

## REVIEW

## MISSING MOM

Tim Cornell and Oswyn Murray, edd., *The Legacy of Arnaldo Momigliano*. Warburg Institute Colloquia 25. London and Turin: The Warburg Institute and Nino Aragno Editore, 2014. Pp. xii + 203. Hardback, £50.00. ISBN 978-1-908590-48-0.

Thirty years after Arnaldo Momigliano passed away,<sup>1</sup> books and articles devoted to his intellectual legacy are not exactly rare, and yet, each one of them has its *raison d'être* and sheds light from a different angle on various aspects of antiquity, of its tradition, and/or of the cultural history of the nineteenth century. The volume under review collects eleven contributions originally presented at the Warburg Institute in London on two separate occasions, in February and May of 2009. The organizers, as Oswyn Murray says in his preface (xi), intended to replicate as closely as possible the intellectual atmosphere of the series of seminars held by Momigliano at the Warburg Institute from 1967 to 1983, in (some of) which all the authors of the present volume, with two exceptions, had participated. That is to say, in a more profound way than your usual conference in honor of X or in memory of Y, these two events were meant as intellectual commemorations of an almost ritual kind, and it is beyond doubt that reading the book is no substitute for having witnessed the performance. On the other hand, while preserving some of the flavor of the occasions on which they were originally delivered, the contributions in this volume do not read at all as conference papers, in terms of form or substance. The texts are tightly argued and never give the impression of being occasion pieces. All the authors approach the old master with intellectual respect, that is, with a mixture of affectionate complicity and criticism. Reminiscences are omnipresent but unobtrusive. The tone of the volume is remarkably homogenous, with only one exception. The outlier is Riccardo Di Donato's contribution, in fact the fifth installment in a series of 'Materials for an intellectual biography of Momigliano', where the balance of information and interpretation is strongly in favor of the former. Because Momigliano had such an uncommonly vast array of (largely interconnected) interests, the contributions in this volume touch upon many key topics of ancient history and of the study of the classical tradition, from the historical meaning of the boundary

<sup>1</sup> The thirtieth anniversary is no excuse for the lateness of this review, for which the author wishes to apologize to the readers of *Histos*.

between antiquity and the Middle Ages to the nature of ancient biographical writing. In the following, some brief remarks on the individual contributions will be offered, almost like a commented table of contents, within the limits of the present reader's knowledge and understanding (both immeasurably narrower than the scope of the volume and of the scholarship of Arnaldo Momigliano).

Under the guise of exploring Momigliano's perception of the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, Carlotta Dionisotti opens the volume with some crisp reflections on the role of religion as a historical factor in Momigliano's thought and on the methodological complications of treating it as a historical factor like any other, independent of the religious commitments of the scholar. Christianity is the test case, and it brings forth many interesting remarks on Momigliano's views on the study of early Christianity in Italy in the early decades of the twentieth century. Guido Clemente's contribution similarly focuses, albeit in a more explicit way, on the pre-exilic Momigliano, offering valuable insight into historical debates within the school of Gaetano De Sanctis, and their political implications in a cultural landscape increasingly dominated by fascist ideology. Among many reasons that commend it, Clemente's contribution provides a very concise and sharp assessment of the question of Momigliano's own political views and involvement with the regime, which should be mandatory reading especially for non-Italian scholars who have shown over the years a somewhat superficial understanding of both issues. Oswyn Murray opens with a combination of personal memories and interesting observations on certain limits of Momigliano's approach, which firmly locate him before the linguistic turn, such as his suspicion for literature as evidence for the practice of history, and other important aspects, such as Momigliano's limited appreciation for imputing political bias to historians ancient and modern. Murray then proceeds to summarizing two major discoveries of his, John Gast's *The History of Greece from the Accession of Alexander Till its Final Subjection by the Roman Power* (1782) and Bulwer Lytton's *Athens its Rise and Fall* (1837), elegantly weaving them into a sketch of the development of the practice of ancient history in the British Isles and beyond from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Anthony Grafton, in a contribution that originated as a public lecture in connection with the May seminar, explores some paradoxical aspects of the role played by church historians in Momigliano's vision of the development of historical method and of the practice of history more broadly, from Late Antiquity to the Enlightenment. Momigliano was convinced that a key to the way the writing of history evolved in antiquity and beyond was the use and refinement of methods for dealing with documents. That such refinement should to a large extent be achieved by historians with very strong a priori commitments to truth revealed, rather than established by the mere deployment of evidence, goes against the grain of received opinion. In this breathtaking exploration of the space from Eusebius of Caesarea to

Benedetto Bacchini, Grafton fleshes out the main lines drawn by Momigliano, at the same time modifying them and showing their potential as a framework for further investigations. Amélie Kuhrt's contribution, touching on a field somewhat peripheral to Momigliano's capacious interests, offers historians of Greco-Roman antiquity a crisp and thought-provoking survey of the evidence for the political freedom of and within city-states, or at any rate largely self-administering cities, of the ancient Near East, with a focus on Babylon. The present reader is left with a lingering suspicion that what are usually taken as the differences between ancient East and West in such basic political concepts as personal rights and political freedom might have quite a bit to do with the different kinds of evidence available for archaic and classical Greece on one side and for the Near East before Alexander on the other. In any case, belief in reassuring generalizations regarding the history of political concepts and ideas emerges somewhat shaken from the reading. Tessa Rajak has what seems to this reader the unenviable task of discussing Momigliano and Judaism. Her piece has a staccato rhythm to it, but beyond that, it would take a different reader to even begin doing justice to it. Suffice it to say that, of all the pieces in the volume, Rajak's is the one in which the boundary between scholarship, biographical experience, and personal commitments appears most blurred. Averil Cameron focuses her attention on Momigliano's thought, and specifically on the role of Christianity in his vision of the end of Antiquity. The Cambridge lectures on peace and freedom have a central role in the discussion, and Cameron brings out in a striking way the highly positive role that Momigliano attributed to Christianity as a stage towards the modern concept of freedom. While of course Momigliano was perfectly capable of assessing in much more realistic ways the impact of Christians and of Christian institutions on religious discrimination, especially against the Jews, in his very Hegelian view of the dialectics between Greek freedom, Roman peace, and the Christian combination of peace and freedom, built on Jewish foundations to be sure, Christianity comes in as a historicist *deus ex machina*. Cameron has thoughtful remarks on how Momigliano, in his early years in Britain, appears to have been more inclined to pose fundamental historical problems; at the same time, her warning that '[t]he trajectory of a scholar such as Momigliano cannot be thought of in simple linear terms' is essential. If there is a nuance that might be added to the general thrust of this thoughtful contribution, one might be inclined to underline that Momigliano himself never published his Cambridge lectures. An Italian reader may also feel tempted to speculate that Momigliano's view of Christianity in the war years may bear some relation to Croce's essay *Perché non possiamo non dirci Cristiani* of 1942. John North's contribution concludes a trilogy on Momigliano and religion by interrogating aspects of Momigliano's views on Roman religion from the late Republic to the Empire and on the rise of Christianity. Starting from the introduction to *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* of 1963 and continuing with a cluster of essays

on the history and historiography of ancient religions from the eighties, North analyzes the inner logic of the decadence of Roman paganism as seen by Momigliano, opposing it to current, much more positive views of the resilience of paganism as a popular religion well into the first centuries of the Empire. Momigliano's position is contextualized in the development of the study of Roman religion in relation to the institutional approach of Georg Wissowa. Alan Cameron contributes a discussion of the authorship and date of the *Historia Augusta*, with reference to Momigliano's views on the subject and to the contrast between Momigliano and Ronald Syme. His own conclusion is that the author was 'a frivolous person of decadent literary tastes and a weird sense of humor, with no agenda worthy of the name at all'. The somewhat tribal world of the *Historia Augusta* specialists will no doubt have something to say on what seems like an utterly sensible reconstruction—to somebody like the present reader, for whom the definition of non-specialist would be an understatement. Riccardo Di Donato, the keeper of the Momigliano Archive, contributes a wealth of evidence and observations on the *Ottavo contributo* and the scholarship assembled in it, and more broadly on the last decade or so of Momigliano's life, after he stopped teaching at UCL in 1975. Tim Cornell concludes the volume with an open-ended contribution on Momigliano's work on ancient biography. Cornell persuasively questions the separation of biography from historiography, pointing out that much material of an essentially biographical nature is in fact conveyed in works that certainly qualify as historical. Apart from being difficult to draw, however, the distinction seems to Cornell to be essentially pointless. His contribution turns into an aporetic attempt at figuring out what the reason for Momigliano's interest in ancient biography was, against the background of much biographical work, *lato sensu*, by Momigliano himself.

In at least one way the volume achieves its goal. A fundamental tenet of Momigliano's method was the notion that studying a historical problem and studying the ways in which previous scholarship had engaged with that problem are two inseparable activities. True to this methodological creed, the majority of the contributions in the volume both elucidate aspects of Momigliano's thought and aspects of the problems Momigliano was dealing with. It may be of some interest to consider how the subject matter of the volume maps onto the expansive scope of Momigliano's oeuvre. There is a clear concentration of contributions in the general area of Late Antiquity, with religion inevitably playing a major role. By contrast, other periods garner markedly less attention. While early Rome seems the only one of Momigliano's major fields that is essentially absent from the volume, even Greek history and historiography come in only somewhat tangentially. This thematic distribution does not depend solely on the specific fields of interest of the authors. In the background, one seems to recognize the gravitational pull of Momigliano's most prolific and influential student, Peter Brown. This is not the whole story,

though, and it may be worth wondering whether the heritage of Momigliano may have turned out to be most fruitful in fields that were on the margins of ancient history as it would have been canonically defined during his formative years before the Second World War—and here one inevitably thinks of his extraordinary influence on the study of modern erudition, witnessed by the work of Anthony Grafton.

In conclusion, this is a remarkable book. Reading a collective volume from cover to cover is rarely an enjoyable experience, and conference volumes are not the exception. Yet reading this book is a consistent intellectual pleasure. It is also a striking testimony to a unique intellectual and human legacy and to the powerful influence that Arnaldo Momigliano exerted on the field of history, ancient and modern. And finally, in a less overt way this volume stands out among the volumes devoted to Momigliano and known to the present reviewer, for the consistent tone of intellectual and human gratitude that reverberates across it. Whatever one thinks of the nostalgia for a better age of scholarship so eloquently expressed in Oswyn Murray's preface, there cannot be many historians whose intellectual presence is missed like that of Arnaldo Momigliano.

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