Review of A. Momigliano, The Classical foundations of modern Historiography

Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters. [https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/52109/story/]

This work is the VERSION OF RECORD (VoR)
This is the fixed version of an article made available by an organization that acts as a publisher by formally and exclusively declaring the article "published". If it is an "early release" article (formally identified as being published even before the compilation of a volume issue and assignment of associated metadata), it is citable via some permanent identifier(s), and final copy-editing, proof corrections, layout, and typesetting have been applied.


Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

Article begins on next page

Reviewed by T. Corey Brennan, Bryn Mawr College.

The main arguments of this book are now long familiar to us. Much of the material of these 1962 Sather Lectures can be found dispersed in the eleven volumes of M. Momigliano's articles and reviews entitled *Contributi alla Storia degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico* or, in a few cases, in some of M.'s reviews which have not made it into the *Contributi* series. In these revised Lectures, M. has given us an exhilarating overview of his work on some of the most important aspects of the history writing of the *collegium trilingue* -- the Hebrew, Greek and Roman worlds -- and its influence on later Western thought.

The present volume thoughtfully includes detailed bibliographical notes for each chapter (pp. xiii and xiv), listing the major correspondences with M.'s work published through the year of his death, 1987. One must use these notes to benefit fully from this California publication, because *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* is not quite a self-contained volume. There are no footnotes and there is no bibliography. Citations of actual texts, ancient and modern, are kept to a bare minimum (as it turns out, less than one per page, according to my rough count). This is a bit unfortunate, since as we all know, M.'s range of reference is remarkable. So is his cast of characters. Well over four hundred names of writers of history appear on the pages of this slim volume, not all equally familiar. It is at times difficult to check some of M.'s intriguing (and sometimes puzzling) assertions, except perhaps by leafing through the indices to each of the *Contributi* volumes. But there one often can strike gold. For example, my curiosity regarding the Benedictine scholar Benedetto Bacchini (whose career is sketched at length in *Classical Foundations* pp. 132-136) was more than satisfied once I found M.'s *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* article on this man (reprinted in *Terzio Contributo* pp. 121-134). It is unfortunate that this piece, and several other pertinent prosopographical essays by M., are not mentioned in the present volume's bibliographical notes.

The posthumous *Classical Foundations* therefore looks a bit different from two related works (see pp. x and 153), the publication of M.'s 1968 Harvard Jackson Lectures, *The Development of Greek Biography*, and his 1973 Cambridge Trevelyan/1974 Bryn Mawr Flexner Lectures, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (this too has no notes, but fuller citations of sources in the text and a systematic bibliography). Luckily there is a good Index of Names. In this volume, M.'s narrative, unencumbered by detailed reference, moves over vast terrains with breathtaking speed. One is thankful on the occasions -- usually at the outset of individual lectures -- when he indulges in a more leisurely treatment of a particular idea or individual (the character sketches of the antiquarian N.-C. Fabri de Peiresc (Chapter Three *init.*) and Benedetto Bacchini (Chapter VI *init.*) are superb). There are only a few misprints in this well-produced book. (In particular, on p. 90 L. Cincius Alimentus should be restored to his original praetorian college of 210 B.C.)
The reasons for publishing the Sather Lectures in this minimalist fashion are explained in the Foreword (by Riccardo Di Donato of the University of Pisa). M.'s first thought was in fact to publish his talks as they had been delivered; yet this impulse soon gave way to a more ambitious project of revision and annotation. "The version now published represents the latest stage of the work left by the author" (Di Donato, p. ix). The text, projected annotations and select bibliography were evidently never completed. M.'s literary executor decided to collate the "numerous" copies of the Sathers found among M.'s papers, and print a text only, leaving the rest undone.

M. had promised the publication of his Sather Lectures several times in print (most conspicuously in the programmatic Preface to his 1966 *Studies in Historiography*) and naturally rumors surfaced from time to time in the years which followed that its publication was imminent (see e.g. M. Reinhold in *CPh* 73 (1978) 359 n.2). Now that we have this volume, we can legitimately ask whether M. would have approved of the Lectures' appearance in this form (he presumably did not expressly forbid their publication).

I do not know enough about M. and the tradition he writes about to answer that question with full confidence. I do know that M. was not exactly sparing of publication in his lifetime. It is difficult to believe that completing the notes and bibliography to *The Classical Foundations* could have posed much of a real problem: for M., I would guess that was a few weeks' work at most! The text must have been the real difficulty. The select topics touched upon in these Sather Lectures were very much a crystallization of M.'s central intellectual interests. Di Donato in the Foreword (p. ix) is surely not far off the mark (at least for the initial decision to delay publication) when he states "Arnaldo Momigliano could not tear himself away from the subject which he felt to be crucial". One should add that M. was not fond of repeating himself in print. With *Contributi* volumes appearing (on average) every four years, after a time, M. may have felt that he had made it difficult for himself to say something sufficiently new about these central issues to justify a separate book. For instance, M.'s 1965 article "Fattori orientali della storiografia ebraica post-esilica e della storiografia greca" (*Terzio Contributo* pp. 807-818 = *Essays* pp. 25-35) covers much the same ground as a major portion of the present volume's Chapter One, "Persian Historiography, Greek Historiography, and Jewish Historiography". I find it significant that more than a dozen years after delivering the Sather Lectures, M. could be found attempting to expand their range to include developments in history writing in Spain and Germany during the XVI century (p. ix).

M. himself made an *epitome* of his Sather Lectures, which appeared embedded in a review article, "Remarks on Eastern History Writing", which was published in 1965 (reprinted in *Terzio Contributo* pp. 233ff). The scope of this book is much broader than one would have surmised from M.'s own *epitome*. A proper summary would be difficult indeed: here I can touch on only some of the more interesting points M. makes.

In Chapter One, we learn that the Hebrews of the Biblical age had an historiographical tradition, influenced in part by the Persian habit of record keeping, which reached its acme in the post-exilic period (the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles). M. is persuasive when he argues that, after the destruction of the Temple (A.D. 70), "the significance which the Jews came to attach to the Torah killed their interest in general historiography" (p. 23).

In Chapter Two, "The Herodotean and the Thucydidean Tradition", M. discusses the
conflict between these two approaches to historiography. In the 1965 summary, Momigliano asserted that he studied "the two models provided by Herodotus and Thucydides, both centred on political and military history and mainly relying on oral evidence, but one placing political events against a vast background of ethnographical research, the other strictly confining himself to an analysis of contemporary political behavior." Here we may perceive some development in M.'s views over the years. In the revised version of this lecture found in the *Classical Foundations* volume, M. rightly drops the idea that Herodotus was "centred on political and military history". In fact, there is precious little political history in Herodotus; nor is there much military history for its own sake. Rather, M. stresses that Herodotus regarded the preservation of "the history of civilization" as crucial: it was a hedge against human mortality. Thucydides however did not consider the past interesting in itself. He was overwhelmingly concerned with the present, and felt that from contemporary political behavior permanent features of human nature could be disengaged. M. then sketches in outline the vicissitudes of these two competing models of historiography through the nineteenth century. It was Thucydides' influence which ensured that the proper province of history was long to be understood as "political and military history".

Chapter Three isolates and examines a genre which would not have existed, M. maintains, had Herodotus prevailed as the model historian: the phenomenon of antiquarian research. Antiquarianism -- the systematic, non-chronological study of customs, institutions, cults, laws and the like -- originated with the sophists. It is no accident, then, that at all times we find antiquarians, whose "systematic approach to institutions and beliefs allowed a critical evaluation of the principles underlying a system of law or religion" (p. 78), closely linked to philosophers. M. points out that philosophic criticism would be very difficult without antiquarian research. The relationship, however, between antiquarianism and ordinary history was not quite so comfortable. By the mid-nineteenth century many (but not all) of the best political historians had come to agree with the antiquarians that the investigation of non-literary evidence was indeed crucial. The "discipline" of antiquarianism soon became a dinosaur, doomed to extinction. There were however a few last majestic moments, most notably Mommsen's encyclopedic *Staatsrecht*. This essay, to my mind, is perhaps the most illuminating piece in this Sather volume. The main lines of development of this tradition stand out much more clearly here than in M.'s groundbreaking 1950 essay "Ancient History and the Antiquarian" (reprinted in *Studies* pp. 1-39).

A good part of Chapter Four, "Fabius Pictor and the Origins of National History", is indebted to an important 1960 essay, "Linee per una valutazione di Fabio Pittore" (= *Terzo Contributo* pp. 55-68). Although I have no issue with M.'s main point (national history began with the Romans, and thus ultimately Fabius Pictor), some of the detailed argumentation in this chapter is difficult to swallow. For example, on pp. 95ff., M.'s discussion of the *Annales Maximi* unfortunately relies on the confused and confusing account of Servius (*ad Aen. I 373*). M. states "as is well known, the pontiffs registered what mattered to them on a whitewashed board, the *tabula dealbata*, which was changed every year and had the form of a calendar ... at the end of each year the contents of the relevant tabula must have been transcribed into a scroll or codex and automatically became part of a chronicle which presumably preserved the calendar form." I am convinced that the *tabula dealbata* is a late, monstrous invention (Servius' own?), based ultimately on a misunderstanding of the one reliable account we do have of the *Annales Maximi*, that of Cicero *De Oratore* II 52. Nor can M. be correct in his over-literal interpretation of M. Porcius Cato's comments on the (fr. 77 P2) (p. 97).

Chapter Five focusses on Tacitus and then "Tacitismo" into the XIX century. M.
rightly stresses Tacitus' experimentalism, the different angles from which he explored his overarching interest, "the consequences of the permanent suppression of liberty." It is interesting to learn how little influence Tacitus had in later antiquity (Cassiodorus cites him only as "a certain Cornelius"!), and how he really came into his own only in the late XVI century. Finally, Chapter Six delineates trends in ecclesiastical historiography, with particular attention to the immense authority which accrued to its "inventor", Eusebius (thanks largely to Rufinus' Latin translation).

Although this posthumous volume doubtless falls short of M.'s own standards (we can only guess in what ways), the general scholarly community will thank the University of California Press for finally bringing to light M.'s summation of some of his most significant contributions to the study of historiography.