



ARNALDO MOMIGLIANO

1908–1987

Arnaldo Momigliano, who died in London on 1 September, shortly before his 79th birthday, was one of the most eminent European historians of his generation; his honours and intellectual achievements have been recorded in the public press both in his native Italy and here in England. It is not yet time for a detailed discussion of his life and work; we should remember rather the man who cared so much about making our Society and our Journal the foremost in their field, and who was a dominant influence on the London classical scene for thirty-five years.

Born in 1908 at Caraglio (Cuneo) of a prominent Piedmontese Jewish family, he studied under Gaetano de Sanctis at Turin, and in 1929 followed him to Rome, to work under his direction at the *Enciclopedia Italiana* and at Rome University; in a rare moment of warmth that austere man wrote of the sympathy which, 'nell' ambiente romano si andava conquistando e per la sua cultura e pel suo carattere il mio allievo Arnaldo Momigliano' (*Ricordi della mia vita* (1970), 142). In 1936 he was appointed to the chair of Roman History at Turin; two years later he was dismissed on racial grounds.

His invitation to come to England was due to Hugh Last, who had already noted the great merits of his book on Claudius in this Journal (xxii (1932), 230–3), and had arranged its translation into English; Momigliano often spoke of his gratitude to 'a friend whose generosity and loyalty were equal to his immense knowledge'. He spent the war years in Oxford, where he and his family were maintained with the help of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, and later of the Rockefeller Foundation.

His first publication in English was in this Journal, a review of Syme's *Roman Revolution* (*JRS* xxx (1940), 75–80); it is a characteristically frank expression of admiration for the achievement, and doubt about the ultimate consequences of the method: to one whose formative years had been spent under fascism it seemed self-evident that 'history is the history of problems, not of individuals or of groups'. Later he was to admit the difficulties involved in 'the necessity of acquiring a new language and absorbing a new culture in order to teach'; but Oxford of the forties also brought him close friendships, with fellow scholars such as Isobel Henderson and Beryl Smalley.

After the war he was of course reinstated in his Professorship at Turin. The decision to remain in England cannot have been an easy one, and he always retained his Italian citizenship. In retrospect this seems the turning-point in his life; for in choosing deliberately to remain an emigré, he set out on a path of independence which was to have enormous effect on the cultures of both England and Italy. Here he joined that group of European intellectuals who overturned for a generation the parochialism and self-absorption endemic in British university life: like his contemporaries Eduard Fraenkel, Fritz Saxl (who introduced him to the Warburg Institute) and Ernst Gombrich, he transformed his discipline by connecting it with the wider and deeper historical culture of Europe. In Italy, to an outsider, it seems that his independence from the university system, with all its necessary compromises, enabled him to become the symbol of the autonomy of history and of freedom for the individual scholar.

In 1947 he became Lecturer and later Reader at Bristol University, and in 1951 was elected to the chair at University College London, holding it for twenty-four years until his retirement in 1975. From 1964 he was also Professor at the Scuola Normale Superiore at Pisa; after his retirement he held Fellowships at All Souls College, Oxford, and Peterhouse, Cambridge, and spent several months each year at Chicago as Distinguished Visiting Professor for life. He never ceased teaching and writing: his last seminars were held earlier this year at Pisa and Chicago, and his last article was written from a hospital bed in Chicago; his latest writing was a review of Paul Johnson's *History of the Jews*, published in the *New York Review of Books* for 8 October, and he was discussing new books and new ideas with friends at home until a few days before his death.

Momigliano had joined the Society for Roman Studies in 1941, but it was his move to London which brought him into daily contact with its workings. He served on the editorial committee of the Journal for thirty-one years from 1952 to 1982; in 1957 he was elected a Vice-President, and from 1965 to 1968 he served as President, renowned for the unnerving speed with which he conducted business; for he never appreciated the English habit of regarding formal meetings as social occasions.

It was in this second period of his life that I first met him, when he was appointed to be the supervisor of my thesis in 1962. His first letter was characteristic: I had submitted an article on the Quinquennium Neronis to the Journal; in accepting me as a graduate student he wrote, 'you will be aware [I was not] that I was responsible for the rejection of your article: one does not write learned articles about subjects suitable for undergraduate essays'. His last letter of the 30 July, after a major heart attack in May, was no different; I quote it in full, for it is typical:

I hope to see you soon though you will see another man, and I doubt very much whether I shall at least be able to do something intellectually valuable.

As for your paper which is sound, but too long and would gain from some abbreviation, I would like to put down a preliminary question. Since the Christian era (not to speak of its Jewish antecedents)

the organization of the State depends on religious principles (or anti-religious, secular, principles). The Greeks did not know of religion as conditioning the structure and tasks of the state: the question could at least be asked of the Romans. No use of course playing tragedy outside the Greek polis. The good rabbi Durkheim had of course no idea of how he misunderstood Judaism and Christianity in order to understand primitive tribes.

Between these two letters rest twenty-five years of unconditional friendship and advice. His friends and colleagues learned to seek out such forthright and liberating criticisms: all meetings, however brief, immediately became discussions of whatever historical questions engaged us at the time, and one always came away with the problem transformed. He lived for such conversations and such contacts, so that we scarcely noticed the amount of time and trouble he took over us.

His seminars were famous and terrifying occasions; those at the Warburg Institute in the late sixties and early seventies were the intellectual centre for our generation, a place where we had to be ready to discuss almost any historical subject, and where absolute standards were combined with a complete lack of regard for the individual — unless he happened to be young and out of his depth, when Momigliano would come to his rescue with a masterly summary of what could in fact be said on the topic. In Italy the seminars at the Scuola Normale were occasions of annual pilgrimage for hundreds of young scholars, from all over Italy and from a wide variety of disciplines.

The secret of his power was I believe also the source of his greatness as a historian. It was not his extraordinary learning (of which even Fraenkel was said to be afraid), or his ability to range over the whole of European history. It was his refusal to distinguish between scholarship and life; history was not a discipline to be practised in working hours in an institutional environment according to certain rules: it was a way of life, to be pursued with the same passionate commitment as life itself.

So, despite his deep appreciation of the teaching of De Sanctis (as shown in the sensitive obituary in *Secondo Contributo*; see also *JRS* XLVII (1957), 235), he came more and more to see himself as a disciple of a man whom he had known personally and from his writings, Benedetto Croce. Croce was indeed the dominant intellectual force in the Italy of his youth (see *Quarto Contributo*, 95–115); but what is remarkable is the increasing identification with Croce and his view of history in Momigliano's later essays. This was no adherence to a theory (he mistrusted all general theories of history), but a growing recognition that Croce provided the justification for his view of history. History was made by a succession of *historians*, great men who sought to interpret for their generation the meaning of the past: the historian in the European tradition held the same place as the prophet in Judaism. That is I think why he was so passionate in his pursuit of history, why he found some of the modern frivolous games with history as unacceptable as its degeneration into a technical discipline or a set of facts; that is why the study of past historians was so central to his conception of history: it was not a mere extension of an interest in 'la problematica' or the state of the question. And that too is why the writing of a definitive work never seemed particularly important to him. Such books were the achievements of individuals in impressing a sense on historical events, landmarks indicative of the state of consciousness of a generation, starting points for the future; but history would continue, and the historian's fate was to be part of the historical process as well as its interpreter. The historian was no outsider, commenting on the human condition from the privileged vantage point of the scientific present, fixing the past for all time; he was condemned to live in history, and to seek to understand it from within. Momigliano had suffered as much as any man from history; for him the task of the historian was to renew the past with the help of the present, as a way of making sense of the present.

Yet he was also by heredity, by inclination and by training an *érudit*. Some of his later work is deliberately, almost defiantly, a demonstration of how facts can speak more meaningfully than theories; he liked to shock his disciples by denunciations of ideas he had earlier been the first to welcome. Perhaps his most important later work is his (very subversive) series of investigations of the sources of modern scientific positivism in the prejudices of our great nineteenth century predecessors (*Tra storia e storicismo* (1985)). Ultimately he refused to recognize an opposition between ideas and facts: he lived as a true historian, both *érudit* and *philosophe*.

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