts. It must have come as a nasty shock to them when in 1998, to the third edition of his now thirty-year-old book *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, he now added the explosive Chapter 24, entitled 'The Damage is Obvious and Cannot be Exaggerated' - a quotation from the secret internal Board of Enquiry, set up by the Trustees in 1938 to investigate reports that over-zealous cleaning of the Marbles had seriously damaged them. What William had uncovered (but only after repeated requests under the Thirty Year Rule of the Public Record Act) was the full record of that near-forgotten scandal. He ended his chapter with an appeal for an honest, international inquiry into the events of 1938-39.

It is a reflection of his standing and influence that a version of such an inquiry was indeed set up within a year or so, but by the Museum itself, at the (creditable) instigation of its then Director, Robert Anderson. Attending this violently controversial event myself, I could hardly believe my ears when we heard one of the Museum's own Deputy Keepers, the late Ian Jenkins, say that 'the cleaning [of 1938] was a scandal, and its cover-up was another scandal'. It was William's victory that such words could now be openly uttered.

There are collections of plaster casts of the Parthenon Marbles all over Britain, and a few of them contain casts originally commissioned by Elgin himself, before any further effects of deterioration or damage could occur. One small such set was held by the University of Edinburgh, where I was then a Lecturer, and in the early 1960s I showed these to William. It was absolutely characteristic of his generosity and long memory that, when he published his third edition in 1998, he sent me - otherwise still a stranger - a

signed copy in gratitude. After that, we quickly became friends; when I invited him to talk in Cambridge, it was a tribute of a different kind that the then Keeper of Greek and Roman, Dyfri Williams, travelled up from London especially to challenge him.

Anthony Snodgrass