

**GEORGE HILL**  
(1867-1948)

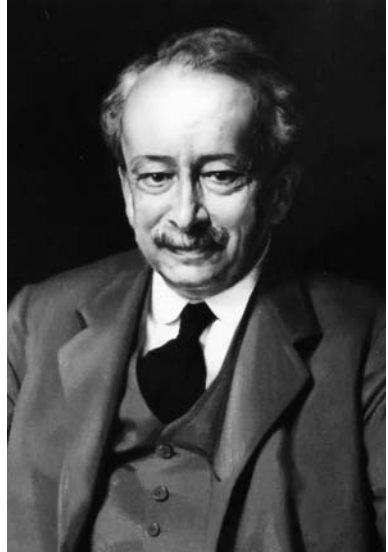
“As I look back on my eighty years, I think I may say that my time has not been altogether wasted; but I realise that my work has never quite been in the first class.”

Writing shortly before his death, Hill took a modest view of his own achievements. Yet there have been few, if any, other figures who have had such an effect on numismatics during the 20th century.

George Francis Hill was born 22 December 1867 in Bengal, the son of a missionary and the youngest of five children. He returned to Britain at the age of four, and went to school in London. He was educated at University College (where he “was introduced to the wonders of Greek sculpture in the British Museum”) and at Merton College, Oxford – as his family was not rich, he was able to take up his place at Oxford only because he was offered a scholarship. There he met Percy Gardner, and took his first steps in numismatics.

He failed to get a fellowship at Oxford, and at Gardner’s suggestion applied for a vacancy in the British Museum. He was successful; he himself says that he was recommended to the museum partly for his abilities at philosophy, and that this drew the response, “we don’t want any philosophers here” (!), but his references do not mention this. Gardner, for example, recommended him because “he has considerable knowledge of the works of art both of antiquity and the Renaissance, and has a decided taste for and appreciation of what is excellent in art of various ages.” In April 1893 he began work in the Department of Coins and Medals on the series of catalogues of Greek coins.

“From that time I steadily produced volume after volume of the Greek catalogue.” During his career at the Museum he was indeed responsible for as many as six volumes: *Lycia, Pamphylia, and Pisidia* (1897), *Lycaonia, Isauria, and Cilicia* (1900), *Cyprus* (1904), *Phoenicia* (1910), *Palestine* (1914), and *Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Persia* (1922). As well as showing his industry, the publication of these volumes showed his extraordinary ability. The series developed as he worked on it, with each new volume containing more illustrations, more comparative material and



Portrait of Sir George Hill by James Gunn (British Museum collection)

a more complete study of the subjects it covered. Each of his volumes became a monograph in its own right. Moreover, nearly all of them led him to deal with difficult or imperfectly understood scripts and languages, such as Lycian, Cypriot, Aramaic, Phoenician and Hebrew. His ability to deal with difficult scripts led him to his interest in the other end of the classical world (“a sudden somersault”, as it was later called), the pre-Roman coinage of Spain with Iberian script, and he published two books dealing with on Spanish coins, *The Coins of Narbonensis with Iberian Inscriptions* (1930) and *Notes on the Ancient Coinage of Hispania Citerior* (1931).

His work on Greek coinage extended further. A mass of articles was also published, including a long and regular series of annual bulletins on new acquisitions made by the Museum. It is less well known that he spent three years as the principal editor of the famous second edition of *Historia Numorum* (1911). *HN*<sup>2</sup> is still in widespread use today, and this is a characteristic of his work, that it is still extensively consulted and used, even though some of it was published more than a hundred years ago. Durability of this nature is indeed the mark of a great scholar.

He also published books of a more general numismatic nature. His *Handbook of Greek and Roman Coins* (1899), *Coins of Ancient Sicily* (1903), *Historical Greek Coins* (1906) and *Historical Roman Coins* (1909) were regarded by him as “of small importance”, “useful for educational purposes” – “but they were not pot-boilers”. Again some of them continued in use until relatively recently, as did the two reference works he compiled for students of Greek history: *Sources for Greek History* (1897; 2nd ed., 1907) and *A Manual of Greek Historical Inscriptions* (1901, with E.L. Hicks) were used by two generations of undergraduates and others studying the history of classical Greece.

Although his work seems to us to have been of a profoundly historical nature, it is interesting that he was strongly drawn to the aesthetic side of coinage. In this respect he shared the outlook of his generation towards the remains of the classical world, and in his own case he was probably influenced by his early interest in Greek sculpture and by his contacts with Percy Gardner. In 1927, he published the two volumes *L'Art dans les monnaies grecques* and *Select Greek Coins: a Series of Enlargements Illustrated and Described*; and in 1932 he revised the selection of interesting and beautiful Greek coins in *A Guide to the Principal Coins of the Greeks*. As well as the book, the coins were kept in a separate cabinet where they were available for admiration for two generations of visitors to the Museum. In a similar vein he wrote several guides for Museum visitors.

Hill could range over a wide series of subjects. As well as his studies on Greek coins, he made important contributions to Roman and Iron Age numismatics, heraldry and even Italian Renaissance drawings. But his other main area of achievement was in the field of medals, even though he though he regarded this as only a paragon to his principal work, on Greek coins. Yet here too his output was also prolific and lasting. His first modest article was published in 1896, and it was followed by

a long series of notes in the *Burlington Magazine*, a book on *Pisanello* (1905), *Medals of the Renaissance* (1920), *The Gustave Dreyfus Collection* (1931) and the enormous *Corpus of Italian Medals before Benvenuto Cellini* in two folio volumes, published in 1930. This is still the principal work of reference for the subject.

He had a keen appreciation of the importance of technical considerations as a valuable tool in aiding our understanding. He facilitated the study of weights by publishing a reliable guide between the old British system of grains and the continental system of grams, and his own works use both systems. He published on the frequency table (*NC* 1924), and his paper on “Ancient Methods of Coining”, in *NC* 1922 remains a classic study. It was probably also this interest that led him to publish the two volumes on *Becker the Counterfeiter* (1924, 1925). Less well-known is the way he appreciated the importance of die axis as a methodological tool, and it was he who introduced “those little arrows” into the British Museum Catalogue, and from there their use has grown to become a standard part of numismatic description.

He became interested in the English law of Treasure Trove. His book on the subject, *Treasure Trove in Law and Practice* (1936) remains the best account of the subject today, and includes a remarkable review of the similar arrangements in other European countries. But his interest also had practical results. It was during his career that the Treasure Trove law began to be used systematically as a means of protecting antiquities, a practice which continued until the recent Treasure Act of 1996. The new Act does not represent a radical departure, and in an important respect institutionalises one of the changes Hill was able to introduce. For many years he waged a battle with the British government to ensure that finders of Treasure Trove should have a full reward. There had previously been a deduction of 20% “for administrative costs”, and the principle of the “full reward” is still regarded as one of the key features of the new system. As a result of his involvement in the law, Hill also became involved in the redrafting of antiquities’ laws for Iraq and Palestine, and later for Cyprus, where the new law was eventually enacted in 1935.

He was appointed Keeper of Coins and Medals in 1912, and during the First World War he did not join the forces, but remained at the Museum. Almost single-handed he was responsible for the packing of 500 cabinets and for their removal to the safety of a neighbouring underground tunnel – only one medal was lost. His family were, however, involved in the fighting, and, like many Englishmen of his day, the war had a profound effect on him. In the commentary he provided on contemporary German medals, *The Commemorative Medal in the Service of Germany* (French version: *Les Médailles commémoratives comme instruments de propagande allemande*; both published in London, 1917), Hill’s distaste becomes clear. “But never has this instrument [the medal as a vehicle for political manifesto] been employed with so much zest, or with so frank an appeal to the lower passions to which war must always give rein, as it has in Germany during the present conflict.”

And in describing one particular group of medals, he concludes, “it is to be hoped ... that some museums devoted to the ethnology of primitive races will preserve specimens.” Overall, the pamphlet is a thinly veiled denigration of what Hill regarded as the shallowness of German outlook and aesthetic sensibility.

*Et dormitat Homerus.* But mistakes were rare. The only memorable one concerned the very rare decadrachm of Athens that he purchased for the Museum in 1920 from “an Athenian in whose family it had long been a treasured possession, being worn on festal occasions on a chain by the ladies of the house”. The Museum paid £300 for this famous rarity, but Hill had been set up by one such lady of the family during a visit to Greece, and, despite noticing the inferior quality of the piece at the time of its acquisition, it was only some years later that he realised that it was a recent product of the forger Christodoulos.

On 1 January 1931, Hill – somewhat reluctantly – became Director of the Museum, the first archaeologist to hold the position, which had previously always been held by a librarian. His appointment led to the abandonment of his promised catalogue on the coinage of ancient Spain, but to greater things for the Museum. His Directorship was marked by two outstanding acquisitions: the *Codex Sinaiticus*, the earliest surviving text of the Bible, and the magnificent Eumorfopoulos collection of oriental antiquities. His career as Director lasted until his retirement in 1936, and was marked by an attempt to improve the appearance of the Museum. He introduced colour into the galleries and rejected the designs for the new Greek sculpture gallery, destined to hold the Elgin marbles. Outside he placed bay trees in tubs between the columns of the colonnade and had flowering almond trees planted in the forecourt. “I thought of those almond trees,” he once said, “when I was quite a young member of the staff, but no one would let me plant them then.”

We do not know a great deal of his personal life. He was short, and had a gentle voice and a charming smile (see illustration). He married his wife Mary in 1897, but she died in 1924 and they had no children. Nevertheless, or perhaps as a result, he loved children, and encouraged the young, for example publishing a book on *The Truth about Old King Cole* (1931) and buying work by the young sculptor Barbara Hepworth well before she was recognised. He records how important to him his friendships were, and the long list of names who contributed to his 80th birthday tribute indicates the large extent of his influence. *A Tribute* lists his extraordinary output of writing, 24 pages of bibliography, and the compilers added that “it takes no account of the vast amount of work Sir George has put into other people’s books, for he has always been ready to help, advise, and encourage others.” He was awarded many honours: a CB in 1929, a knighthood in 1932; honorary fellowships and doctorates at Oxford, London, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Manchester; medals of the Royal, American and French numismatic societies; a Fellow of the British Academy in 1917, and Vice-President of many learned societies. Curiously he had no Festschrift, though a volume of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* was dedicated to him.

It is, however, hard to judge what he was really like as a person; he is said to have had a sense of humour, but he clearly also held strong opinions, and these were not infrequently negative, such as his poor opinion of the Oxford University Press or some colleagues like R.S. Poole and H.A. Grueber (a “plodder”, in his view), or his hostile attitude to Germany.

He devoted his retirement to writing his *History of Cyprus*; the first volume was published in 1940, the fourth and last in 1951, after his death on 18 October 1948. Not long before his death, writing at the end of his life, he had been deeply pessimistic

“If I had the choice given me of living my life over again, with the knowledge of what I should have to go through, should I like it? I do not think so ... No, on the whole it would hardly seem worth while to go through it all again.”

It is hard to believe this of a man who had shown such energy and achieved so much in his life.

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