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Masterpiece

“The Roman Revolution” (1939) by Ronald Syme

A Short Step to Dictatorship

Ronald Syme's 'The Roman Revolution,' written under the cloud of fascism, is a compelling account of the decline of the Roman oligarchy in favor of a principate

by Joseph Epstein

In his study of the Roman historian Sallust (86-35 B.C.), Ronald Syme writes that “historians are selective, dramatic, impressionistic.” Later in the same work he notes that “systems and doctrines decay or ossify, whereas poetry and drama live on, also style and narrative.” These words apply to Syme himself, a man generally considered the greatest modern historian of Rome. Syme wrote biographies of Sallust and Tacitus and much else, but his reputation rests on “The Roman Revolution.” Published in 1939 when the specter of fascism clouded Europe, it was soon recognized as the magnificent book it is.

Syme (1903-1989) was a New Zealander who studied at and settled in Oxford. His specialty was prosopography, or the study of collective biographies to find common characteristics of historical social classes or groups. This was invaluable for “The Roman Revolution,” which is a compelling account of the decline of the Roman oligarchy in favor of a principate, or monarchy, quietly but implacably put in place by Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors. If historians had Rolodexes, none could be more complete than Syme’s on the Romans in the last years of the Republic. “In any age in the history of the Roman Republic,” he notes, “about twenty or thirty men, drawn from a dozen dominant families, hold a monopoly of office and power.” An intramural, nearly incestuous, affair was Roman political life; consider alone Servilia, “Cato’s half-sister, Brutus’s mother, Caesar’s mistress.”

A man who sees beneath every surface, demolishing all pretenses, Syme, early in his great book, writes: “The Roman constitution was a screen and a sham.” Of the idealism of the Republic, he notes: “Liberty and law are high-sounding words. They will often be rendered, on a cool estimate, as privilege and vested interest.” No cooler estimator existed than Syme. “The career of Pompeius,” he writes, “opened in fraud and violence. It was prosecuted, in war and peace, through illegality and treachery.”

Once the Triumvirs—Julius Caesar, Pompeius, Lepidus—were in ascendance, the Roman Republic’s day was done. “From a triumvirate it was but a short step to a dictatorship,” Syme writes. Julius Caesar, who emerged as dictator, before his assassination adopted Octavianus, whom Syme regularly refers to as “Caesar’s heir.” Octavianus would subsequently become Augustus, who, after his victories over Caesar’s assassins and later Marcus Antonius, ruled for 40 years. Augustus, Syme writes, possessed “an inborn and Roman distrust of theory, and an acute sense of the difference between words and facts.”

Syme was a master of the brief character sketch, not infrequently followed by a sharp observation. The mixture of good and evil in the same people fascinated him. After toting up Marcus Antonius’ many flaws, he writes that “a blameless life is not the whole of virtue, and inflexible rectitude may prove a menace to the Commonwealth.” Cicero, he says, “had lent his eloquence to all political causes in turn, was sincere in one thing only, loyalty to the established order. His past career showed that he could not be depended on for action or statesmanship.”

Augustus succeeded owing to his ambition and cunning, and to his awareness that, after long years of civil war, Romans were willing to surrender liberty for peace and concord. Concord meant rule by one man—monarchy—whose worst feature, along with the loss of liberty, “was the growth of servility and adulation.”

Unsurpassed in his erudition, relentless in his perspicacity, Syme combined these merits with a historical style in the tradition of Thucydides, Sallust, Tacitus and Gibbon, great disillusionists all. The interjection of the short, deadly sentence is among the hallmarks of this style. “Two days of diplomacy divided the Roman world,” is but one example from Syme. The murder of Cicero “disgraced the Triumvirs and enriched literature with an immortal theme” is another. Accounting for the rise of Octavianus, he writes: “Accident blended with design.”

With a single sentence he fills in long spans of time. “From first to last the dynasty of the Julii and the Claudii ran true to form, despotic and murderous.” He writes of Antonius and Cleopatra in Egypt that they “spent nearly a year after the disaster [of the battle of Actium] in the last revels, the last illusory plans, and the last despondency before death.” He specializes in the risky yet authoritative generalization: “Lacking any perception of the dogma of progress—for it had not yet been invented—the Romans regarded novelty with distrust and aversion.” Sometimes this style turns aphoristic: “Politics can be controlled but not abolished, ambition curbed but not crushed.” Again: “It is not enough to acquire power and wealth; men wish to appear virtuous and to feel virtuous.”

Toward the close of “The Roman Revolution” Syme writes: “To explain the fall of the Roman Republic, historians invoke a variety of converging forces or movements, political, social and economic, where antiquity was prone to see only the ambition and agency of individuals.” As with all historical masterpieces, one comes away from “The Roman Revolution” feeling unblinkered and intellectually rejuvenated.

—*Mr. Epstein is the author, most recently, of “Frozen in Time, Twenty Stories” (Taylor Trade Publishing) and “Wind Sprints, Shorter Essays” (Axios Press).*

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