

AGNES VON ZAHN-HARNACK'S FORGOTTEN

ESSAY ON MOMMSEN

I. Introduction

One of the more remarkable phenomena within classical studies since the international symposium evaluating Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff on the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1981¹ has been the extraordinary rise of interest in the modern history of the discipline. For a critical bibliography of over 3,000 items see William M. Calder III and Daniel J. Kramer, *An Introductory Bibliography to the History of Classical Scholarship Chiefly in the XIXth and XXth Centuries* (Hildesheim 1992). An extensive supplement is in the press. Not only is there an enormous rise in publication but a whole series of international colloquia on the subject, composed of leading scholars in varied disciplines, have been held and their papers published. We note only those on the Cambridge Ritualists, Werner Jaeger, Otto Jahn, Eduard Meyer, Eduard Norden, Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, not to speak of three published symposia on Heinrich Schliemann. Volumes on Hermann Diels, the young Wilamowitz, and classics under National Socialism and Italian Fascism are forthcoming, all symposia held in 1998. Fine biographies, including one on the American scholar Moses Finley, have appeared. The latter is the first book-length biography of an American classicist ever written by a European.² But especially revealing are the editions with commentaries of unpublished and uncensored source material, especially letters and diaries. They are changing the whole way we classicists present our past.³ The contribution of women to classical studies in North America was subject of a recent CAMWS conference at Austin, Texas, in April 1992. The papers were published in this journal.⁴ This paper presents to English-speaking readers a remarkable and forgotten memoir of one of the greatest ancient historians of modern times by a pioneer in the European feminist movement.

We have very few contemporary descriptions of great classical scholars written by women. The reason is simple. Certainly until World War I great classical scholars had few female students; and usually it is a grateful student who writes a memoir of his revered mentor. Such memoirs as do survive are regularly by close relatives, a widow or a

¹ The acts were published as *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren*, edited by W. M. Calder III, H. Flashar, and T. Lindken (Darmstadt 1985). See the review of B. vom Brocke at *HZ* 243 (1986) 101–36.

² See M. Tschirner, *Moses Finley Studien zu Leben, Werk und Rezeption* (Marburg/Lahn 1994).

³ For a recent expert evaluation of modern work in the subject see K. Christ, "Zur Geschichte der Historiographie zehn Jahre nach Momigliano," *Historia* 47 (1998) 234–52.

⁴ See W. M. Calder III, J. P. Hallett, et al., *CW* 90 (1997) 83–194.

daughter. One recalls Ruth Jaeger on Werner Jaeger⁵ or Anna de Lagarde's recollections of her controversial husband⁶ or Adelheid Mommsen's memories of her father in the circle of his family.⁷ Calder persuaded two of Wilamowitz's daughters to write their memories of their father, valuable historical documents containing information that otherwise would have perished.⁸ Extraordinary good fortune has preserved the invaluable reminiscences of Wilamowitz's brilliant and ill-fated female doctoral student on the man she most admired and revered.⁹ Among the English one need only mention Lady Jebb's standard life of her husband¹⁰ and Charlotte M. Leaf's edition of her husband's fragmentary autobiography with her own accompanying memoir.¹¹ In the autobiography of Walter Leaf's daughter, one finds much on the banker and Homeric commentator.¹²

For Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903)¹³ there exists apart from his daughter's recollections a remarkable sketch by a talented woman of extraordinary intelligence who knew him not as the student but as daughter of a respected colleague and friend. Her sketch was posthumously published in a forgotten collection of papers, rarely read by

⁵ R. Jaeger, "Werner Jaeger," *Germans in Boston* (Boston 1981) 19–22.

⁶ A. de Lagarde, *Paul de Lagarde: Erinnerungen aus seinem Leben* (Göttingen 1894; 2nd ed., Leipzig 1918). The volume remains a fundamental source for the Old Testament scholar and notorious anti-Semite.

⁷ A. Mommsen, *Theodor Mommsen im Kreise der Seinen: Erinnerungen seiner Tochter* (Berlin 1936). The book has been reprinted in a modern font and with *addenda* as A. Mommsen, *Mein Vater: Erinnerungen an Theodor Mommsen* (Munich 1992). This informative and readable book deserves translation. Our references are to the first edition, with references to the second in parentheses.

⁸ See S. H. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, "Erinnerungen an meinen Vater," in U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *In wie weit befriedigen die Schlüsse der erhaltenen griechischen Trauerspiele? Ein ästhetischer Versuch*, edited with introduction and notes by W. M. Calder III (Leiden 1974) 159–63, and W. M. Calder III and M. Braun, "Dorothea Freifrau Hiller von Gaertringen, geb. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Hermann von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff on Their Father," *Eikasmos* 6 (1995) 297–308.

⁹ W. M. Calder III, "Eva Sachs on Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff," *ICS* 13 (1988) 203–16 = *Further Letters of Ulrich von Wilamowitz*, edited by W. M. Calder III, prepared for publication by S. Trzaskoma (Hildesheim 1994) 207–21. She died in a madhouse speaking ancient Greek and convinced that she could save the life of Socrates "if she got there in time."

¹⁰ C. Jebb, *Life and Letters of Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb O.M.*, *Litt.D.* (Cambridge 1907), with the review of Wilamowitz at *LZB* 58 (1907) 1469–71. Expectedly the unpleasant is omitted (e.g., Jebb's row with A. H. Sayce), but much is there that otherwise would have been lost. Ideal is a life by a widow and a second one fifty years later by a scholar.

¹¹ C. M. Leaf, *Walter Leaf 1852–1927: Some Chapters of Autobiography with a Memoir* (London 1932). For the widow's method of composition see appendix *infra*.

¹² K. West, *Inner and Outer Circles* (London 1958). One is struck throughout by her extraordinary preference for her father over her mother.

¹³ The best modern and authoritative biography with an extensive bio-bibliography by an expert is A. Demandt, "Theodor Mommsen," in *Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. W. W. Briggs and W. M. Calder III (New York and London 1990) 285–309.

Roman historians.¹⁴ It has never before been translated into English. A word is necessary on the author. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack (1884–1950) was the daughter of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), theologian, church historian, and scholarly organizer. He was professor for Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte at Berlin (1888–1921), director of the Staatsbibliothek (1905–21), long chair of the Kirchenväter-Kommission where he served with Mommsen, rector of the Berlin University (1900–01), historian of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, and president of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft.¹⁵

Agnes von Harnack¹⁶ studied theology, German literature, and English. Because she was a woman, she was forbidden by Gustav Roethe to take her doctorate at Berlin.¹⁷ She took it, therefore, at Greifswald under Ehrismann with a dissertation on Clemens Brentano's *Aloys und Imelde*. She then began her teaching at a private girls' boarding school in Berlin, Das Institut Wellmann von Elpons, in the Grolmannstraße in Charlottenburg. She taught religion, German, and English and later shared in the administration. She became active in the women's movement in Berlin and during World War I organized women for the war effort and served herself in the War Department. In 1919 she married the lawyer Dr. Karl von Zahn. There were two children of the marriage. In 1924 she published her book *The Working Woman*. It soon became a standard work on the subject. Her busy life was devoted to teaching, the women's movement, and raising her family. Apart from her influential articles supporting the liberation of women,¹⁸ her most enduring publication is the life of her father.¹⁹ Her sketch of Theodor Mommsen reveals in miniature her ability as a writer and observer. Our version is not meant to replace the original but to make it available to a wider audience.

¹⁴ A. von Zahn-Harnack, *Schriften und Reden 1914 bis 1950* (Tübingen 1964). The date of composition for her essay is not known but must be after 1945.

¹⁵ His daughter was his biographer: see A. von Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack*, 2nd ed. (Berlin 1951), and for English readers G. W. Glick, *The Reality of Christianity: A Study of Adolf von Harnack as Historian and Theologian* (New York 1967). For his writings see F. Smend and J. Dummer, *Adolf von Harnack: Verzeichnis seiner Schriften bis 1930* (Leipzig 1990). The great volume on Harnack and Mommsen is S. Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen und Adolf Harnack: Wissenschaft und Politik im Berlin des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 1997), reviewed by Calder in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 49 (1998) 375–76.

¹⁶ Biographical details are from I. Reicke, "Agnes von Zahn-Harnack: Ein Lebensbild," in von Zahn-Harnack (above, n.14) 189–207. The essay is a fine portrait of a great woman, but too often chronological and historical details are lacking.

¹⁷ Because of the obscenity of much German literature (not least Goethe!) women took doctorates in the subject far later than they did in mathematics and the sciences. For the same reason classics were late in encouraging women. See generally J. C. Albigetti, *Schooling German Girls and Women: Secondary and Higher Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton 1988).

¹⁸ The most influential are easily available in von Zahn-Harnack (above, n.14) 1–85.

¹⁹ For the most informed evaluation see Rebenich (above, n.15) 8.

II. The Text

Charlottenburg has a Mommsen Street and a Mommsen Prep School; it has too, as the old telephone book reveals, a Mommsen Pharmacy, a Mommsen Drug Store, a Mommsen Sanatorium, and even Mommsen parking garages. But how many residents of Charlottenburg still know who Mommsen was? One can of course read about him in an encyclopedia. There one will find that he was born in the year 1817, and that his main work was a multi-volume *History of Rome*. Because of his democratic ideas he was relieved of his post in the year 1848 and found asylum in Switzerland. In 1852 he was recalled to Prussia, and from 1858 he served as professor in Berlin. His external appearance is preserved in a statue, which was erected in his memory on the property of the university and which survived the bombing of Berlin.²⁰ For years Mommsen was the leading member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences. His particular achievement here was the organization of "The Big Business of Scholarship." That means the achievement of scholarly projects which were not done by an individual but were directed by a great man. He was a patriot and a citizen of the world at the same time, whose native country transcended religious confession, political party, and race but whose heart and mind embraced mankind.

I had the great luck, still, to know Mommsen personally and can recall a bit about him from my memory.

As a child I could see him. He used to come with his wife in winter every other week to the so-called circle.²¹ This small-town, cosy term really did not describe properly the gathering, which in no way was petit-bourgeois, and included a circle of from five to seven married couples. The men held high positions in scholarship, and their wives were distinguished for their charm and artistic talents. The children were permitted to appear after the meal and greet all the guests; and there for the first time I recall having seen Mommsen and heard him speak. He said to the fellow sitting next to him: "You see, one can best study the differences in peoples from details. When Germans, Frenchmen, Englishmen part in the evening, they say: 'Gute Nacht, bonne nuit, good night'; but the Italian wishes them 'Felicissima notte.'" The two Italian words rang like music in my ears; and in the eyes of the old man shone his tender love of that country, to which he had dedicated his life's work.

I was also well acquainted with his handwriting. Because he stood in close scholarly contact with my father, letters and postcards used

²⁰ The reference is to the marble statue by A. Brütt (1855–1939) unveiled in the courtyard of the university on November 1, 1909; see K.-D. Gandert, *Vom Prinzenpalais zur Humboldt-Universität* (Berlin 1985) 170–71.

²¹ The German word is *Kränzchen*. For this group see L. Wickert, *Theodor Mommsen: Eine Biographie*, vol. 4, *Grösse und Grenzen* (Frankfurt/Main 1980) 37–38, and A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 22–23 (35–36), where we find that the gatherings occurred on Wednesday evenings.

to come from him sometimes almost daily. The lines on them always clearly went upwards to the right, as visible expression of the winged, optimistic character of their writer.²²

But now I was supposed to eat lunch alone and by myself once a week in the Mommsen house. My school was far away, classes took place morning and afternoon, and the Mommsen house lay close by the school. That way the effort of twice walking to school was spared me. With my sixteen years I was really quite uneasy as I stood feeling so small for the first time before the little, old-fashioned house in the March Street. It was thickly covered with trellises of ivy.²³ Immediately on the floor, as one entered, reproductions of ancient reliefs and fragments of ancient Roman inscriptions greeted the guest. Precious discoveries of the epigraphist. I was greeted kindly in the living room, by Lump too, the old dachshund who generously greeted the new guest.²⁴ The master of the house was not yet back from the University. Suddenly he appeared—and to my great amazement brought with him a giant shopping bag! He shook out the contents of the bag on the round table. Suddenly appeared fresh artichokes, carefully chosen eating apples, and also a few packets of Italian spaghetti and macaroni.²⁵ Everything he had bought himself, to present to his wife. "Father always brings things which he loves to eat himself," said the daughters in good fun. This I first had to learn, that in this house people gladly made fun of one another, and also sometimes teased a bit; but it always took place with intelligence and delicacy; and no one felt himself hurt. Mommsen himself was a master of the polished bon mot. With one sentence he could characterize—and often also annihilate—a man.

The little house was always filled with people, even though no longer so full as in earlier days. Sixteen children were produced from Mommsen's marriage, twelve of which, six sons and six daughters, survived their parents. They were not easy years, when the children were small and the income very limited—so limited, that friends used to say: "There isn't enough of anything, only of Frau Mommsen's good nature!" This good nature was not only for her children, but most of all a vital need for her passionate, high-spirited husband. She was the great blessing of the house; and there has perhaps never been a better marriage than between these two people, who at first glance seemed so fundamentally different.²⁶ Mommsen's most

²² Her observation is confirmed by the plates in *Mommsen und Wilamowitz Briefwechsel 1872-1903* (Berlin 1905) 64 and Rebenich, *Mommsen-Harnack*, 579.

²³ The ivy is illustrated in A. Mommsen (above, n.7) frontispiece (facing p. 92). She discusses it on p. 27 (43).

²⁴ One sees him with his master in 1903 in A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 28 (on dust jacket only in reprint).

²⁵ Von Zahn-Harnack may be indebted here to A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 9 (15).

²⁶ This judgment is confirmed by Wickert (above, n.21) 29-33; see further A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 41-46 (65-71).

beautiful poems from the days of his marriage until his advanced age concerned his wife.²⁷

The children were warmly embraced within this love. Mommsen was a great friend of children.²⁸ "There must always be a five-year-old in the house." This expression most clearly characterizes his relation to children. For years before my time, it was the grandchildren, who with delight saw a container on grandfather's desk, which contained sweets and bore in clear letters the inscription "feed for kids."²⁹ There is an obviously silly, even though often repeated, legend that Mommsen did not recognize his own children on the street. It could easily have happened that he did not see them, because there fits him as scarcely any other German professor the phrase of Lichtenberg:³⁰ "People call him unorganized, because he is always so organized." I myself experienced a wonderful example of this:

When I came for lunch one day, the master of the house had a little ribbon over his left ear. To my polite query as to what had happened to him, he only looked at me with a smile, which was partly sly, but also concealed something like a bad conscience! But the daughters eagerly informed me: "Father as usual got up at almost six in the morning, had lit the oil lamp on his desk, enjoyed the cup of cold black coffee, which always stood there for him, and then had begun with his work. He was missing a book, which stood on the highest shelf just under the ceiling. Because the light of the lamp was so weak Mommsen lit a candle and with it climbed the library ladder. When he reached the top, he found the book he wanted. Its content so intrigued him, that he did not take the time to climb down again. He sat down on the highest rung of the ladder, placed the book on his raised knees and read until—yes, until a sharp pain made him aware of the fact that his ear was burnt!" And this, so the daughters assured me, happened to him not once in life but many times.³¹

Mommsen was a man of heroic industry; even his trips, which often took him to France, again and again to Italy, were always concerned with his work. Each day, every single hour, was used for research. In Rome he was a very popular figure. I remember a trip in an open wagon in Rome during which my father mentioned the name Mommsen. Then the coachman turned round on his bench to us and said with true Roman pathos: "Il grande Mommsen!"

²⁷ The early poems to his wife were not published in the original edition but have been added to the second (129–39). Mommsen's love letters to his future wife have recently been discovered (J. Dummer).

²⁸ Confirmed at Wickert (above, n.21) 23.

²⁹ Von Zahn-Harnack's idiomatic German is *Kinderfutter*. A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 14 (22), prefers *Enkelfutter*.

³⁰ She cites the writer G. C. Lichtenberg (1742–1799), famous for his aphorisms.

³¹ The library with ladder is illustrated in A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 13 (plate 5). For the repeated burnings of his ears see *ibid.*, 16–17 (25–26).

"The great Mommsen!" There came the day when the eighty-five-year-old closed his eyes forever. A kindly fate summoned him away, before blindness, which threatened him, hindered his reading and working.³² I had the good fortune to stand at his bier. Death had smoothed his furrowed features and hammered out a Roman portrait of perfect beauty and dignity. So Hans Olde has bequeathed him to posterity in a masterly sketch.³³

Then came the funeral service, which the town of Charlottenburg prepared for its great honorary citizen in the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche. The church itself, but also the whole area around the church, was packed full of people, who wanted to share in this hour. Adolf von Harnack delivered the funeral oration for him.³⁴ It concerned not only the great scholar, not only the upright, honest, liberal politician, but also the most loyal, most deeply venerated friend and master. Harnack's voice, subdued by pain and shock, had the ring of a broken bell, when he began: "A star is gone from the sky and a crown has fallen." He described the dead: "An artist, a poet he was and remained until old age. Therefore, he never lost his youth. Exact scholarship and a poetical spirit and grace here have formed the rarest alliance, and one can perhaps say this alliance was what was most unique in his person." And he applied to the dead the verse in which Friedrich Nietzsche once characterized himself:³⁵

Yes, I know from where I come,
Untamed, like the flame,
I glow; and I consume myself.
All that I touch becomes light.
All that I leave is coal.
Certainly I am a flame.

APPENDIX CHARLOTTE M. LEAF ON THE COMPOSITION OF HER HUSBAND'S BIOGRAPHY

In a letter in the possession of Calder to Dr. Claude Wilson³⁶ and dated 2nd May 1932, 6 Sussex Place, Regent's Park, N.W.1., Charlotte Leaf describes her method of composition. She writes:

Dear Dr Claude

You will never know how happy your letter about Walter's book has made me. It was you partly who gave me the incentive to write it

³² For the threat of blindness see A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 81 (126-27).

³³ Reproduced in A. Mommsen (above, n.7) 82 (facing p. 93).

³⁴ A. von Harnack, *Rede bei der Begräbnisfeier Theodor Mommsen am 5. Nov. 1903 in der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche gehalten* (Leipzig 1903). An English version was published in *The Expository Times* 15 (1904) 153-56.

³⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta, III (Munich 1966) 32.

³⁶ Dr. Wilson cared for Leaf near the end: see C. M. Leaf (above, n.11) 290-91, 294.

& I feared you would be disappointed with the result. Your letter & the one from Walter's brother Herbert are the two I value the most and I have already had 60 letters! The reviews have all been kind so far.

I wonder if you can as a doctor approve of my having done all the work on the book in the early morning, from 5:30 to 7:30 a.m., on a thermos of tea? "No," I can hear you saying, "a most undesirable method!" Yet the maids are still in bed, there is no telephone; one does not neglect one's domestic duties. And I go to bed at 8 when thus working. Please thank Mrs. Wilson for reading the book & believe me.

Your aff: Lotta Leaf.³⁷

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³⁷ The following volumes referred to above as forthcoming have now been published:

W. M. Calder III and R. S. Smith, "A Supplementary Bibliography to the History of Classical Scholarship Chiefly in the XIXth and XXth Centuries" *Paradosis* 2 (Bari 2000).

W. M. Calder III and J. Mansfeld, eds., "Herman Diels (1848–1922): et la Science de l'Antiquité," *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique* 45 (Vandoeuvres-Genève 1999).

W. M. Calder III, M. C. Dubischar, M. Hose, and G. Voigt-Spira, eds., "Wilamowitz in Greifswald: Akten der Tagung zum 150. Geburtstag Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorffs in Greifswald 19.–22. Dezember 1998," *Spudasmata* 81 (Hildesheim, Zürich, and New York 2000).