

OBITUARY

MATTHIAS GELZER, 19.12.1886–24.7.1974

In 1909, under Ulrich Wilcken, Gelzer, son of a Swiss pastor, presented his dissertation, *Studien zur byzantinischen Verwaltung Ägyptens*; in 1972, at the age of 86, vigorous, lively and persuasive still, he published an article on Asinius Pollio. In the intervening sixty-three years he had never been idle, teaching, often occupied in University administration, an editor of *Gnomon* for thirty-seven years, and all the time burrowing more and more deeply into the late Roman Republic and early Empire and into Hellenistic and Roman historiography. His first work in this field, published in 1912, was revolutionary, *Die Nobilität der römischen Republik*; at a stroke it emancipated the social and political history of the late Roman Republic from Mommsen and the nineteenth-century tradition. What did words like *nobilis* and *popularis* mean? Roman politics were revealed as being Roman politics and not nineteenth-century European politics at all.

Soon after this Gelzer climbed to the professoriate, and from 1919 to 1955 was Professor of Ancient History at Frankfurt (and, afterwards, Emeritus), publishing article after article and review after review, and writing biographies of the major public figures of the late Republic and early Empire for Pauly-Wissowa, the most important of them (of Cicero, Caesar and Pompey) making their appearance, with suitable metamorphosis, as books. His reviews—that of H. H. Scullard's *Roman Politics* is a good example—were full (in his own description of someone else's) of 'reichlich zugemessenen positiven Äusserungen'; his vitally important articles are as varied in their subjects as the three on Polybius as a working historian, 'Nasicas Widerspruch gegen die Zerstörung Karthagos' and 'War Caesar ein Staatsmann?'

By the enterprise of two of his distinguished ex-pupils, Hermann Strasburger and Christian Meier, a collection of the major articles and reviews was published—the *Kleine Schriften*—to mark the master's seventy-fifth birthday on 19 December, 1961. The bibliography of his writings up to that date amounted to 287 items.

Knowledge, insight and imagination apart, Gelzer's work has always been marked by painstaking care—of nobody could it more appropriately be said that genius was an infinite capacity for taking pains—and by a wonderfully cautious instinct in the use of evidence; he has never skated except where the ice was safe, and that is why his work lasts, and will last, so well. A singularly attractive feature of his writing has always been its warmth and generosity, the reflection of himself; his reviews were often highly critical, but never so as to give offence, and his praise was always generous. All this, of course, is known best to the numerous scholars whom he taught and who, having learnt from Gelzer, have brought their own distinction to their subject, free always to disagree with Gelzer's views without ever losing his affection or regard.

If the editors of volume IX of the *Cambridge Ancient History* overlooked Gelzer's genius, others in England have happily been more percipient: the British Academy, of which he has been a Corresponding Fellow since 1961; our own Society, of which he was an Honorary Member; Sir Basil Blackwell and all those responsible for the excellent English translations of *Caesar*, *Cicero* and *Die Nobilität*; and the University of Oxford which voted him an honorary doctorate which, unfortunately, bad health prevented him from coming to England to receive.

J. P. V. D. B.