

Frank W. Walbank

1909 – 2008

Frank William Walbank, one of the greatest ancient historians of the 20th century, died in Cambridge on 23 October 2008, just two months short of his 99th birthday. The son of a schoolmaster, Walbank was born in Bingley, West Yorkshire, and educated at Bradford Grammar School. On entering Peterhouse, Cambridge, at the age of nineteen he was immediately acknowledged as an outstandingly talented student. One of the numerous scholarships and prizes that he won allowed him to spend a summer in Jena learning German. The threatening atmosphere that hung over Germany in those days left a lasting impression upon him.

Having acquired a supreme mastery of the classical languages, as well as of Greek and Roman literature, history and archaeology, Walbank chose Classics as his vocation and Polybius and the Hellenistic Age as his specialty. After spending a year as a Latin master in Manchester, he was elected to a junior teaching post at the University of Liverpool (1939). When the Second World War broke out his applications to serve in the Home Guard and in Bletchley were turned down because of his strong left-wing views. He therefore spent the war in Liverpool with the University Tower Watch (a branch of the National Fire Service), calculating and reporting the azimuths of bombs dropped by German planes, and occasionally lecturing to the troops.

In the years that followed his academic career continued to soar. He held his first chair, in Latin, at the University of Liverpool (1945–51); he then became Professor of Ancient History and Classical Archaeology at the same university (1951–1977). In 1977 he moved to Cambridge, where he spent the rest of his life as Emeritus Rathbone Professor at Liverpool University and Honorary Fellow of Peterhouse.

His publications, which span seventy-two years (from *Aratos of Sicyon*, published in 1935, to 'Tyche in Polybius', published in 2007), include eight books,¹ one co-authored book (with N. G. L. Hammond),² two co-edited books³ and some 300 articles and reviews. Books such as *Aratos of Sicyon* (1933), *Philip V of Macedon* (1940) and the widely translated Fontana *The Hellenistic World* (1984) singled him out as a quintessential historian of Hellenistic political history. His *Polybius* (1972), and in particular his magisterial three-volume *Historical Commentary on Polybius* (1957, 1967, 1979), which because of its typographical complexities Oxford University Press agreed to print straight from his handwritten manuscripts, confirmed him as an unrivalled expert on Polybius. The latter work, thanks to Walbank's meticulous scholarship, wide erudition,

¹ *Aratos of Sicyon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1933), *Philip V of Macedon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1940), *The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West* (London: Cobbet Press, 1946) [republished as *The Awful Revolution: The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West* (Liverpool: University Press; Toronto, University Press, 1969)], *Polybius* (1972; 1990), *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957, 1967, 1979), *The Hellenistic World* (1981), *Selected Papers* (Cambridge: University Press, 1935) and *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), the latter two being collections of articles.

² *A History of Macedonia, Vol. III: 336–167 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

³ *The Cambridge Ancient History* 7.1², *The Hellenistic World*, ed. F.W. Walbank, A.E. Astin, M.W. Frederiksen and R.M. Ogilvie (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Chapters on 'Sources for the period' (1-22); 'Monarchies and monarchic ideas' (62-100); 'Macedonia and Greece' (221-56); 'Macedonia and the Greek leagues' (446-81) and *The Cambridge Ancient History* 7.2², *The Rise of Rome to 220 B.C.*, ed. F.W. Walbank, A.E. Astin, M.W. Frederiksen and R.M. Ogilvie (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

superb judgment in evaluating the sources and sheer ability to get into Polybius' mind and to capture the spirit of his age, came to be recognized as one of the finest commentaries ever composed on any Greek or Roman historian. Walbank's *The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West* (1946), revised under the title *The Awful Revolution* (1969), along with his contributions to the economic history of the Roman empire, were written under the spell of Marx, Lenin, Spengler and Toynbee and mirrored Walbank's deep disquiet regarding the future of modern Western civilization. He had, however, become disillusioned with communism as a possible solution as early as 1939, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

As Arnaldo Momigliano pointed out in an article written in Walbank's honour (published in the 1984 issue of *The Journal of Roman Studies*), the central trait of Walbank's writing, and by implication of his personality, was a deep commitment to rationality. This made it easier for him to spot any lack of rationality in the writings of others. Nowhere is this more evident than in his 'Supernatural paraphernalia in Polybius' *Histories*' (1994), in which Walbank throws into perspective the extent to which Polybius, that paragon of rationality and pragmatism, ascribed the pattern of the fifty-three years during which the Romans became masters of the inhabited world to supernatural guidance.⁴ Frank Walbank was irritated beyond measure by the new trend of 'postmodernism', embraced by numerous ancient historians during his later years, regarding this too as a dangerous concession to the demon of irrationality.

Frank Walbank was highly regarded both at home and overseas; honours were showered upon him in abundance. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy at the early age of 43, and was made both Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Public Orator at Liverpool University. He received an Honorary DLitt from Exeter University, was awarded the British Academy's Kenyon Medal and became a CBE in 1993. In the United States he became Sather Lecturer at Berkeley, Mellon Professor at Pittsburgh, a Kentucky Colonel and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He held visiting positions at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Walbank's links with institutions and individuals in other countries (in particular Germany, Italy and Albania) were equally strong. He maintained a lifelong connection, both personal and professional, with numerous Israeli scholars, many of whom will forever be grateful for his inspiration, comments and criticism. In 1993 he was made an honorary fellow of the Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies in Israel. 'This was', as a close friend put it in an obituary published elsewhere, 'a man of high achievement and humanity who was regarded by all who knew him with the greatest respect and affection'.⁵

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⁴ 'Supernatural paraphernalia in Polybius' *Histories*', in I. Worthington, ed., *Ventures into Greek History* (Oxford 1994), 28-42, repr. in his *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World* (above, n. 1), 245-257.

⁵ Peter Garnsey, 'Professor Frank Walbank', *The Independent*, Tuesday 28 October 2008, 34.