

Thomas R. Martin and Christopher W. Blackwell, *Alexander the Great. The Story of an Ancient Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012; 193 pp., ISBN: 978-0-521-14844-3; \$24.99.

Meant to be an introduction for non-specialists, this book aims at writing the biography of Alexander as “an enigmatic man” (p. xi), thereby giving great weight to the constructed positive images of him in the ancient, especially Greek sources, and turning away from negative images of him as a tyrant king. It is doubtlessly a helpful way to get nearer the historical phenomenon of Alexander by not accepting the unfavorable ancient portraits of him uncritically and to abstain from moral judgments. However, this applies for *all* the images of Alexander in our sources, also for the favorable ones. In each case, the socio-political, cultural, and intellectual background of the author, his sources, date, and intention has to be carefully scrutinized before being able to draw any conclusion about the historical Alexander who has vanished behind all these literary layers. Therefore, Martin’s and Blackwell’s approach is highly problematic and may indeed offer “a more source-based view” but in a rather restricted, debatable way: nearly all positive accounts on Alexander are taken at face value and without employing source criticism. In consequence, an image of Alexander emerges that often reminds one of Tarn’s Alexander: a refined man of letters to whom Greek literature meant the world and who was driven by his “eagerness to acquire knowledge” (p. 24), altogether “a Man of Great Soul” (p. 182). The authors state that Alexander wanted to follow Herodotus’ account during the Persian Campaign. However, it has to be taken into consideration how much of this impression was created by Callisthenes in his literary report. Ignoring the important role of the leading Macedonian nobles, Alexander is presented as the only responsible great man in action who controlled the war from the start. Many recent examinations of important issues of the history of Alexander (such as doubts about Callisthenes’ being the pages’ teacher, Alexander’s involuntary retreat at the Hyphasis, or his alleged *imitatio Achillei*) are not mentioned. References to numismatic, epigraphic, and archaeological sources are missing. The book blends fact and fiction, ancient contemporary traditions and later interpolations, useful general information (as, for example, on the Argead polygamous court structures, the *sarissa* and war elephants) and speculation (such as on the female contribution to Alexander’s education). Even highly dubious anecdotes such as the encounter between Diogenes and Alexander or Hephaistion’s and Alexander’s visit to the Achaemenid women after Issus are treated as facts. Thus, even Callisthenes’ corruption of historical facts for propagandistic purpose, such as that the Branchidae were involved in the fall of Miletus under Xerxes, is reproduced (p. 110). In fact, the sack of Miletus took place in the reign of Darius I. Another error is the location of Hephaistion’s death in Babylon (p. 163) as in Oliver Stone’s Alexander movie. Hephaistion died in Ecbatana. The authors correctly interpret the Persian ritual of the *proskynesis*: it did not mean the worship of the Great King as a god (p. 131), but then, and in contradiction, they characterize the proskynesis that Persian king’s mother did before Alexander as praising him as a god (p. 67). They also adopt the Western stereotype of the Persian “harem”. On the other hand, the issues of Alexander’s visit to Siwa (p. 76) and Persian policy (p. 106-107) are treated very reasonably. The book provides a timeline of Alexander’s life, two maps, a brief outlook on the modern

reception of Alexander and suggested readings that unfortunately ignore non-English works. Altogether, one gets the impression that the book is primarily based on Plutarch's compositions that are often taken at face value. This raises the question whether it can be a useful tool for the non-specialists interested in the history of Alexander.

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