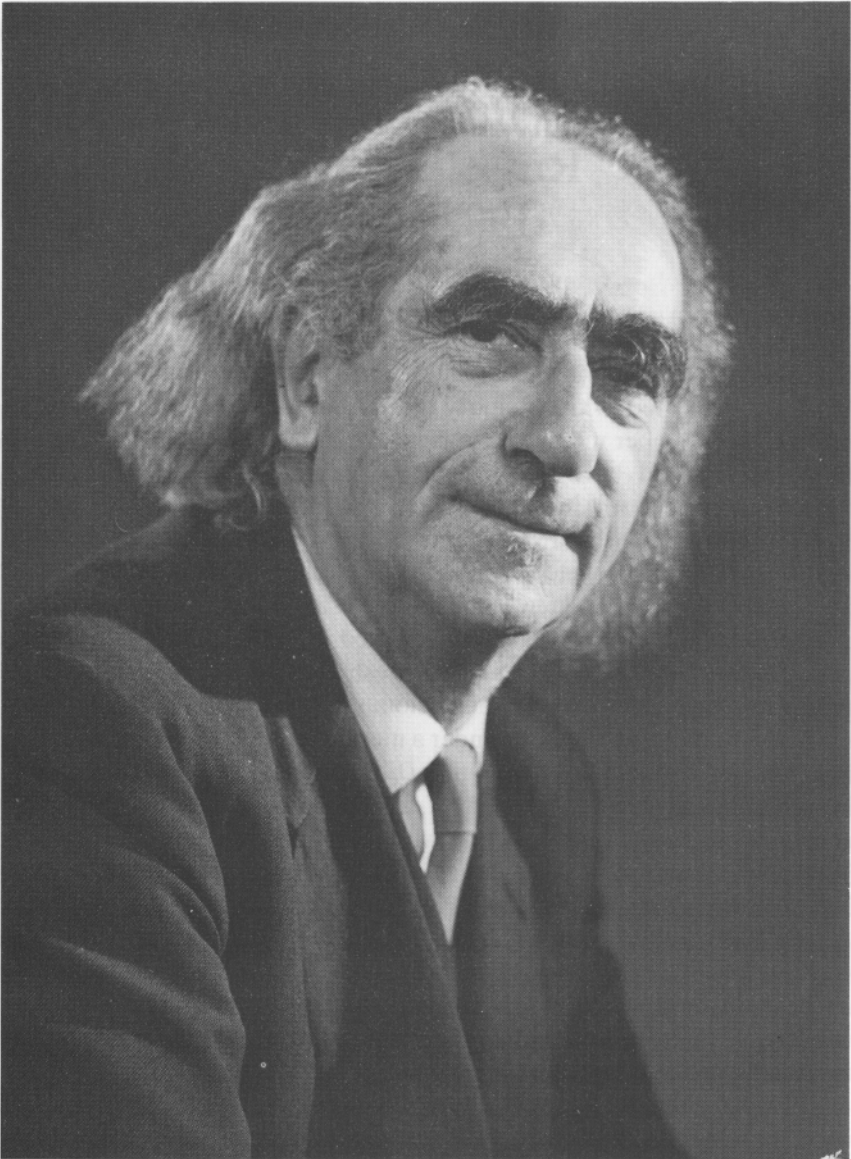


## Russell Meiggs 1902–1989

RUSSELL MEIGGS' last book, *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, is dedicated to the memory of his grandfather John and his great-uncle Henry, 'timber merchants in New York State'. The family, originally from Dorset, had been established in America since the seventeenth century. Henry, born in 1811, joined the movement to California in 1849, but to establish sawmills, not to search for gold. Being skilful, vigorous, enterprising and persuasive, he rapidly achieved distinction in San Francisco and after a few years there ran for Mayor. Unfortunately, he overreached himself financially, and arrived in Chile in 1854 as a fugitive from Californian justice. He made a fresh fortune in Peru, displaying a genius for engineering management, notably in the Trans-Andean railway, the highest point of which runs under a mountain still called Mount Meiggs. His younger brother, to whom the *Dictionary of American Biography*, in two columns devoted to Henry, does not do justice, had joined his enterprise in San Francisco (but without falling foul of the law) and joined him later in Peru, where (as contemporary documents show) his exceptional managerial and financial talent was greatly respected. About the time of Henry's death John moved to London, where he enjoyed great wealth, was highly regarded in English society, and set up a company for railway-building in Argentina. Political events there wrecked this enterprise, and John died almost destitute, having sacrificed everything in the interests of his creditors.

His son William Meiggs, the fourth of his nine children, eloped in 1897 with Mary May to Argentina. Their first child, Helen, was born in Buenos Aires the following year, but they were in London by 1902, when Russell was born. There was no inheritance from John. If William had employment, it did not last long; nor did his association with his family, for he was back in



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Argentina by 1904. From there he sent postcards signed 'Uncle Willy'. It seems likely that Russell as a child was led to believe that his father was dead; William did not in fact die until 1939 (in England), but Russell felt no obligation towards him. Mary brought up her children in poverty, but William's elder sister secured a place for Russell at Christ's Hospital.

He said later in life that he 'owed everything' to Christ's Hospital. The headmaster from 1919 to 1930 was Sir William Hamilton Fyfe, who, like Meiggs, had been brought up in poverty by his mother. Fyfe was a committed Christian, all his life a giver and not a taker, a breaker of barriers between classes and ages, combining a strong sense of duty with a considerable sense of humour and an alarmingly sane disrespect for convention. His influence on Meiggs was profound; he was in fact a splendid substitute for an unsatisfactory father, and their friendship endured until Fyfe's death in 1965. Meiggs, an all-rounder, became Head Grecian and Head Boy, and won an exhibition to Keble. There followed the predictable Firsts in Mods and Greats, and in 1925 the Pelham Studentship at the British School in Rome. He remained an all-rounder, and displayed his talents as actor and producer in the Keble Players; and through the long friendship with Leslie Banks which was rooted in that activity he kept in touch for many years with the theatrical world.

After Rome he taught for two years at Christ's Hospital, but returned to Keble as a tutor in 1928. He was elected to a fellowship in 1930 and was Dean from 1935 to 1939. While he was at Keble he edited the *Oxford Magazine*, visited the Soviet Union, and went to the United States to raise support for the Keble appeal. His unique combination of candour, firmness and kindness, and the speed and penetration of his thinking, whether it was applied to historical problems, contemporary political situations or delinquent undergraduates, made a profound impression on senior and junior members of the college. He maintained that 'teaching is a branch of the acting profession'; and if more dons of the 1930s had taken the proposition seriously, their teaching would have been a good deal better than it was.

In 1938 he was invited by Balliol to take over from Duncan Macgregor (who as a tutor was fading out) some of their Ancient History teaching for Greats. Balliol thought so well of him that in the following year they offered him a tutorial fellowship, and he accepted it. Nowadays it would be unusual for a fellow to move from his own college to a position of the same category at another college, but at that time Keble was used to it; H. M. D. Parker, Meiggs' own tutor in Ancient History, had made a similar move to Magdalen in 1927. What chiefly determined Meiggs' move was that at Balliol he would no longer have any significant degree of responsibility for the Pass

School, which at Keble, he felt, had taken up an inordinate amount of his time.

Early in 1940 he was recruited by the Ministry of Supply and became Chief Labour Officer in the department concerned with the production of timber. One consequence of that period was a thorough knowledge of trees and the techniques of those who turn them into timber; a second was a book little known in the Classical world, *Home Timber Production 1939–1945* (London 1949); the third, and most important, was his marriage in 1941 to the historian Pauline Gregg. They were both at Warwick in the Ministry of Supply, both devoted some of their spare time to amateur theatricals, and they first met when she was playing Elizabeth Barrett and he Robert Browning.

As Praefectus of Holywell Manor from 1945 until his retirement from his fellowship in 1969 he got to know generations of research students at Balliol, irrespective of subject. Wherever one goes in the world, one has a good chance of meeting people who remember the Meiggses with great affection. He lived up to the standards of the very best ‘housemaster’ dons of the previous generation, and in that respect he earned a reputation as an ‘archetypal don’. Academically, though, he improved greatly on the archetype; neither his teaching nor his research was cast in the traditional mould, because his intellect was both restless and resolute.

New pupils found his appearance formidable on first acquaintance; a mane of long hair (many years before it became fashionable, and regarded with great disapproval by some of his more conventional colleagues at Balliol), a complexion which suggested many seasons of baking and desiccation under a desert sun, bushy eyebrows, craggy features and thin lips gave an impression which was reinforced by an incisive way of speaking, and the subtle inclination of the mouth which betrayed that he was smiling was not easily observed until one got to know him better. His criticisms of imperfect work were sharp, and could sometimes be wounding when they were meant to be cheerful and jocular. He pushed pupils to their limits, but he was a very good judge of what an individual’s limit was, and he did not try to push past it. With those who had been away from academic work for four or five years he was merciless, and in that he was quite right; it would have been very bad for us if such excuses had been allowed, and we recognised, when we stopped to think, that in teaching one period of Greek history and two of Roman he had far more to catch up with than we had. Anyone in real trouble found him patient, sympathetic and generous with good, practical advice. It was characteristic of his tutorials that he compelled us to ask awkward questions to which neither the sources nor the secondary literature gave direct answers, and always to think of the Greeks and Romans—whether eminent politicians or

anonymous stonecutters and sailors—not as chessmen to be moved around in an intellectual game but as real people dealing with real predicaments. His prodding was sometimes facetious ('How did they get enough ostraka for an ostracism? Did you break up the jerry before you went to the assembly, or what?'), sometimes more emotional, as when he expressed his admiration for the self-discipline which made transaction of business by a very large citizen-assembly possible.

The years immediately after the War were years of peculiar excitement in Greek history. The first volume of the *Athenian Tribute Lists* had been published in 1939 and the first volume of Gomme's *Historical Commentary in Thucydides* in 1945 (Gomme describes it in his preface as 'virtually a 1939 book', but he took full account of *Athenian Tribute Lists*). Meiggs' experience at Ostia strongly inclined him to put documentary inscriptions at the very heart of historical studies and then to see how far the literary 'authorities' could be reconciled with them—he was not among those who grumbled 'the tribute-lists haven't really told us anything we couldn't learn from Thucydides'—though the relative paucity of material makes that a harder approach for the Greek historian than for the Roman. He was University Lecturer in Greek Epigraphy from 1949, the year of Marcus Tod's retirement, to 1957, and his skill and judgment in the handling of inscriptions were strongly reflected in his teaching.

Three projects in which he took a large share were designed primarily with the needs of students in view. The first was the revision of J. B. Bury's *History of Greece*, the second edition of which dated to 1922 but was still the standard one-volume Greek history used by sixth-formers and students. For the new edition (1951) Meiggs had to work under the severe constraint of retaining the original pagination, but for the fourth edition, which appeared in 1975, the publishers agreed to a new format, and Meiggs was able to rewrite substantial portions, shifting emphases and inserting material which was not, and in some cases could not be, appreciated in Bury's time—for example, the tribute assessment of 425. Sir George Hill's *Sources for Greek History, B.C. 478–431* (Oxford 1897, 2nd ed. 1907), another standby of undergraduates reading Greats, needed not only substantial expansion on the documentary side but reconsideration of its selection of excerpts from literature. Meiggs produced a new *Sources* in collaboration with Anthony Andrewes. It still bore the name of Hill on its spine, but the literary sources were rearranged, the epigraphic portion was transformed, and five massive indexes divided into sections and subsections provided a panorama of the Pentekontaetia in which users can quickly spot the precise topics of their choice. The rate at which new inscriptions of importance were being discovered made a revision of Marcus Tod's *Selection of Greek Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century*

B.C. (Oxford 1933; reissued with an appendix, 1947) an urgent necessity, and Meiggs and David Lewis did this in collaboration. Their new *GHI*, published in 1969 (second edition, 1989), contained, out of a total of 95 documents, 22 which had not been in Tod, shedding in the process three long documents which are now available in *Athenian Tribute-Lists* and a few from which nothing could be learned except that some people well known from literature had really existed. No less than half the new items had been found since Tod's original publication.

One product of Meiggs' epigraphical interests was a magisterial article, 'The Dating of Fifth-Century Attic Inscriptions', (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* lxxxvi [1966]). It had been vigorously argued, particularly by Professor Mattingly, that the generally accepted dating of Attic documents had relied far too much on a dogma that the three-barred sigma gave way completely to the four-barred at a point in time in the mid-440s. In his article Meiggs catalogued the forms of  $\beta$ ,  $\rho$ ,  $\sigma$  and  $\varphi$  attested in inscriptions which are securely dated on other grounds, adding a list of those which are not so dated but contain letter-forms which are putatively early. He was in no way hastening to the defence of a dogma, because he recognised that where many stone-cutters are concerned we cannot expect letter-forms to change universally and irreversibly overnight, but presenting the evidence as a basis for the assessment of probabilities, and he showed how enthusiasm for the revision of accepted chronology could lead to the adoption of a later historical context for a document when an earlier context is at least equally plausible and in some cases demonstrably more so. In an appendix he points out the superficiality of Sir Moses Finley's criticism of historians for their preoccupation with 'the date when the Athenian stone-cutters began to carve the letter sigma with four bars instead of three'. The issue is in fact vital to the reconstruction of the history of Athenian imperialism, and 'Finley has made a molehill out of a mountain'. Meiggs would have understood, and possibly Finley would not, how and why laborious dissection of small fossils from the Burgess Shale matters to evolutionary biology.

During his year at Rome as Pelham Student his imagination was captured by Ostia. He made several further visits before the War, and by 1940 had prepared a short book about it; but he dropped this project during the busy years immediately after the War, resumed it in 1951, and paid many further visits to Ostia, where his talent, integrity and warmth of personality made friends of all those concerned with the site. By then he had a much more comprehensive book in mind. *Roman Ostia*, which was published by the Clarendon Press in 1960, is undoubtedly his greatest book. It was unanimously acclaimed in the reviews (except for one in *Classical Philology*, written from the standpoint of a social historian

who deplored the 'lack of organization' in what Herbert Bloch, whose own experience of Ostia put him in a good position to judge, praised as 'excellent organization'), although Meiggs' decision not to include a folding map was no less universally regretted. Bloch thought the book a 'masterpiece', and Jocelyn Toynbee called it 'an object-lesson in ancient history'. Although there was plainly much more of Ostia to be excavated and much more to be found out about it (as proved to be the case at the end of the 1950s), the most systematic campaign of excavation had been completed in 1942, by which time two thirds of the town had been exposed and the interest of the Italian directors had rightly shifted to interpretation and conservation. *Roman Ostia* was the right book at the right time. A new edition appeared in 1972, in which many points in the original edition were amplified in the light of new data, particularly new inscriptions, and the most significant revision was owed to the accidental discovery, in the course of roadworks for the airport at Fiumicino, of a substantial synagogue, which overturned Meiggs' conclusion (justified on the evidence available in 1960) that there was no Jewish community at Ostia. His style was plain, muscular and vivid. His task demanded equal competence in the handling of many different types of evidence. What makes *Roman Ostia* 'an object-lesson in ancient history' is the clarity with which it describes historical change, the acumen displayed in the choice of relevant data, and conciseness in explaining their relevance. These qualities are especially notable in the chapters which deal with the archaeology of the Claudian and Trajanic harbours, the analysis of the governing class, the operation of the guilds (emphasising that they were combinations of employers and not analogous to trades unions), the process by which Christianity came to predominate in the course of the fourth century AD, changes in artistic taste, and the gradual shift of population and prosperity from Ostia itself to Portus.

A shorter book on Ostia, designed for a series entitled 'Ancient Sites', exists in typescript; the publisher abandoned the series, but Meiggs' book, with a certain amount of editing and up-dating, may yet appear.

He began work in 1961 on *The Athenian Empire*, which was published in 1972. It is hard for anyone whose enthusiasm for fifth-century Greek history was aroused by reading Greats in the Post-War years to open the book anywhere without a pang of nostalgia; but perhaps that is not entirely a good thing. It is an unhappy fact that neither *Journal of Hellenic Studies* nor *Classical Review* reviewed the book (though both acknowledged receipt of a copy). Conceivably potential reviewers felt that it was an old-fashioned book and would have found it embarrassing to say so. Certainly the reference on the first page to 'the unrivalled authority of Thucydides', and phrases such as 'the best tradition says . . .', 'our earliest authorities . . .' and '[had this occurred] he must have

mentioned it' are out of keeping with attitudes to ancient historiography which were taking shape by then. Chapters 21 and 22, on how the empire was regarded in the fifth and fourth centuries, are sound enough on the issues which ancient sources themselves thrust under our noses, but miss (for example) the gruesome implications of Isocrates' dismissive reference (*Panathenaicus* 70) to 'insignificant islands' and fail to probe the Funeral Speech deeply enough to uncover its exultation in aggression. He was baffled by Herodotus' evasive allusion to Kallias' mission to Persia, for which Professor Badian (*Journal of Hellenic Studies* cvii [1987] 7f.) has now provided an explanation which has very far-reaching implications for fifth-century history and historiography. If we consider *The Athenian Empire* as a 'state of the art' book on a very large subject charged from beginning to end with controversy, we may well doubt whether anyone could have done the job better than Meiggs. It is, after all, a splendidly lucid and concise presentation, simultaneously candid and courteous, and always informed by sensible judgment, of the problems and arguments at the point they had reached by 1970. There is a characteristic touch of self-deprecating humour in one entry in the index: 'Probably, *passim*'.

After retirement in 1969 he turned to a subject which originated in his years in the Ministry of Supply: timber in the ancient world. From time to time he had mentioned to friends his ambition to write a book about it one day, and *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World* appeared from the Clarendon Press in 1982. Wood was of such fundamental importance to the ancient world that it may seem surprising that there was a gap to be filled; but, after all, there cannot ever have been many good Classicists who had Meiggs' intimate knowledge of the qualities of different woods and the practicalities of moving great timbers from source to destination. He comprehended under 'the ancient Mediterranean world' regions as far east as Assyria, but not those west of Italy. The surviving remnants of ancient wood (often carbonized) are enough to answer some questions and create some surprises, but any attempt to give a comprehensive account of the woods used by the ancients for this purpose or that is bedevilled by semantic uncertainties. There is no general agreement on what the Egyptians meant by *aš* and *meru*, inconsistencies and regional variations in the Greek words for different kinds of oak were observed by Theophrastus, and poets (to say nothing of prose authors on unfamiliar ground) are notoriously careless of distinctions which mattered less to their original audiences than they do now to historians. Ancient cities and rulers were alive to the perils of deforestation in the areas on which they were accustomed to draw for timber, and they knew that deforested mountain-slopes are subject to landslides which expose bare rock and leave the land useless, but population growth, the corresponding demand for ever more agricultural



land, and the consumption of wood in fuel and building materials brought great changes before the end of antiquity to forests which were readily accessible from cities or situated near a sea-coast. In a masterly chapter on deforestation, using illuminating evidence from medieval and modern times, Meiggs shows that goats, whose consumption of new growth has made them the villains of the story in modern tradition, are comparatively innocent; it is simply growth of population and consumption in the last two centuries to which really serious and irreversible devastation must be debited.

For a substantial part of his career Meiggs had to combat a cyclic depression which first struck early in 1946. In the depressive phase he became lethargic and apathetic, unresponsive in tutorials and faltering in giving the lectures which when he was well had so powerfully impressed audiences by their vividness and spontaneity. He was treated several times by electro-convulsive therapy; a few days after each treatment, some hidden switch in his brain was turned and he became irrepressibly active, effervescing with new (mostly good, and never unrealistic) ideas and projects—until the next occasion on which the switch was turned, in a matter of minutes, the other way. In the mid 1960s a new medication (lithium carbonate), unknown at the start of his illness, smoothed out the ups and downs into a welcome stability. The symptoms of depression are in large measure the same, no matter whom it attacks, but the characters of those who suffer its invasion are not, and Meiggs' own extraordinary strength of character not only enabled him, during the years of recurrent illness, to serve on the Hebdomadal Council and pay enjoyable visits to the University of Ibadan and Marlborough College, Vermont, but also ensured that even when deeply depressed he did not become suspicious or hostile in his dealings with other people; nor was he ever inclined to self-pity.

He was a Christian, who read the Bible daily and prayed on his knees until he was too old to kneel. In college business he was always a peacemaker, immune to the temptations of intrigue, malice and slander. He forgave readily, and was prompt in giving helpful advice (which even Lord Balogh sought from him on occasion). Yet the religious faith which underlay his treatment of his fellow humans was never allowed to obtrude; no one could ever have been less sanctimonious, and no one less likely to imagine that charity required him to praise where praise was not due. He was in fact an extremely shrewd judge of personalities and motives, and in private conversation would commonly express himself in terms which sounded cynical but lacked the essential ingredient of cynicism in that they squared with the evidence. Candour was always to be expected of him. He once told a young research fellow, 'No, you shouldn't get that job. [X] is much better than you are'. Some years later, meeting the same person, he

remembered and made amends: 'I was wrong about you'. Occasionally he lapsed into the donnish habit of summing up a person as 'beta minus', but that sounded out of character. In the late 1950s, lamenting a certain lack of enthusiasm for ancient history among undergraduates reading Greats, he exclaimed 'Martin Frederiksen is the only *real* historian I've taught since the War!' (Noticing that I must have heard him, he hastily qualified the statement, but he need not have done).

In 1960 he was invited to Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, as a Visiting Professor. The College gave him an honorary doctorate in 1971 and invited him back, after his retirement, in 1974, 1976 and 1977. He endeared himself to faculty and students alike not only by the standard he set in teaching but by his readiness to talk to anyone about anything. His colleagues' children loved him, and he evoked astonishment and admiration by rolling in deep snow, wearing only bathing-shorts (physical hardiness was one of many attributes which he shared with Bernard Ashmole). A Cedar of Lebanon was planted on the Swarthmore campus in his honour.

He had a strong belief in the handwritten letter as a bond between people, and although his letters were not easy to decipher—his handwriting looked at first sight like hasty Egyptian Demotic—they were well worth the labour of decipherment. Margery Allingham, a friend of many years, declared, 'He taught me how to write letters'. Thanks to his enjoyment of the art, he was able to keep contact with his former pupils at Swarthmore as fully as he did with his Oxford pupils.

He lived at Garsington from 1969 onwards, where his ability to insert himself into a community was quickly manifested. He had an exceptional rapport with people of all ages, and the whole village was anguished by his death. His capacity for work had been progressively reduced by immobility (an operation on one hip was reasonably successful, but the operation on the other was not) and failing eyesight (he lost one eye in an accident) and memory (he suffered a series of strokes from 1982 onwards). Yet neither his humour nor his curiosity was extinguished, and he continued to reflect on intractable problems in Herodotus long after he knew that he would not be writing any more. There are few scholars of his generation to whom so many pupils, colleagues and friends owe so much.

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