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Fergus Millar
1935-2019



With the departure of Professor Sir Fergus Millar (DLitt, DPhil, FBA, FSA) on 15 July 2019 an era in the study of the Roman world has come to an end. That era that was marked by the volume, the range and the impact of his writings on everything from Republican times to late Antiquity, by his teaching, and, just as much, by his unique personality.

Millar's huge influence on generations of scholars all over the world bears eloquent witness to the effects of his vast and manifold writings and teaching. At the same time, his reputation derives no less from his humanity, generosity and integrity. In this sense the title of one of his most important contributions to the study of ancient history, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (1977), which centres on the theme of petition and response, fits Fergus Millar's place in the academic world to perfection. For while he stood at the peak of his academic career and achievements, Fergus Millar never lost sight of us, his students, "his subjects", who were struggling to master our respective fields of knowledge, trying to obtain academic positions, seeking promotions and striving to become fully-fledged members of the academic world. Nor was he blind to other aspects of our lives, which scarcely touched our academic performance: our boyfriends and girlfriends, and later on our partners, our children, our hopes, our struggles and successes — and our failures too.

Fergus Millar was trained in the British classical tradition, receiving a traditional secondary school education in Edinburgh which gave him mastery of both Latin and Greek, and an intimate acquaintance with the literature, the languages, and the then conventional views of Roman history. From there he went on to Oxford, where he studied ancient history and philosophy at Trinity College (1955-58). A prize fellowship at All Souls College (1958-64) enabled him to write, under the supervision of Sir Ronald Syme, a DPhil dissertation on Cassius Dio which was published as a book in 1964. In that year he became a fellow and tutor at Queen's College Oxford, where he remained until 1976, when he was appointed Professor of Ancient History at University College London (1976-84). Between 1975 and 1979 he served as editor of the *Journal of Roman Studies*. He returned to Oxford as Camden Professor of Ancient History and fellow of Brasenose College (1984-2002), and after his retirement continued to teach and take part in the activities of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish studies until his death. He was knighted in 2010.

Perhaps the most surprising, yet also the most dramatically fruitful, aspect of his academic *oeuvre* is his deep involvement with the history of the Jewish people. This was displayed initially

in the new, four-volume, English edition of Emil Schürer's *Geschichte des Jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi (176 B.C. - A.D. 135)*, published together with Geza Vermes and, later, Martin Goodman. In undertaking this formidable project of revising and updating the original German edition, Fergus Millar did "as much as any classical scholar in the twentieth century to make the historical experience of the Jewish people during the Hellenistic and Roman eras central to the study of classical history" (so G.M. Rogers in the "Introduction" to *Rome and the Greek World, and the East I: The Roman Republic and the Augustan Revolution*, p. xii).

And yet, quite in character, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* is presented, as it says in the introduction, as a tribute to Emil Schürer's "immense diligence, scholarship and judgement", for it does not offer new interpretations, not even those of the translators themselves (vol. I, p. vii). Such restraint is scarcely to be imagined these days in a young (Fergus was then only 35) scholar. Our only excuse is that we need "to be (promoted) or not to be".

I had the immense good fortune to become his DPhil student in 1973. I must have caused him some puzzlement and more worry, spending as I did more time in Rome and London than in the Ashmolean Reading Room — not to mention my absence from the required daily ritual of coffee-break at 11:00 AM. Having never left Israel before, I thought I should become acquainted with the "ruins" that were Rome, and the edifying entertainment one could find at Covent Garden and Stratford-upon-Avon, rather than devote my whole time to the writing of a DPhil in Roman History on the utterly prosaic subject of "Letters of Recommendation in Latin from Cicero to Pliny". At the last minute, at Fergus's suggestion, I added to it an appendix on "Documentary Letters of Recommendation". This gave me a first taste of work on documentary evidence, papyri and inscriptions; of the latter, Fergus greatly approved as a life-long and worthy pursuit, as indeed it has become for me. I am not the only one to have been put on the right track by him — and like many only half conscious of having been placed there.

Despite his formal achievements, he never felt himself bound by the formal titles of his chairs nor by the traditions attached to them. Nor was he content with library research from known sources. He wished to feel the very places where the events had taken place. He believed that a historian had to understand the physical/geographic context in which things transpired. He therefore spent time traveling to Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and quite a few times to Israel ("up to the snowbound peak of Mount Hermon" with the late Zvi Yavetz) before embarking on *The Roman Near East 31 BC-AD 337* (1993). Likewise, he toured Rome with a copy of Coarelli's Guidebook when turning to write on the Republic in what became *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (1998) and *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (2002). The latter was the printed version of the Jerusalem Lectures in History for 2007, given in Memory of Menahem Stern, a scholar whom he greatly loved and admired.

I accompanied him on a trip to the Galilee in September 2009 to see as many of the synagogues as possible in order to gain insight into their function and *Sitz im Leben*. This was not simply scholarly tourism: as I discovered later it resulted in "Inscriptions, Synagogues and Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine", published in the *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (2011).

His supervisor, Ronald Syme, was famously an outsider, from New Zealand. So too was Arnaldo Momigliano, his predecessor in University College, London, who came to Britain as a refugee from Italy. Fergus Millar, as a Scot, was an insider but he was not a member of what to many looked, and still sometimes looks, like a self-perpetuating Oxford club. He wanted to shake it up. He desired British scholars to see that their grasp of their subject matter was limited. They needed to broaden their outlook by looking for new evidence as well as reconsidering and reevaluating the evidence already at their disposal, the writings of ancient authors (other than historians), the documentary material, legal texts and the archaeological evidence. Above all he constantly posed new questions, looking not only at the Romans themselves, but at all the peoples who inhabited

the Roman Empire. Such a piece of literature as *The Golden Ass*, religious writing, legal texts — all had the potential to be new sources of historical evidence. It is precisely because he was so deeply aware that all we are left with on which to base our understanding of the nature of the ancient world and the course of its history amounts to no more than fragments that he insisted that everything was relevant, and therefore capable of being used legitimately as sources for our understanding of the past. No wonder he was impatient with people who spent their time mechanically applying “theories” — for there was so much material that had yet to be sifted through and digested.

Nonetheless, he was very appreciative of those scholars who limited themselves to the collection of historical facts without asking weighty historical questions: prosopographers, papyrologists, epigraphists and other experts on one or another piece of arcana. But I doubt that he would have called them “historians” as he understood the term. Although his technique seems to be very “Scottish-empirical” and dry, he was not against theory. Over-arching generalizations can be made as answers to questions, so long as those making them ground them in a thorough sifting of the evidence — especially new evidence — and so long as these generalizations are presented tentatively, in the anticipation that the discovery of a new piece of evidence may prove them false.

Of course in order to be able to use all that evidence one has to be blessed with a capacious memory, whether inside one’s head or on paper. Fergus made and used myriad handwritten cards and notes, in a good (because it worked) old-fashioned way.

However, it is no use making notes unless you can recall that you have made them, and what their relevance is. Fergus’s breadth was astonishing: the politics of the Republic, its legacy in political theory, the height of the Empire and its mechanisms, the multi-national East, the late Roman Empire, its transition to Islam — all examined in the original source languages, not only Greek and Latin, but Hebrew and Syriac as well. Any one of these would have been enough for a career, and most historians content themselves with only one small niche in any of them.

If at the start of his career Fergus had announced that this was what he would set out to do, he would have been dismissed as a self-deluded megalomaniac. And yet he managed to do it all without anyone feeling that he was overbearing, or that he had over-reached himself.

His personality was unique among scholars, dominant as he was. It would have been natural for a man with such accomplishments to be more than a little self-centred. And yet, having read his books, many people were in awe of him, only to be utterly disarmed once they met him in person and discovered how approachable, friendly and kind he was.

I met him before he was Professor Millar, long before he became Sir Fergus. Nonetheless, like many others, I can testify that none of the accolades and distinctions received changed him in the least; if anything, his generosity increased and became a tremendous burden of responsibility and duties: writing letters of recommendation, reviewing manuscripts, advising, and encouraging former students — often also mature scholars — to go on producing and developing, even changing.

Fergus is survived by the family that was always the real centre of his life: his wife Susanna (Friedmann), their children, Sarah, Andrew and Jonathan, and seven grandchildren.

Susanna was the love of his life. It was at the Old Library of All Souls College, during a lecture on Jewish history by David Daube, that he saw her for the first time — and fell in love. So he told us with warm pride, sitting in the same room, on the occasion of the celebration of his 80th birthday in 2015.

I would like to thank my husband, Ari Paltiel, who has shared my life-long friendship with Fergus Millar as well as the feelings which went into this Tribute.

Hannah M. Cotton