



Chester G. Starr

CHESTER G. STARR was a distinctive and influential figure in American historical studies.

A native of Missouri (the "Show-Me" state), he spent his entire career (except for graduate training at Cornell University, under M.L.W. Laistner) in the American Midwest. After teaching at the University of Illinois at Urbana (a town he disliked) for 30 years, he moved in 1970 to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (a town he adored). Despite deep Midwestern roots, Starr was a cosmopolitan figure who travelled widely and enjoyed a large European correspondence.

He was particularly at home in Italy and Greece, where he embarked upon a highly original research programme that wedded a careful reading of classical literature to the evidence of ancient art and archaeology. He wrote 21 books, dozens of articles, and over 100 book reviews.

While impressed as a young scholar by the philosophy of Hegel, Starr belonged to no established school of thought. His students share certain convictions about historical meaning and method, but cannot be said to constitute a school. Starr's interests ranged across a wide span of ancient history, from pre-Homeric Greece, to Achaemenid Persia, to the Roman Empire of Constantine and Theodosius. He was remarkably well-read in modern history and sociology. No American historian before him had written so much and so well about such a wide span of ancient history, and (given modern tendencies to specialisation) perhaps none ever will.

In addition to his ancient studies, as chief of the historical section of the US Fifth Army during the Second World War, Starr directed the compilation of a nine-volume *Fifth Army History* and wrote a popular abridgment, *From Salerno to the Alps* (1948). He wrote many works for lay readers; among them, *A History of the Ancient World* that, in four English-language editions (1965-91), helped to define the meaning of antiquity for a generation of American students (and were published in Britain, as were many of his books, by Oxford University Press).

Starr published in part to support his wife and four children and he was forthrightly proud of the substantial income he earned by writing. But he

was also motivated by a conviction that historians must share the fruits of their research with non-professionals.

Starr was convinced that antiquity could not be adequately apprehended by the study of ancient literature alone; indeed, he believed that too literal acceptance of literary sources had led scholars into error. As a corrective, he championed the historical analysis of physical evidence. His approach to interweaving art and literature was inaugurated in *Civilization and the Caesars: the intellectual revolution in the Roman Empire* (1954), a treatment of the transformation of Roman society that owed a debt to Hegel.

His next, and perhaps greatest, book, *The Origins of Greek Civilization* (1961) was a ground-breaking assessment of the emergence of a distinctively Greek mentality, based upon a close analysis of painted pottery from the Greek Dark Ages (c1100-800 BC). Starr's seminal work on this period has recently been rediscovered by a younger generation of archaeologists. He is justly lauded for demolishing the notorious "Nordic thesis" that sought to explain classical Greek culture in racial terms.

In *Origins* Starr focused directly on humans as agents of change. Rejecting the *longue durée* approach to pre-modern societies championed by the Paris-based "Annales School" of social history, Starr saw Greek and Roman societies as dynamic and their histories as discontinuous, characterised by abrupt breaks and sudden leaps forward. This change-centred understanding of ancient society was elaborated

in later studies, including *The Social and Economic Growth of Early Greece* (1977) and *The Beginnings of Imperial Rome: Rome in the Mid-Republic* (1980).

Starr was fascinated by the practice of history writing. In *The Awakening of the Greek Historical Spirit* (1968) and *The Flawed Mirror* (1983) he probed the relationship between a radically new social conception of time and the capacity to write an analytic narrative of the past. His concern with proper historical method and practice helped lead to the creation in 1974 of the American Association of Ancient Historians; Starr was its first President. In 1987 it published his personal assessment of the

state of the profession as *Past and Future in Ancient History*. When, a decade later, a new survey of the field was called for, it had to be authored by a team of five scholars and was dedicated to Starr.

In person, Chester Starr presented a complex mix of earthy good-humour and military formality; of personal vanity and Midwestern lack of pretension. His profound pleasure in the lifelong companionship of his wife, Gretchen (a skilled weaver of art tapestries), was manifest; they drove matching Mercedes Benz sedans, and cleared their front walk in the Michigan winter with matching snow-shovels.

Although an inveterate enemy of anachronism, Starr clearly identified with certain figures of the ancient past, and took against certain others. He decidedly preferred the "instinctive sympathy, sensitivity, [and] imagination" of the wide-ranging Herodotus to the austere Thucydides, concluding that the latter, by focusing narrowly on political and military matters, "did more than any other single man to set the pattern of history [writing] and thereby was its worst disaster".

But it was perhaps the Boeotian poet Hesiod with whom Starr felt the greatest personal sympathy. Like Hesiod, Starr urged "work on work with more work" as the key to success. Hesiod's pleasure in a shady rock during summer's heat finds a counterpart in Starr's love of mystery novels, jigsaw puzzles, and the game of Scrabble (often played in French). Like Hesiod he was frugal but loved luxuries; Hesiod's joy in the imported "wine of Biblis" might be

compared to Starr's fondness for a bourbon whiskey called "Virginia Gentleman" and to his passion for Art Nouveau paperweights.

Over the course of a long career, Starr remained fascinated by Hesiod's contradictions. Starr eventually characterised the author of *The Works and Days* as a "semi-aristocrat" – a spokesman for the class of Greek society that Starr came to believe was most directly responsible for the cultural expansion of archaic Greece. Starr's semi-aristocratic Hesiod – staunchly self-identified with the unromantic central Greek town of Askra ("harsh in winter, miserable in summertime, not really good at any time of year"), yet writing vividly for a sophisticated international audience, well versed in stories from distant parts and the distant past, truth-obsessed and bluntly didactic – was close in spirit to the scholar from Centralia, Missouri.

Chester Starr exemplified Hesiod's assertion that "he is truly blest and wealthy who knows these things and does his work".

JOSIAH OBER

Chester G. Starr, historian: born Centralia, Missouri 5 October 1914; Lecturer, Department of History, University of Illinois at Urbana 1940-53, Professor of History 1953-70; Chief of Historical Section, US Fifth Army Headquarters in Italy, 1942-46; Professor of History, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor 1970-73, Bentley Professor of History 1973-85; married 1940 Gretchen Starr (died 1999; two sons, two daughters); died Ann Arbor, Michigan 22 September 1999.