

Obituary

Noel Curren-Briggs, 1919-2004

By Ian Wilson (with some background details kindly supplied by **Dr. John Pollard** of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, author of the definitive biography of Pope Benedict XV)

In the year immediately following the publication of my first Shroud book, one of the joys was to hear from outsiders so intrigued by the subject that they felt compelled to offer their professional expertise to further Shroud research. Such approaches could generate lively correspondence, new and original findings, lectures and publications. A neatly typed letter sent to me from Verteillac, France on 27 August 1982 generated just such benefits

The letter was from genealogist and historian Noel Curren-Briggs, and it began a long association with the Shroud which terminated only with Noel's death on September 20, 2004, at the age of 85. Noel seized upon the so-called 'missing years' of the Shroud's history – those from its disappearance from Constantinople in 1204 to its emergence in the hands of the de Charny family in the 1350s – and applied his considerable genealogical and historical sleuthing skills to shedding new light on these. He lectured to the BSTS at least twice, once in June 1985, on the subject of the Shroud and the Grail, the second time in 1988 on the Shroud in Greece. His book *The Holy Grail and the Shroud of Christ: The Quest Renewed*, was published in 1984, packed with intriguing, highly relevant detail, much of which has yet to be properly assimilated by Shroud researchers. Likewise all too few are aware of the depth of detective work which lay behind these – skills honed in the very real cause of King and Country during World War II, when Noel was in his early twenties.

Noel was born near Leeds on November 21st, 1919 and educated at Bryanston School. He began a degree at St. Catherine's College, Cambridge in 1938, only for this to be interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. After he had worked for a year in the Friends' Ambulance Corps, his skills in modern languages led to him being recruited to work as a cryptographer at Bletchley Park, wartime Britain's famous centre for deciphering the codes that Hitler's forces were using to communicate their tactical information. Of this work Noel wrote to me in November 1983:

For some years now those of us who worked at Bletchley Park ... have been tacitly released from our vow of silence, with the result that several books have been written on the subject and its role in winning the war. I have...read most of them with the keenest interest, especially those about the machine cypher Enigma, upon which I worked for a brief period in 1942. But Enigma was only one of several German cyphers that were broken, and one of the things that has puzzled me about these books has been the omission

of any mention of the medium-grade cyphers on which I and a handful of colleagues were working from 1942 to 1945... I was especially interested in the work of my unit during the run-up to the invasion of Sicily in the summer of 1943, because several of us were given decorations for it, and I was never quite sure why!

It would seem that the British forces' information about the German order of battle in Sicily was mainly derived from Noel and his colleagues' work in Tunisia breaking the Playfair cyphers, hence the decorations. After the war, Noel completed his Cambridge degree in modern languages, then became a farmer in Gloucester, where he was also secretary of the Three Choirs Festival and with his wife Barbara ran an operatic festival at Taynton House. In the 1960s, he became a professional genealogist, publishing eight books on the subject, and working for a number of years as consultant to Debrett's Peerage. His involvement with the Turin Shroud began in 1982. He also wrote a novel, *Young Men at War*, and edited the Country Gentleman Magazine and the *Kluwer Handbook of Security*. He became a frequent broadcaster in the 1990s and appeared in various TV documentaries. He died at his home in Sutton-in-the-Isle, Cambridgeshire, after a short illness on September 20th, 2004.

Thanks to Noel's expertise an extensive genealogy has been established for the Shroud's first known European owners, the de Charny family, also for other Shroud-associated families of that same period. Noel also showed many valuable insights on the links between the Shroud and the Grail legend, and was one of those who held steady to his own instincts about the Shroud's authenticity when the world's media, accepting the radiocarbon dating findings, decried the Shroud as a mediaeval fake in 1988. His penetrating intellect was accompanied by a lively sense of humour. Besides his being one of the Shroud world's most colourful characters – I vividly remember his calling by powerful motorbike at my then Almondsbury, Bristol, when he was already in his sixties – Noel was also one who had real professional expertise to bring to the subject. Like myself, he came into the subject from an agnostic family background, but for him this only made all the stronger the insights about the human Jesus which the Shroud revealed. As he wrote to Mark Guscini in June 1998:

"The Shroud's value to me as someone who was born and brought up in an agnostic tradition is the way it brought home to me the appalling suffering Jesus had to undergo. No amount of conventional portrayals of the crucifixion can convey the sheer horror of dying from asphyxiation when nailed to a cross. Whether or not one regards Jesus as divine and the Son of God doesn't matter. To torture an innocent man in this way is barbaric, and to have said, as I believe he did say, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do' reveals him as one of the most saintly men the world has ever known".