SOME RECENT BOOKS


The flow of biographies of Alexander the Great and of articles on various aspects of his career shows no sign of drying up. But translations of the original sources on which these are based have not kept pace with them despite the fact that an ever increasing number of those who study Alexander must rely on translations. For an appreciation of Alexander, particularly of his early years and his relations with his Macedonians, Plutarch’s Life is valuable. The present work is, therefore, very welcome.

The translator retired at the end of 1970 after almost 25 years as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland. As a classical don at Merton College, Oxford, Dr Maidment produced a fine translation of the Minor Attic Orators for the Loeb Library, and this translation, one of a number of Plutarch’s Lives which he made for his own benefit in recent years, is evidence that he has lost none of his skill. He has based his translation on Konrat Ziegler’s revised text in the Teubner series, which represents a considerable improvement on the text used by previous translators. He has divided Plutarch’s narrative into sections according to the successive stages of Alexander’s career (although he indicates the usual chapter divisions), and he has relegated to footnotes material which he considers Plutarch would have put there had he been writing today.

The present translation succeeds admirably in reconciling the conflicting demands of accuracy and readability. Plutarch’s involved sentence structure frequently precludes a literal rendering of the Greek, but Dr Maidment’s translation never degenerates into paraphrase. Only occasionally does one feel that the sense of the Greek has not fully been brought out, as, for example, on p. 80 ‘a kind of mute emblem’ hardly reproduces the force of the simile from the stage, or on p. 29 where ‘waved them from his presence’ seems too elaborate a translation for παρέπεμπ. On p. 57 the translator follows Ziegler in retaining the ‘Kleomantis’ of the manuscripts, but the person meant is certainly the seer ‘Kleomenes’ mentioned by Arrian Anabasis 7.26.

The quality of the translation is perhaps best illustrated by quotation. First a passage from the description of the ‘breaking’ of Bukephalas:
‘Then, quietly throwing off his cloak, he vaulted up, landed safely on his back, and cautiously drawing rein, brought him up short, without a blow being struck or a drop of blood drawn. When he was satisfied that the fight had gone out of him and that he wanted nothing better than to be off and away, he gave him his head, his voice rising confidently and his heels pounding at his flanks as he urged him on faster and faster.’

Then, in a different style, a passage from the last year of Alexander’s life:

‘On another occasion, when Kassander was seeking to reply to Antipater’s accusers, Alexander interrupted him. “Come, come!” he cried. “Are you claiming that men without a genuine grievance would have come all this way, merely to make baseless assertions?” “They have put a distance between themselves and any possible test of their honesty!” retorted Kassander. “That in itself suggests they are liars!” Alexander broke into a laugh. “This is the logic-chopping that you Aristotelians invariably use to bolster whichever side of a case suits you!” he said. “Let me warn you, though! If it proves that you or your father have done these men the slightest injury, you shall pay for it!”’

I have one reservation about this book. It would have been worthwhile in my opinion to devote space in the Translator’s Note to an outline of Plutarch’s aims as a biographer, or at least to have indicated briefly where this information might be found. But it would be unfair to end on a critical note. A classic such as Plutarch’s Lives deserves to be translated frequently. Too often we have been put off with a ‘modernized’ version of the translations of the Langhorne brothers or of ‘Dryden’. Here we have an independent and elegant version whose accuracy can be relied on.

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