

# Theodor Mommsen

## Nobel Prize in Literature 1902



Nobel Prize in Literature 1902 "The greatest living master of the art of historical writing, with special reference to his monumental work, *A history of Rome*"

\* 30 November 1817 in Garding  
(Schleswig-Holstein)

† 1 November 1903 in Berlin-Charlottenburg

1852–1854 Professor of Roman Law at the  
University of Zurich

## Caesar and Swiss German

Liberal in his thinking, Mommsen was accused of involvement in the May uprising in Saxony in 1849 and dismissed from his position as professor of law at the University of Leipzig in 1851. In the same year, the University of Zurich offered him the chair for Roman law. Mommsen's move to Switzerland involved two citizens of Zurich who belonged to his circle of friends in Leipzig: the brothers Caspar and Salomon Hirzel. Caspar was the Swiss Consul General

in Leipzig, and Salomon, together with his brother-in-law Karl Reimer, ran the publishing house "Weidmannsche Buchhandlung." The two publishers had asked him, after a lecture, to write a history of Rome; they signed a contract for the book with him in 1850.

Mommsen came to Zurich for the summer term in 1852 and boarded, together with four other lodgers, with the family Holzhab, bookbinders, at Strehlgasse 29. His rooms were spacious, but with a northerly aspect, so he saw little sunlight. Since 1933, the house has borne a commemorative plaque recalling Mommsen's stay there. The greatest advantage of the location was its proximity to the University, which, until 1864, was located in the "Hinteramt" near the Augustinerkirche. The Fröschengraben, later transformed into the Bahnhofstrasse, ran in front of the building.

It was his exploration of Roman law and its sources that brought Mommsen to his real area of interest, ancient history. He had already spent several years in Italy, collecting and studying Latin inscriptions in the territory of the Kingdom of Naples. This time left him with a life-long taste for macaroni, then hardly known north of the Alps, which he had sent to him regularly from Italy. However good his knowledge of Latin and Greek was, though, Mommsen could not warm to Swiss German. Three weeks after his arrival in Zurich, he wrote to a friend in Rome: "Here, there are beautiful mountains, clear water, an excellent silk industry, and even

English people to laugh at. But it's impossible to understand the girls and their Zurich German; inscriptions are rare and good friends are far rarer still. Enough: We don't have to be happy."

And so it remained: Mommsen never felt at home in Zurich. A lonely figure, his passionate temperament led him to pass harsh, even wounding, judgments. For his colleagues at the University – German and Swiss alike – Mommsen had little but contempt. They seemed to him to be malicious to one another, and servile towards the uncrowned king of Zurich, Alfred Escher. Socially, he felt himself surrounded by a "rabble." But

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he enjoyed spending time with a couple of friends in the Café Littéraire on the Weinplatz, which later had to make way for the Hotel Storchen.

Mommsen's place of work was relatively modest in scale: The University then consisted of 22 full professors and about 160 students, compared to over 800 students in Leipzig. He had some ten students, to whom he was not particularly devoted; he did not like lecturing but was obliged to teach for ten hours a week each semester. He complained to a German friend: "The most ambitious students here go into industry and politics. That may be right and proper, but German academic pride



finds it very hard to put up with third place." The professor's discontented attitude did not go unnoticed in Zurich. A colleague in the Antiquarian Society remarked: "It's a pity – the man is like a razor-sharp knife and needs handling with great care."

Mommsen found himself able to publish his insights on "Switzerland in the Roman era" as a New Year's text for the Antiquarian Society in 1854, the first account of this topic of any academic value. He carried on a long and friendly correspondence with Ferdinand Keller, the President of the Society.

In "Switzerland in the Roman era," Mommsen formulated his understanding of "proper historical research" as follows: "It seeks for peaks and perspectives, and from the right point and with good timing, it can look down on the immutable laws of necessity, which stand forever fast as the Alps, and on the many passions of men, which wreath them like clouds, without changing them."

Mommsen had indeed often climbed in the Alps. From Zurich, he undertook frequent, extensive mountain tours. In the end, Theodor Mommsen did not find it so easy to bid farewell to the city, and above all to his beloved Swiss mountains. But in 1854, after two years in Zurich, he was appointed to a position in Breslau, then in Prussia. As a parting gift to his friends, he had a portrait done by the Zurich lithographer Carl Friedrich Irminger.

In the village of Laufen at the Rheinfall lived a sister of Salomon Hirzel of Leipzig, who was married to the local pastor, Johann Heinrich Pfenninger. There, Mommsen, a great admirer of Goethe, wrote a reconciliatory poem, dated 28 August 1852,

to celebrate the great poet's birthday.

In this poem, Mommsen looked with emotion to his forthcoming wedding. Through marriage to Marie Reimer, the daughter of his Leipzig publisher and niece of Salomon Hirzel, he was now also related to his friends, "Auntie Nettli" in Laufen and "Uncle Sali" – Salomon Hirzel. Marie Reimer had been on a visit to Zurich in the summer of 1852. Walks on the Zurichberg and a stay

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on the Rigi had awakened their love. Marie was a devoted wife, who found fulfillment in the management of his large household. She bore 16 children, 12 of whom survived their parents.

*Rheinfall, den 28. August 1854*  
Rheinfall, 28 August 1854

*An meiner Heimat Schwelle*  
On the threshold of my own land  
*Glänzen im Abendstrahl*  
Today, for the last time,  
*Schneeberg und grüne Welle*  
Snowy mountains and  
waves of green  
*Mir heut' zum letzten Mal.*  
Gleam in the evening light.

*Es winken aus fernen Weiten*  
From afar off  
*Alpen im Nebelraum,*  
The Alps flicker through the clouds  
*Dran hängen vergangene Zeiten*  
Times past cling to them  
*Gleichwie ein schwindender Traum.*  
Like a fading dream.

*Und in der Lebenswende*  
As my life changes  
*Segn' ich mit Herz und Hand*  
I bless, with heart and hand,  
*Das Land der fleißigen Hände,*  
The land of busy hands,  
*Das schöne fremde Land,*  
The beautiful, foreign land,

*Die Berge, die ich erklommen,*  
The mountains I climbed,  
*Alpros' und Genzian,*  
Alpine roses and gentians,  
*Die Seen, drin ich geschwommen,*  
The lakes I swam in,  
*Und manchen rechten Mann.*  
And many a good man.

*Die Heimat wieder eigen,*  
Back in my own land,  
*Grüß' ich mit frommer Scheu;*  
My greeting is modest and shy;  
*Ich darf vor mich zeigen,*  
I can claim  
*Ich blieb ihr mutig treu.*  
I stayed valiantly true to her.

*Aus der Fremde guten Stunden*  
Of the good times in a  
foreign land,  
*Bleibt mir die eine nach,*  
One remains with me,  
*Wo Dich ich dort gefunden*  
When I found you there  
*Am blauesten Sonnentag.*  
On the bluest of sunny days.

*Das Herz in der Brust, das warme,*  
The warm heart in your breast  
*Bewahrt, was es gewann;*  
Guards what it has won;  
*O nimm mich in die Arme,*  
O, take me in your arms,  
*O Liebe, nimm mich an!*  
O, take me, love!



Ultimately, however, Mommsen did not feel at home in Breslau either. His friends in Zurich received bitter letters about the backwardness of the town and its idle students. Nor did even the long sought-for appointment in Berlin in 1858 put an end to his complaints. For over a decade, Mommsen tried to get away from the capital, seeking in vain for another place of work elsewhere in Germany. With advancing age and an ever-increasing family, though, he gradually adjusted to Berlin and built up a circle of faithful friends. He was active as a social-liberal politician, as a teacher at the University, and as a highly respected member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences. With his long white hair, Mommsen in old age was the quintessential wise old academic.

An internationally recognized historian, Mommsen was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1902, some 50 years after his time in Zurich, at the great age of 85. On account of his age, he did not receive the prize in person; it was accepted on his behalf by the German ambassador in Stockholm. Mommsen appreciated the honor, but commented somewhat wryly on the eulogy presented to him: "I couldn't wish for a better commemoration if I really had come to the end of my life." The prize money was a welcome financial reserve, for in his old age he worried about the future of his five unmarried daughters – one daughter only was "properly provided for," i.e. married. While Marie, his wife, had never made any claim to higher education or an independent life, three of his daughters had careers – as teachers or nurses – which was most unusual in bourgeois circles at the time. To do so, they required – and received – their father's permission.

Theodor Mommsen died just eleven months after the award of the Nobel Prize. The Faculty of Law at the University of Zurich sent a wreath of edelweiss to the funeral at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche in Charlottenburg, and was thanked warmly by the family. A commemoration planned by the rectorate did not take place, as two of the three professors asked to take part declared themselves not to be professionally competent to do so, and

also thought that Mommsen would not have appreciated such an event. In 1918 the Mittelbergstrasse in Zürich-Fluntern was renamed Mommsenstrasse in his honor. *Margrit Wyder*

**Source:** Margrit Wyder: *Einstein und Co. – Nobelpreisträger in Zürich*; Verlag NZZ libro, Zürich 2015 **Illustration:** Aline Telek  
**Translation:** University of Zurich

Written in Zurich:

## The History of Rome

Theodor Mommsen's literary and historical magnum opus was originally intended to have five volumes, but remained incomplete. The first three volumes appeared in rapid succession from 1854 to 1856. They addressed the period from the beginnings of Rome to 46 BCE, shortly before the zenith of Julius Caesar's power. The fourth volume, that should have covered the history of the Empire, was never published. Mommsen lectured on the subject in Berlin, but he directed his energies to research rather than exposition. He also took the view that there were already enough good histories of the Roman Empire. The final, fifth volume was published in 1885, and dealt with the development of the provinces of the Empire.

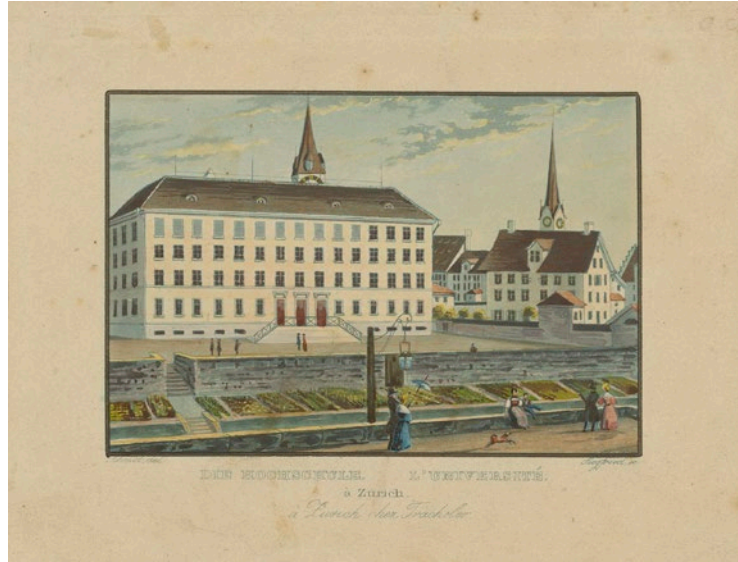
Mommsen wrote his History of Rome based on his vast knowledge of the ancient sources, yet equally from the perspective of a politically engaged citizen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; his judgments of the events of the time are trenchant. He thought most highly of the early republican period, and described the reasons for the downfall of the Roman state. His particular favorite was Julius Caesar, whom he regarded to be perfect as both a person and a politician.

Nor was Mommsen shy about using modern political expressions in his work. His experiences in Switzerland were also reflected: He used "Eidgenossenschaft" to describe the Italic tribal federations, and politico-geographic entities are frequently referred to as "cantons." Zurich was even used in a direct comparison. In the first volume of *The History of Rome*, he writes that the area of Latium was "little larger than that of the current Canton of Zurich." His contemporary references and stylistic brilliance were the basis for the great success of the work. In summer 1854, when the first volume was published and the second volume almost finished, Mommsen received his appointment to the University of Breslau, and left Zurich. The second volume is dedicated to two German colleagues with whom he had become friends at the University of Zurich: the physiologist Carl Ludwig and the theologian Ferdinand Hitzig.

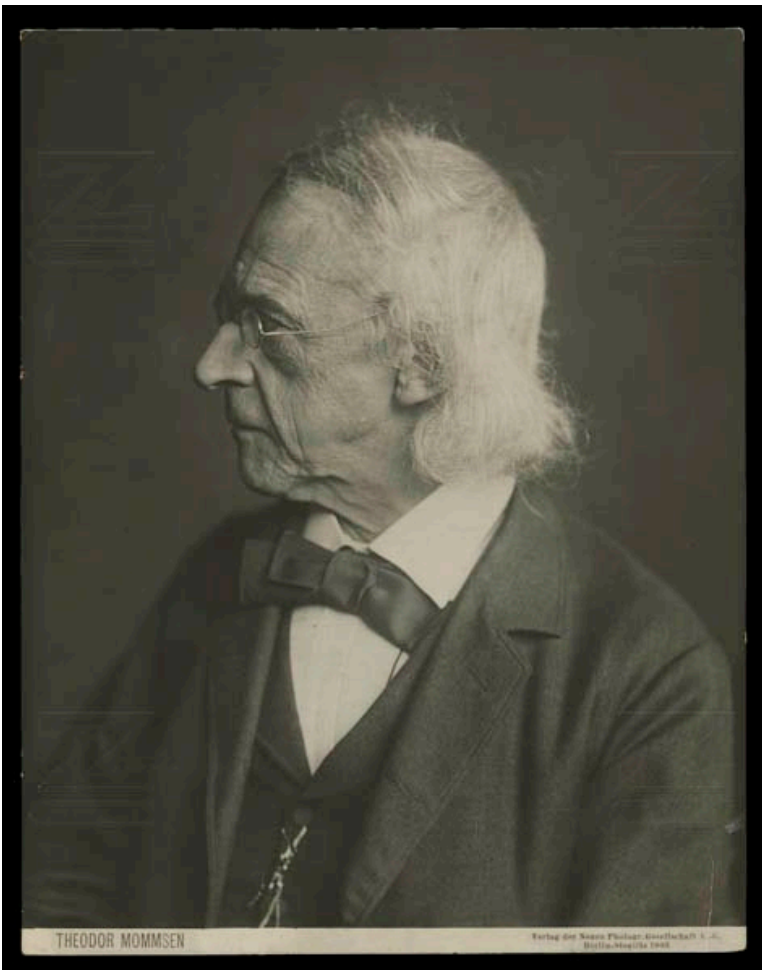
In 1858, the young Conrad Ferdinand Meyer asked Mommsen for permission to translate *The History of Rome* into French. Mommsen agreed, but only on the condition that a publisher be found who was prepared to fund the edition. This was not the case, so Meyer's translation did not eventuate. (MW)



Theodor Mommsen during his time in Zurich  
(Lithography by C.F. Irminger, 1854).  
Image: Zentralbibliothek Zürich



Mommsen taught in the original building of the University of Zurich, located  
from 1833 to 1864 on the Augustinerstrasse near today's Bahnhofstrasse.  
Image: Zentralbibliothek Zürich



Nobel Prize laureate Theodor Mommsen in 1903 in Berlin.  
Photo: Zentralbibliothek Zürich