

EDITORIAL

It has been allotted to me to follow to the Editor's chair two truly towering figures in Shroud Studies. Their knowledge of the Shroud itself, their association with others in the field and their own primary research has amounted to a number of significant advances. Ian Wilson's works are almost invariably the first line of approach for anybody beginning an investigation into the Shroud, and his research into the Mandylion of Edessa has stimulated a mass of concomitant investigation, both for and against his hypothesis; and Mark Guscini's work on the Sudarium of Oviedo has opened up a whole new context for exploration, geographical, historical and cultural.

Besides these, my qualifications as an expert on the Shroud are so meagre as to be insignificant. A bit of kitchen science here, and a determination to read all the primary sources there, have given me information but not experience, a lot of knowledge, but not the intimate involvement of my predecessors.

But perhaps that's the point, so let me introduce myself. I have been Head of Science at a Catholic School for nearly forty years, and a member of the BSTS for most of that time. For me the 'Religion versus Science' debate has been far from academic, and I have often found myself having to defend (or explain) their essential synthesis in the face of extremists from both sides. My first introduction to the Shroud was by reading Barbet and Vignon, and my first investigations stimulated by an almost forgotten 1982 BBC documentary, "Shroud of Jesus: Fact or Fake."

Unlike my predecessors, whom I think are more or less committed to a pro-authenticity point of view, I myself currently incline more towards an accidental 14th century origin for the cloth now preserved in Turin. I say this somewhat tentatively, as I'm well aware that in some internet forums such a statement is tantamount to proclaiming oneself the Anti-Christ, and even the more moderate ones have commenters who

doubt that it is possible to be a good Christian, let alone a Catholic, and hold such a heretical opinion. While I doubt that the membership of the BSTS holds such extreme views, I do detect a slight sucking in of breath even as I type, and for this reason I'd like to take a little time to explain, not my specific views - that can come later - but what any scientific viewpoint on the Shroud really entails.

Importantly, 'scientific' should not be confused, as it often is, with 'judicial.' The Shroud is not being 'tried' and there is no need to come to a 'verdict' in spite of various book-titles claiming to do so (*Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*, by Joe Nickell, for example, or *Verdict on the Shroud*, by Kenneth Stevenson and Gary Haberman). No, the Shroud is still being investigated, and evidence of all kinds, some of it directly contradictory, and most of it incomplete, forms the corpus of the investigation. Of course, even a scientist can't help forming an opinion, but he shouldn't, simply on that basis, then reject all the contrary evidence. Other scientists may give different weight to the same evidence, and form a contrary opinion, and together they may eventually form a consensus, but even then, it tends to be expressed in terms of probability rather than dogma. When we read in the media that "scientists have proved" this or that, we can be sure it is a wild exaggeration!

For me, and I hope for many of you, however, there is also a wholly unscientific side to the Shroud which in many ways is more important. It underlies the reason for carrying out any of the other studies, for a start. The Shroud is, as various Popes have suggested, an icon for Christianity. I was recently asked what I saw in the face of the Shroud, and had to stop to think. Its history, its chemistry and its physics are largely irrelevant in this context. Whatever its provenance, the Shroud image is a powerful reminder of Christ's passion and death, and as such commands both respect and reverent contemplation.