

## REVIEW

SYME, MOMIGLIANO, AND A NEW ITALIAN  
EDITION OF *THE ROMAN REVOLUTION*

Ronald Syme, *La rivoluzione romana*. Nuova edizione a cura di Giusto Traina. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi n. s. 622. Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 2014. Pp. xxxviii + 650. Paperback, €35.00. ISBN 978-88-06-22163-8.

It is quite heartening to see Einaudi marking the Augustan bimillenary of 2014 with a new edition of its Italian translation of Syme's *Roman Revolution*—a choice that is also in keeping with the distinguished history of that publishing house. Generations of Italian students will have received their very first introduction to Syme's work, and possibly to the serious study of the late Republican period as a whole, through the masterful introduction that Arnaldo Momigliano wrote for the 1962 edition. Those few pages are a little classic in their own right, duly reprinted in this new volume (pp. XXIII–XXXI).<sup>1</sup> They establish a memorable connection between the subject matter of the book, the context in which it appeared, and the personality and research agenda of its author. The opening lines retain their arresting quality: 'Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution* appeared in the summer of 1939. I remember reading the copy given to me by the author at a time when war had been declared and the nights were getting longer in an Oxford plunged in gloom'.<sup>2</sup>

Giusto Traina, who has overseen this new edition, must have known he had a hard act to follow as he set out to write his own introduction (pp. VII–XXII). His brief piece achieves three important aims. First, it provides the reader with a lucid overview of Syme's biography and intellectual trajectory, which was missing in the first edition, and probably has never been provided to a comparable degree of detail and insight in Italian. Secondly, it charts the reception of Syme's great work in Italy, and draws attention to an

<sup>1</sup> See also Momigliano (1966) 729–37; an English translation, by T. J. Cornell, may be found in Momigliano (1994) 72–9.

<sup>2</sup> P. XXIII: '*The Roman Revolution* di Ronald Syme apparve nella estate del 1939. Ricordo di averlo letto nella copia donatami dall'autore, quando ormai la guerra era stata dichiarata e le notti si facevano sempre più lunghe su Oxford immersa nell'oscurità'. I am quoting Cornell's translation in Momigliano (1994) 72. Momigliano's early reaction to *RR* is of course set out in the review article that he published in *JRS* a few months later: Momigliano (1940) = (1960) 407–16.

intriguing paradox: some earnest engagement with it came only from Momigliano, who was driven by profoundly different historical questions (and whose personal relationship with Syme was anything but warm), and from sectors of Marxist historiography (in its various denominations), from Antonio La Penna to Antonio Guarino and Luciano Canfora.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, it sheds light on Momigliano's role in enabling the publication of the Italian translation of *RR* with Einaudi.

Traina has been able to rely on some important evidence from the publishing house's archive. He quotes an extract of the report that Momigliano produced in November 1952, when he was first consulted on the possibility of an Italian edition of *RR*. In his view, Syme's book was undoubtedly a classic, and great care had to be taken over the choice of a translator, 'ché l'autore è uno stilista'. The full text of the report will be soon published by Tommaso Munari in a collection of readers' reports that were produced for Einaudi between 1941 and 1991.<sup>4</sup> Traina argues that Momigliano's deep reservations ('antipatia') about Syme are very thinly disguised in that confidential report, and that his emphasis on Syme's attention to style is in fact double-edged, and reflects a reservation towards his Tacitean style that other historians shared. This is not hard to believe, even though the word 'stilista' does not carry a negative connotation *per se*: the entry in the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (XX.175) shows that it entered usage in the late nineteenth century, and had a positive connotation in Carducci and D'Annunzio, and a derogatory one in Croce. Momigliano was surely playing on some level of ambiguity; he was also, even on the most hostile reading, acknowledging that Syme's approach to historical writing was strongly shaped by intellectual influences and concerns that could not be dismissed lightly. But the main focus of his reservations lay elsewhere. Momigliano's statement, in the same report, that H. H. Scullard's book on Roman politics in the middle Republic was 'an imitation of Syme, without its bitter realism, but with greater accuracy on matters of detail', suggests that Momigliano viewed Syme's skill as a prose writer as a quality that was not matched in other, arguably more important, areas.<sup>5</sup> The ancient debate on the tension between commitment to historical truth and ambition to stylistic brilliance found a striking, if not entirely surprising, re-enactment in Momigliano's confidential assessment of the work of a distinguished colleague whose intellectual development, as he candidly admitted (p. XXIV), eluded him.

<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between Syme and Momigliano see Bowersock (2013) 12–18.

<sup>4</sup> Munari (in press).

<sup>5</sup> P. XII: 'una imitazione di Syme senza l'aspro realismo, ma con maggiore accuratezza nei particolari'.

The translation by the late Manfredo Manfredi has been lightly revised for this edition; the extent of the changes is not explicitly set out, but it is fairly clear that the outcome retains the many qualities and the few shortcomings of the 1962 version. It is consistently reliable, if often not quite precise, and does justice to the agile and elegant *allure* of the original as much as may conceivably be expected of a translation into a language that is so distant from English, especially in its academic register.<sup>6</sup> Besides Traina's valuable introduction, there is another factor that commends the purchase of this new edition to any serious research library: Alice Borgna has compiled a comprehensive *index locorum*, which encompasses literary and documentary sources, and which is lacking in the original English edition and its various reprints. Students of the late Republic will use it with great profit, whatever their linguistic backgrounds might be.

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<sup>6</sup> A few randomly chosen examples: 'A *popularis* could contest the misuse of this prerogative' (p. 153) does not best translate as 'Un *popularis* avrebbe potuto contestare l'abuso di questa prerogativa' (p. 171: something along the lines of 'Un *popularis* aveva la facoltà di contestare ...' would have been preferable); 'the Republic was now recalled, bewildered and unfamiliar, from the arbitrary rule of the Triumvirate' (p. 277) does not quite mean 'La repubblica, smarrita e disabituata, veniva ora richiamata alla libertà dopo il governo autoritario dei triumviri (p. 309: 'smarrita e irriconoscibile' is closer to the mark); stating that men like Afranius and Labienus were 'models and precedents' of a career in military service or provincial administration is not quite the same as saying that they were 'l'esempio' of such an itinerary, especially if one is talking about Roman Republican history; 'due provision ... for the peaceful transmission of the Principate' (p. 437) is not 'le debite precauzioni...' (p. 483), but 'le debite misure ...'.