

OBITUARY
ARTHUR DARBY NOCK

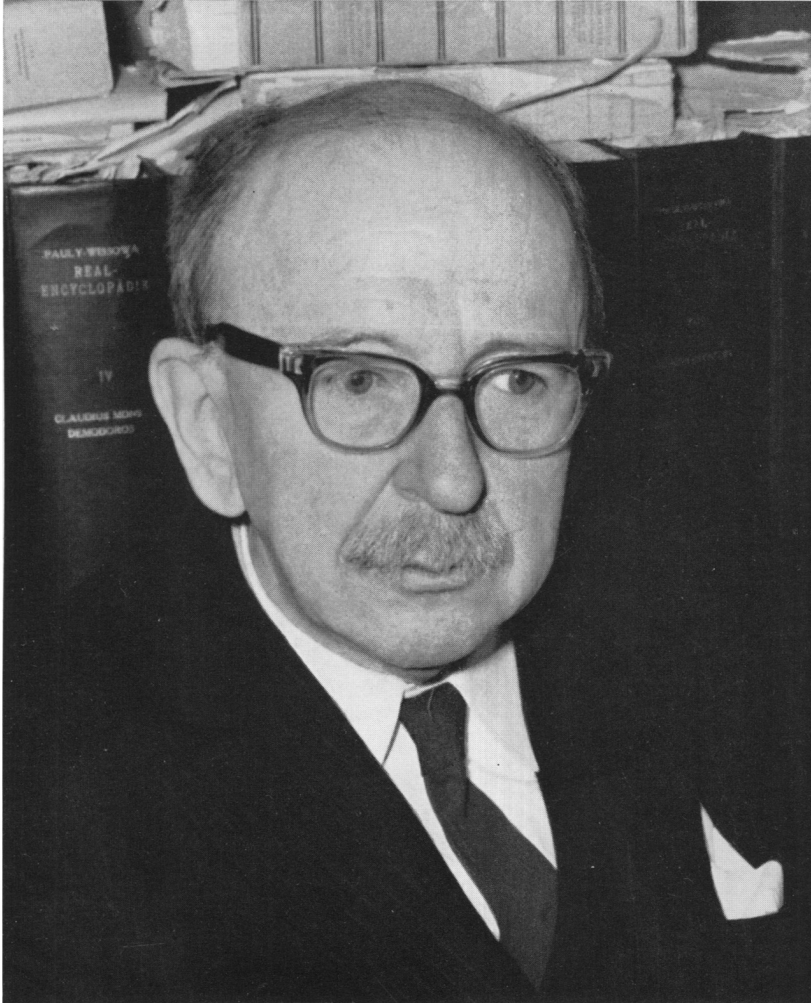
(Plate XVIII)

Arthur Nock was one of those scholars who choose their field of research early and remain faithful to it throughout their lives, steadily broadening as well as deepening their knowledge, but always relating their studies, implicitly if not directly, to the same central group of major historical problems. Nock's choice was dictated by his deeply religious temperament and his endless curiosity about religious behaviour: the study of emergent Christianity and of the cultural matrix out of which it emerged seemed to him to be worth a lifetime. It was a field in which exciting new vistas had been opened up by the great continental scholars of the previous generation, Reitzenstein and Norden, Cumont and Bidez. Nock stood to them as Lietzmann stood to Harnack, more detached and unemotional, yet with deep inner sympathy for his subject. He set himself to absorb and digest everything that these men could teach him, to correct their perspective where it appeared faulty, and to build bit by bit as coherent a picture of 800 years of religious history as the complexity of the evidence would allow.

Nock was born on 21 February, 1902, and was educated at Portsmouth Grammar School and Trinity College, Cambridge. His appetite for knowledge was from the first insatiable, and to some of his elders appeared excessive: one of them described him in his undergraduate days at Trinity as 'the greatest living authority on Pauly-Wissowa'. But he rapidly demonstrated that he was much more than a collector of second-hand information. At the age of 23 he had completed his edition of Sallustius, *de deis et mundo*; his exhaustive examination of this little treatise from every aspect, stylistic, philosophical, and *religionsgeschichtlich*, displayed a soundness of judgement and a constructive power which the most mature scholar might envy. The book appeared in 1926, and was followed two years later by the long and important paper on 'Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic background', which he contributed to a volume of *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation* edited by A. E. J. Rawlinson. In 1930 he abandoned the uncongenial task of teaching composition to the undergraduates of Clare, and became at the age of 28 Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion at Harvard. Henceforth he could devote all his energies to his chosen life-work.

In his next book, *Conversion* (1933), Nock set out to study the nature of religious frontiers in antiquity and the implications of adhesion to new cults. But the book overflowed the limits assigned by the title; for anyone who wishes to understand the religious experience (as distinct from the ritual and the theology) of the Roman Imperial Age it is an indispensable guide, and the account of Christianity as it may have appeared to pagans is masterly. Indispensable also are the two brilliantly written and characteristic chapters on pagan religion which he contributed to the *Cambridge Ancient History* (vol. x, 1934, and vol. xii, 1939). These were in the nature of *Vorarbeiten* for a more extensive work, his Gifford Lectures on Hellenistic Religion, which were delivered at Aberdeen partly in 1939 and partly (after the interruption of the war) in 1946. Unhappily Nock was dissatisfied with these lectures: his opinions on many questions were changing, and except for the study of Posidonius, printed in *JRS* XLIX (1959), he withheld them from publication. (It is hoped that they may be published posthumously, with such correction in the light of their author's later views as is now possible.) In the years that followed Nock produced illuminating essays on many aspects of ancient religion, as well as reviews which were often substantive contributions to learning, but not the comprehensive book which his friends hoped for. It is intended to reprint the most important of these shorter writings in a volume of collected papers.

Most of Nock's detailed work on early Christianity deals with either the Pauline letters or the Acts. His review of Dibelius's collected papers on Acts in *Gnomon*, 1953, 497-506, is at least as important as the admirable book he is criticizing. His little book *St. Paul* (1938), if not wholly successful, is especially notable for its analyses of differences between St. Paul and Philo, a writer whose tracts Nock knew intimately, as appears in his masterly discussions of Goodenough's theses (*Gnomon* 1937, 156 ff., and the reviews of *Jewish Symbols*, *ibid.* 1955, 558 ff.; 1957, 524 ff.; 1960, 728 ff.). The dark problems of Gnosticism



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also fascinated him. He was critical of the assumption that it can be regarded as a pre-Christian entity and was very sceptical of the notion that Manichean and Mazdean literature can be used to underpin that assumption. In general terms Nock's attitude to the problem of emergent Christianity may be expressed in the formula that Christianity must be treated as what it is and not as something else. The philosophical problems of religion did not much concern him. Religion to him meant feeling—a refusal to admit meaninglessness and helplessness and a like refusal to admit that man has the power to solve his own problem.

To the end of his life Nock maintained close contact with European scholars and with European journals. He was a frequent contributor not only to *JRS* and *Gnomon* but also to the *Journal of Theological Studies*, the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* and *Vigiliae Christianae*—besides the papers that he published in the *American Journal of Archaeology* and above all in the *Harvard Theological Review* of which he was editor for many years. His Harvard colleagues gave him profound pleasure when they presented him with a Festschrift published as the issue of *HTR* for October 1962. One of the few successful examples of international collaboration in scholarship is the great four-volume Budé edition of the *Hermetica* by Nock and Festugière. Nock had begun work on this as early as 1926, but the project was completed only in 1954. He was primarily responsible for constituting the text of the first two volumes and part of the fourth, a difficult task which he handled with outstanding skill and judgement; but he also made valuable contributions to the commentary.

Arthur Nock had a genius for friendship, and the news of his death on 11 January, 1963 was a profound shock to his friends in many countries. They will remember him not only for his great intellectual gifts but for the affectionate warmth of his personality, his kindness to young and struggling scholars, his lovable eccentricities, and the effervescent gaiety which effectively hid from all but a few the private griefs and anxieties of a lonely and vulnerable man.

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