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ARTHUR DARBY NOCK *

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ARTHUR DARBY NOCK was born in Portsmouth, England on February 21, 1902, the son of Cornelius and Alice Mary Ann Page Nock. In his family's quiet and somewhat austere home, he and his elder sister were always urged to excel in their school work and had little opportunity for easy contact with friends. In later years Nock felt that early loss. Meanwhile, however, he flourished in the atmosphere of forced learning, and distinguished himself both at the Portsmouth Grammar School and at Trinity College, Cambridge, to which he had won a Scholarship.

From the start Nock gravitated toward Classics and Ancient History, and from the start he showed a kind of genius: with a prodigious memory and an unerring linguistic skill he combined an uncanny speed and accuracy in reading and a delight in the discovery, ordering, and establishment of facts. At first he worked at the interests into which his classical training at school and university had taken him, becoming at the unheard-of age of twenty the annual reviewer of Latin literature in *The Year's Work in Classical Studies*. His first major effort, however, was a response to Gilbert Murray's plea for an adequate treatment of Sallustius's *On the Gods and the Universe*. He produced in 1926 an edition of this fourth-century Greek text, with a translation and a masterly introduction. Here already one finds that extraordinary balance of thoughtful generalization with specific fact which was a decade later to make his two chapters in the *Cambridge Ancient History* on Roman religious developments small masterpieces of exposition. In later years Nock would shake his monumental head over the introduction to *Sallustius* and say, "How did I know so much then?"

His enormous energies were not confined in the least, however,

* A minute on the life and services of the late Professor Arthur Darby Nock, Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion, prepared for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University by a committee consisting of Professors Crane Brinton, Frank M. Cross, Jr., Fred N. Robinson, Krister Stendahl, and Zeph Stewart (Chairman). This minute was presented to the Faculty at its meeting on February 11, 1964.

to the literary and philosophical studies which were making his early reputation. In a flood of articles and reviews he touched during the next few years on almost every branch of classical learning, but with increasing emphasis on the fields of ancient religion and magic (including the evidence of papyri, inscriptions, and coins) which were to become the center of his life work. In his middle twenties he was already an international figure. Perhaps the crowning achievement of this period was his essay in 1928 on "Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background." The next year he was invited to come to Harvard as a visiting lecturer and the following year asked to remain as Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion.

Nock did not hesitate to accept the chair which he was to hold until his death. He considered himself above all an historian, and for him history was primarily knowledge and interpretation of the raw materials from which one might reconstruct the life and culture of an age. In the history of religion in particular he was to dwell on the practice and the expression of little people, of the common man, rather than on literary and philosophical sources, though he knew them perfectly. He saw the essence of religion not in philosophy or theology but in piety and cult. He had a contempt for self-declared "profundity," and his unusual combination of genius and common sense allowed him to treat the actual manifestations of religion without condescension. This was not just a matter of empathy. Once a practicing Anglo-Catholic, his religious sentiment remained the same even in later years of agnosticism.

Moving into Eliot House when it opened in 1931, he and his library remained an immovable object even to the Navy in the war years. In 1937 he became a Senior Fellow of the Society of Fellows, which was henceforth his major concern and his second home. Shuffling busily between these centers of interest, he flourished amid the books and the anecdotes which gathered and heaped around him. He had been unhappy in the Fellowship at Clare, to which he had gone in 1923. In this new position and new land he found at once a freedom and an appreciation — of his eccentricities as well as of his abilities — which won his heart. He became a United States citizen in 1936.

In these and the following years his production of articles and

important reviews continued unabated. In 1933 appeared *Conversion*, an imaginative and exacting study of religious currents in the Hellenistic and Roman world, in 1936 *St. Paul*, and in 1945 and 1954 the four volumes of the Hermetic Corpus, an edition planned twenty years before and completed in collaboration with A. J. Festugière. At Harvard his thirty-three-year editorship of the Harvard Theological Review made it a leading international journal. His regular teaching of the History of Religions and in the Classics Department and the Divinity School had the aberrant effectiveness of enormous learning and good humor mixed with explosive incoherence of speech. Those who could penetrate the second profited from the first. His prodigious advisory work for the Library helped keep it supreme in more than one field. To many in this community, however, his most valued gift was his friendship, which spanned a host of interests and three generations of age. Those who knew him well saw even his noisy exuberance sometimes as the almost childlike simplicity of an emotional life without guile, sometimes as an overenthusiastic attempt to be friendly or sociable, sometimes as the outward bravado of a somewhat lonely man. He could be gay and mirthful, as they know who remember his elaborate birthday parties or his booming recitations of his parody of his own obituary. He could also be serious, as they know who have had his generous help or have felt the exactness and amplitude of his intellectual standards. His dearest friend at Harvard, Willard Sperry, expressed it well in dedicating a book "To Arthur Darby Nock, whose accurate and conscientious scholarship has greatly furthered my feeling for 'the sacredness of fact' and in so doing has strengthened, rather than impaired, my part in our common faith."

Nock's scholarly world was, like his standards, international. Three honorary doctorates, membership in eight foreign academies, the Société des Bollandistes, and the American Philosophical Society, associate editorship of the Oxford Classical Dictionary and of *Vigiliae Christianae* were among his distinctions. Shortly before his death he was made an honorary member of the Société des Bollandistes. From the walls of his rooms in Eliot House a magnificent collection of photographs of the leading classicists and religious historians of the last hundred years — many of them his personal friends — looked down on him as he worked.

They were most truly his colleagues and peers. Theodor Mommsen was wreathed always with red ribbon, Martin Nilsson with fronds.

During the last fifteen years Nock slowly and at first painfully came to play a new role. Already in the late 1930's he had refused a request that he write the second volume of Nilsson's monumental history of Greek religion. Nilsson himself finally undertook the work only on condition that Nock help revise his manuscript. In 1939 and 1946 he had delivered Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen surveying religious developments in the Hellenistic and Roman age. As he collected more and more notes and corrections, he found it increasingly difficult to bring them into final shape for publication, and he eventually abandoned the task. He had become a perfectionist acutely conscious of his own imperfections. "I see only half the literature," he would say, though he was realistic enough to add, "I realize that others see only a third, but still I should miss things." So he poured his immense learning as in the past into shorter articles and critiques, but also put it with ever increasing generosity at the disposal of others. He had always maintained a voluminous correspondence, but now his rooms became a world center of advice, suggestion, criticism and encouragement for scholars of all degrees of age and eminence. He had that rare gift of seeing an author's intention and of aiding him in his own terms. Thus after some years of discouragement and doubt he had moved into a new period of heightened productivity and influence at the time of his unexpected death.

Nock had a realistic sense of his eminent position in scholarship. He was considerably less sure of himself in personal relationships, though they concerned him deeply. So he might have taken special pleasure in a tribute paid to him by undergraduates in the Harvard Crimson: "His colleagues can better appreciate the loss to scholarship, but to the University community the death of Arthur Darby Nock is a family loss. One of the last members of a vigorous and humane tradition, he never used high learning to shut out the rest of the world. His many friends in all of Harvard mourn his passing, and must resign themselves to life in a place made suddenly smaller by his absence."

Nock died on January 11, 1963 following an operation for cancer. He is survived by his sister, Alice E. M. Nock.