

Theodor Ernst Mommsen

1905 — July 18, 1958

Theodor Ernst Mommsen, Professor of Medieval History at Cornell, died at Ithaca, New York on July 18, 1958. Born in Berlin in 1905, Professor Mommsen was a grandson of the eminent German historian, Theodor Mommsen, and had as uncles by marriage the sociologists Max and Alfred Weber. Professor Mommsen was given the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Berlin in 1929. From 1929 to 1935 he was a research assistant associated with the great historical enterprise called *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and worked in Germany and Italy. He began his academic career in the United States as an instructor at Johns Hopkins University in 1936. Subsequently he held appointments at Yale University, Groton School, and Princeton University; at Princeton he was an associate professor of history from 1949 to 1954. He joined the faculty of Cornell University in 1954. He served as visiting professor at the University of Chicago and at Bryn Mawr College. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1948.

Professor Mommsen wrote more than twenty articles on medieval European history, covering topics as varied as St. Augustine and the Christian idea of progress, the topography of medieval Rome, and football in Renaissance Florence. Petrarch was a special subject of study both in his articles and his more elaborate works. He wrote a substantial introduction to an edition of Petrarch's songs and sonnets. Petrarch's *Last Will and Testament* he translated and edited in 1957. His early association with *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* continued throughout his life, and he edited one of the volumes of this great undertaking, *Italienische Analekten zur Reichsgeschichte des 14 Jahrhunderts*. He was corresponding member of the executive committee of Monumenta and of the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Lucca.

Professor Mommsen had an outstanding career as a teacher at Princeton and Cornell and served on many committees concerned with academic affairs at both universities. Particularly important was the work of his seminar in which his purpose was to give students the tools of historical research rather than a detailed knowledge of history. His model was the training he himself had received in Germany, where the seminar was a cooperative workshop, the professor leading and directing but not dominating his students. He believed medieval history to be an ideal subject for teaching young historians because the relative scarcity of the records available for study made every fragment precious. They must learn, as he said, "to squeeze the sources dry."

Professor Mommsen was a bachelor. He gave much time to friends, colleagues, and students and shared with them his memories of life among persons of academic and professional distinction in Germany, and his rich knowledge

of books and music. Perhaps he was happiest when a group of graduate students gathered in his apartment to enjoy a light meal, listen to his records, and talk on into the night.

When Professor Mommsen left Germany in 1935 he did so to register a protest against the totalitarian and anti-Semitic policies of Hitler. He came to the United States to affirm his faith in democracy, the equality of man and man. This choice was a continuing source of joy to him. The disasters suffered by Germany in World War II hurt him deeply, however, all the more so because on revisiting Germany in 1948 he judged that the Germans had learned little from experience. These thoughts and others arising from the state of world affairs in the postwar period saddened him; the effects of ill health made him still more unhappy in his last years. His death took from the Cornell community and from the academic community of the United States and Europe an expert scholar and a wise, witty, warm-hearted companion.

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