

OBITUARY

PROFESSOR M. I. ROSTOVITZEFF

The death of Professor Michael Rostovtzeff on 20th October, 1952, deprived the world of a savant whom this Society has been proud to count among its Honorary Members so long as it has had Honorary Members at all. His career had an enduring effect on the study of ancient history in the West, and his own work, together with that which directly or indirectly he inspired, gave part of its character to the whole output of ancient historians in the period between the wars.

When fate forced him to fly from his native land he was already 48—a Russian scholar who had worked in Berlin and who had travelled widely, collecting the best photographs he could find and making copious notes of every monument he saw that was decorated with a scene bearing on the life led by its author. In particular he had collected his corpus of ancient paintings from the south of Russia—a region in which his interest also produced his notable contributions to the study of the relations between Greeks and the Iranian peoples. And, besides this, he had already gained a profound knowledge of the Hellenistic Age, which was fostered by association with scholars among whom Ulrich Wilcken stood out; and of this knowledge he made notable use in his attempts to explain Roman institutions, and especially the colonate, as outcomes of Hellenistic antecedents.

On his arrival in Oxford Rostovtzeff did a little work with F. J. Haverfield on the initial stages of the proposed new volume of Romano-British inscriptions. He also delivered a memorable series of lectures on the Hellenistic Age, which marked a stage in the growth of his greatest work. And on Haverfield's death there was a possibility that he might succeed to the Camden Chair. It was probably better for him that he did not; for in England he would never have found financial means on the scale which the United States later provided for his great campaigns of excavation at Dura-Europos. At any rate Oxford let him go. To tell the truth, in those days his pronunciation of English was, at least in the lecture-room, extremely difficult to understand; and it must be added that, like other unfortunates in exile, remembering that his knowledge was his main claim to consideration he was apt to force it on his listeners in conversation with a vigour which was sometimes thought excessive—as too was the tone he adopted in some of his reviews of works by even quite junior scholars. With success and security in the United States these defects soon vanished, and then the fundamental friendliness of his nature shone out unclouded.

In 1920 he moved to the University of Wisconsin, where he finished *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*. This, though not his greatest, was still a very great book, written by an individualist, who valued civilization and knew that if culture is to advance it can only do so in a society where there is a class more cultured than the rest. By now there is probably fairly general agreement that Rostovtzeff's interpretation of Roman imperial history is to some extent misconceived—and misconceived because he saw it with eyes still filled with pictures of the revolution which had driven him from his home. Indeed, learned as he was about many aspects of Roman affairs, Roman history was not the field in which his mastery was supreme. Of the achievements of Rome none is greater than the creation of the *Corpus Iuris*; and, though Rostovtzeff was almost thirty-three and had already been at Berlin when Mommsen died, he never showed himself so far a disciple as to seek access to the Roman mind through the Private Law, which is its fullest and most detailed expression.

In 1925 Rostovtzeff went to Yale, where at length he found a wholly congenial environment. There he organized, with the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, the great series of campaigns which continued, and came near to completing, the work begun by his friend Franz Cumont at Dura-Europos, in the course of which many Americans learnt not only the technique of excavation but also his own mature methods of interpreting and publishing what was found. And at Yale he completed too what will remain his incomparable masterpiece—*The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*. In this work, ranging over the period he knew best with the sureness which comes of

thorough understanding and the objective judgment which returned to him as his own difficulties grew more remote, he produced a monument which, as Sir William Tarn observed in reviewing it for this journal, not only closed one epoch in Hellenistic studies but also opened the next.

Though he once said in my hearing that he owed his success to having begun his academic life as a classical philologist (he was for a time Professor of Latin at St. Petersburg), I am not sure that this was true of anything but his individualistic conception of human society and his unalterable opposition to totalitarianism in all its forms. The outstanding qualities of his knowledge appeared rather to be derived, first, from his early acquaintance with Ptolemaic papyri, which led him on to a comprehensive grasp of the Hellenistic period, and, secondly, to his interest in decorated remains which, started by the wall-paintings of Pompeii, was continued by the classical tombs in his own country and finally grew into an unrivalled familiarity with the monuments of the ancient world in its Hellenistic and Roman ages. In this brief tribute it is not possible even to mention all the aspects of our studies on which he set his mark. It must be enough to say that his achievement was, first, most firmly to reinforce the growing conviction of the high importance of the Hellenistic Age in the continuous development of ancient history; secondly, to compel all historians to consider material remains, and especially decorated remains, as historical documents; and, thirdly, to turn their attention, too often concentrated on purely political affairs, to social history and the study of its economic setting. In that study, though sometimes his views were affected by the bitter experiences of his own life, he set an example by drawing his conclusions from the available evidence and never approaching it with a conviction, derived from some theory, that he knew what must have happened, whatever the authorities might say. Above all, he saw civilized society as it is, depending for the progress of its culture on an *élite*, whose natural abilities and inherited opportunities enable them to advance along a road which to the many is impassable without the pioneering of the few.

H. M. L.