

Virgil. *Georgics*. Edited with a commentary by R.A.B. Mynors. With a preface by R.G.M. Nisbet. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Pp. xci + 345. ISBN 0-19-814445-8. \$85.00.

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The appearance of this long and eagerly awaited book is a bittersweet event in that the author did not live to see it published, nor indeed to apply the *ultima manus* to his project. We are told, however, in Professor Nisbet's brief preface, that the commentary itself was complete at the time of Mynors' death. It is accompanied by a select bibliography; a list of abbreviations; a magnified reproduction of Mynors' OCT text and apparatus (75 unnecessary pages, since no individual or institutional purchaser of this costly volume will fail to own the OCT); a useful appendix of Greek material (Eratosthenes, Aratus, and Aristotle in Greek and English); and three excellent indices (names in the *Georgics*, Latin words, subjects and names in the commentary).

The commentary itself is grounded on a profundity of philological and technical learning that most of us can merely envy. Mynors is well acquainted with every area of knowledge that the poem touches, both literary and practical. It is not unusual for him to move in the space of a few sentences over a broad range of sources judiciously chosen to elucidate both the technical and symbolic aspects of Vergil's discourse; his observations on goats (ad 3.380 ff.) is but a single case in point. In general, however, more space and explicit comment is devoted to technical than to literary matters. This procedure is helpful in a number of ways. Most recent scholarship has tended in the opposite direction. Mynors restores a sense of vividness and reality difficult for the modern academic to attain within the stacks of a research library. He does so not only by directing us to the most illustrative passages of ancient literature, but by sharing his own observation of traditional farm technology in England, Italy, France, and Spain. His purpose in educating the reader in such matters seems to me the proper one of helping us to acquire, so far as possible, some part of the empirical background that Vergil could have expected his first readers to possess, not to prove that the poem really is a versified agricultural handbook. On the other hand, Mynors' method allows readers who are so inclined to persist in this unfortunate but long-established misconception, and I fear that some scholars will receive the commentary in this spirit.

What makes this situation all the more possible is the fact that Mynors did not live to write his own introduction. Thus we have no single, concise statement indicating just how this great Vergilian interpreted the poem as a whole. The lack of such a statement is deeply frustrating, but not, perhaps, inappropriate in the case of a poem that constantly shifts its ground, dealing in half-truths and lies as well as traditional wisdom, one that continues to elude those who would define it once and for all. Mynors was not one of these. His interpretation, as it emerges gradually from the commentary, is of a subtle, complex, paradoxical poem, one capable both of lamentation for personal loss, and of celebrating the struggle to attain a worthy goal. The poem is not, on this reading, ultimately optimistic or pessimistic. A propos of the famous *labor omnia vicit / improbus*, Mynors accepts Altevogt's interpretation and does not shy away from acknowledging the deeply foreboding tone of the passage. Similarly, of the end of Book 1, he notes the quality, shared with Book 3, but unusual in view of "the canons of ancient taste," of ending "on a note of uncontrollable despair." This is far from a

triumphal reading of the poem. But of the frankly triumphal imagery of the sphragis passage at the end of Book 4, Mynors magisterially waves aside any possibility that *fulminat* (561) compares the future Augustus in any way to Jupiter Tonans (and, implicitly, that one should catch Callimachean rumblings in this thunderstorm), and observes of the reference to *Ecl.* 1.1 in line 566 that "We are left with the feeling that the antagonisms set forth in *E[cl.]* 9.11-16, which always are at hand to afflict the human spirit, have been shown by Caesar to be not wholly insoluble." Here he is clearly at odds with the most deeply pessimistic readers, who see the contrast between the two ways of life represented by Vergil and Caesar as, precisely, insoluble.

This raises the inevitable comparison with Richard Thomas' recent commentary, which, though nominally intended for students, is in many ways (like Mynors') even more useful to those who already know the poem well. Thomas takes a markedly more pessimistic line than Mynors, and tends to view the poem in more strictly literary terms. He advances more novel interpretations than Mynors, and is generally more argumentative in presenting his material. He is not always persuasive; but he emphasizes important aspects of the poem that Mynors tends to scant or ignore. Mynors, for instance, makes no mention at all of the acrostic signature in imitation of Aratus at 1.429-433, which Thomas, following Brown and Ross, explains convincingly as a significant example of Vergil's Alexandrianism. Conversely, Mynors takes seriously (ad 3.476) the possibility that the "Plague of Noricum" may reflect an actual event as well as the more clearly established literary tradition (which Thomas -- and, I suspect, most of us nowadays -- tend to regard as the only relevant background of the episode). His approach to these passages illustrates his aforementioned tendency to privilege realia over literary self-absorption. In view of all this, I find myself all the more thankful that we already have Thomas, whose much more intensely literary approach perhaps needs Mynors as a counterweight, but who himself provides an essential corrective to Mynors' emphasis on agriculture per se.

In conclusion, I can only note how fortunate we are to have this commentary at last. It will obviously be indispensable to everyone seriously interested in the *Georgics*. That it will not drive all rivals from the field simply testifies to the inexhaustible richness of the poem itself.
