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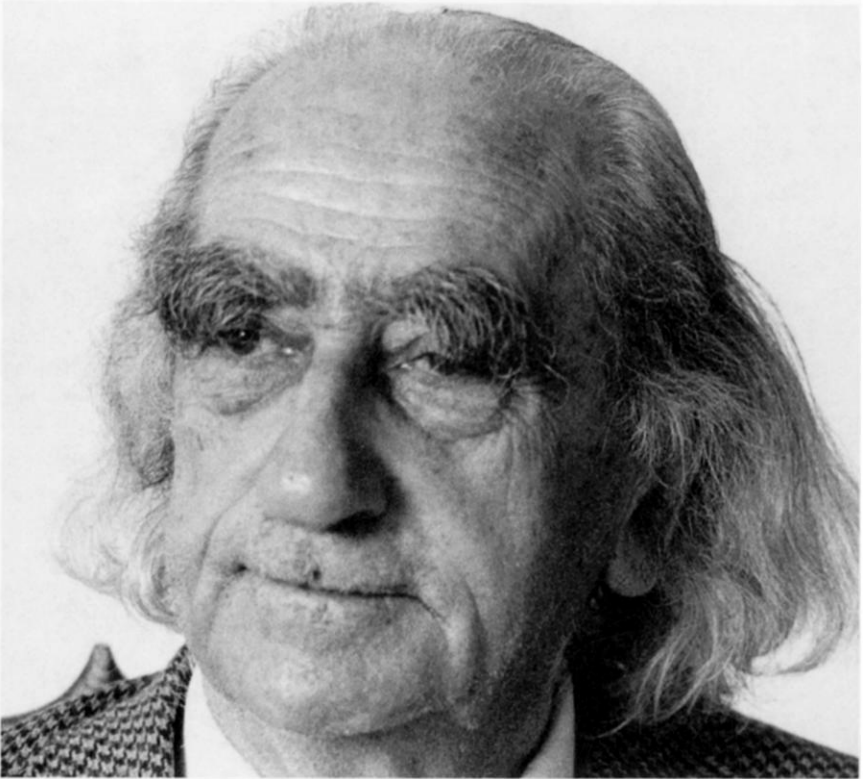
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RUSSELL MEIGGS
(October 20, 1902–June 24, 1989)

Russell Meiggs was one of the last, and certainly one of the greatest of the old-style Oxford dons. From the end of the Second World War until his retirement in 1970, Meiggs dominated the Senior Common Room of Balliol College and exerted a lasting influence on several generations of Balliol undergraduates. Since Balliol was traditionally generous in accepting foreign students, the fame of Meiggs spread quickly round the world. In an age in which the study of classical antiquity was being increasingly carved up among specialists, Meiggs mastered the entire field. He taught both Greek and Roman history, lectured on epigraphy, and worked closely with archaeologists, although, in the old Oxford manner, he published almost nothing for decades. He never aspired to hold the title of professor. His teaching was the core of his being, and even the books that he published in later years reflect above all the lucidity, balance, and good sense that he always demanded of his pupils.

The undergraduates who knew Meiggs as a teacher of ancient history were but a small part of those who came under his spell. He managed to have an impact on virtually every undergraduate that passed through Balliol in his years there. Meiggs was interested in everybody and everything. Undergraduates responded enthusiastically to his jaunty disregard of conventional formalities. He was an extraordinary sight in Oxford, with his flaring shoulder-length gray hair, massive black eyebrows, leathery skin, and Aztec profile. Students were naturally drawn to Meiggs, and he to them. Not surprisingly for many years he enjoyed his role as *praefectus* of Holywell Manor, an attractive Balliol residence about ten minutes' walk away from the college itself. Meiggs's daily procession from manor to college and back again was something that no tourist failed to photograph. With so much external eccentricity, it was all the more remarkable that Meiggs should have dedicated himself so selflessly to his teaching, and that his teaching should have been characterized by restraint.

No one was better at puncturing pomposity than Meiggs. His pupils still recollect with amazement the first time that Meiggs commented on a carefully chiseled tutorial essay by asking, "What's the cash value of that?" Or, "Nothing in that for Meiggs." Meiggs knew all his pupils well and had a clear, if occasionally inflexible opinion as to their worth. It often took many of the young who arrived at Balliol a long time before they discovered that he was not really interested in submission to



authority (despite his exceedingly authoritative manner): the real challenge was to stand up to Meiggs, to challenge him as he challenged others. He admired and encouraged fierce integrity. It was this, rather than the slick paedagogy practiced at some other colleges, that brought Meiggs such exceptional success in the results of his pupils in the honors school of *Literae Humaniores*. He trained his pupils to go to the sources, to assess them critically, and to draw reasonable conclusions. Characteristically his earliest publications were closely related to his teaching. One was a masterly revision of Bury's *History of Greece*, and another a large collection of sources in the original tongues for the history of Greece (a work that he prepared with the late Professor Anthony Andrewes).

During the 1950s Meiggs spoke often of the many books he wanted to write—a history of the Roman port of Ostia based on the exciting archaeological discoveries, a synthetic treatment of the fifth-century Athenian empire in the light of the great epigraphical material (above all, the Athenian tribute lists), a study of Herodotus, and a survey of trees and timber in the ancient world. This last, rather surprising topic arose from the work that Meiggs had carried out during the war as chief labor officer in charge of home timber production in the Ministry of Supply. To many of us it seemed almost miraculous that Meiggs was able to bring out his first major work, *Roman Ostia*, at the age of fifty-six while still in the midst of a crushing schedule of teaching and college affairs. The next two books had to wait until Meiggs went into retirement in 1970. His level-headed synthesis of the evidence for the Athenian empire was published in 1972 and constituted a valuable statement of the general opinion at the very time when that opinion began to be vigorously challenged by a new generation of historians. *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World* finally saw the light of day in 1982 and represented such an extraordinarily high standard of technical expertise that the book was somewhat inaccessible to most ancient historians who might be expected to read it. The ranks of the historical profession regrettably include few with specialized expertise in timber production. But this work fulfilled a long-standing desire of Meiggs, and he offered no apologies for writing what only he was competent to write.

The work on Herodotus was never completed. This is a great loss, because Herodotus was probably the ancient world's closest approximation to Russell Meiggs in his unique and paradoxical combination of curiosity, eccentricity, and sanity. For many decades Meiggs suffered from cycles of severe depression and equally severe manic enthusiasm. I have often thought that balance and good sense were so important to him precisely because he realized that he was constantly in danger of losing them. His own psychological problems made him acutely sensitive to problems in others. This was perhaps one reason why he took such a warm interest in the lives of his students and colleagues.

He could sometimes judge too hastily, and his personal brand of psychoanalysis, with which he liked to assess his pupils, was rather alarmingly homespun. I discovered this when he went to teach in Swarth-

more for the first time and left me in charge of both his tutorial pupils and Holywell Manor. To ensure that I maintained the proper momentum in both enterprises, he left pages and pages of handwritten guidelines. Those pages, covered with a handwriting that is almost, though not quite, illegible, call up even now the humane, sharp-eyed, sensitive, but sometimes overconfident judgments that were characteristic of Meiggs. Of one young man, he wrote, "Working hard . . . Good second class, improvement possible. Deserves to be stretched." Of a rather fancy pupil with aristocratic tastes, Meiggs noted, "Heavy, horsey commitments until the end of next term, but he keeps bargains. A reasonably loose rein, but at tutorials he should be encouraged to think hard." Meiggs loved gardening, and at times seemed to view his pupils as if they were plants: "Seemed first class until recently but has not improved. . . . Must be kept *fresh* and keen-edged."

Meiggs's handling of undergraduate life in Holywell Manor was by no means so offhand as it seemed. His conduct was all part of a conscious policy, as emerged in his notes for me. In authorizing parties, for example, I was to provide "always a word about washup, and, for big parties, be available if possible in case there's a riot. . . . And keep an ear to the ground to make sure that the cleaners aren't given too much to do." In the matter of noise, "can get out of hand in summer term unless watched. Periodically summon at 9.0 a noisy (*sic*), and read a mild riot act." As for the gardener, "Occasional talks to show that his existence is recognized—naturally a friendly bird."

Meiggs always enjoyed America and Americans, and his pupils liked to believe that the "Yankee Pizarro," Henry Meiggs, who built the Peruvian railway, was an ancestor. The connection would at least explain the extraordinary profile. Meiggs was devoted to Swarthmore College and to his colleagues there, and the sentiment was certainly reciprocated. When he came to America he brought with him some of his more exuberant habits, such as rolling in the snow in the coldest days of winter in scant bathing attire. Because of his abiding interest in Greek epigraphy, he formed close connections with the Institute for Advanced Study and particularly with Benjamin Meritt and Homer Thompson. His long years of work on Ostia had brought him close to Herbert Bloch at Harvard. His election to the American Philosophical Society was therefore not only an appropriate recognition of his scholarship and his international influence, but also of his ties with America and Americans.

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