
‘Come mothers and fathers throughout the land / and don’t criticise what you can’t understand. / Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.’ These words, from Bob Dylan’s *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, contribute to the popular perception of the 1960s as a time of rapid social change, witnessing the emergence of a distinct youth culture that challenged, and often bewildered, older generations. Edward J. Watts, in his lively and scholarly account of life in the fourth-century Roman empire, employs a comparison with 1960s America to argue that we need to look behind the dramatic, headline-grabbing events to tell the real story of a historical period. Rather than focusing on the characters involved in moments of great upheaval and religious conflict, such as the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum in the early 390s, Watts looks to the generation before them, to the ‘mid-fourth century’s silent majority’, whose time was mostly spent ‘doing the equivalent of going to work, washing their cars, and mowing the lawn while their children participated in the unfolding of a revolutionary age’ (p. 9). Their story is told primarily by narrating the lives of four elite figures born in or around the 310s – Libanius, Themistius, Ausonius and Praetextatus. Not all of them were pagans, but they are defined here as the final generation ‘born into a world in which most people believed that the pagan public religious order of the past few millennia would continue indefinitely’ (p. 6).

The four chosen representatives of this generation all had successful public careers and (with the exception of Praetextatus) have left us ample accounts of their experiences, ranging from high imperial politics to personal friendships and family tragedies. For this reason, their writings, particularly the letters and speeches of Libanius, feature prominently in attempts to reconstruct elite culture in the fourth century (e.g. R. Cribiore, ‘The value of a good education: Libanius and public authority’, in P. Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, 2009, 233–45) and all four have been the subjects of individual studies of their lives and times (e.g. L. van Hoof (ed.), *Libanius: A Critical Introduction*, 2014; J. Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court: Oratory, Civic Duty, and Paideia from Constantine to Theodosius*, 1995; H. Sivan, *Ausonius of Bordeaux: Genesis of a Gallic Aristocracy*, 1993; M. Kahlos, *Vettius Agorius Praetextatus: A Senatorial Life In Between*, 2002). One of the many enjoyable features of *The Final Pagan Generation* is the way in which Watts blends the separate stories of these figures into a chronologically-structured account that combines political narrative with social history and biographical anecdotes. Its nine main chapters advance sequentially through the fourth century, charting the rise and fall of emperors and their significant actions, as well as their attitudes towards traditional religious practices. Combined with these are not only detailed descriptions of the effects of these events on the four protagonists (and their own contribution to them), but also wider discussions of the experiences of aristocratic Romans at
different stages in their lives and careers. For example, the first chapter, entitled ‘Growing Up in the Cities of the Gods’, provides an evocative account of the prevalence of pagan religious activities in the early fourth century, as well as exploring the phenomena of childbirth, infancy and early childhood in late antiquity, including Ausonius’ own reminiscences about his relationships with different relatives. Similarly, the chapter on ‘Moving Up in an Age of Uncertainty’ interweaves a potted history of the 350s with an illuminating description of how educated men could use their rhetorical skills and influential friends to advance their careers. These developments are amply illustrated with numerous vivid details from the works of Themistius and Libanius, which also provide insights into the personal difficulties that they faced as they headed towards middle age.

The result of this approach is a history of the fourth century that is informative and scholarly, while remaining entertaining and accessible. In particular, it highlights usefully the dramatic effects that changes of imperial regime could have on the prospects of individual aristocrats, and thus complements Meaghan McEvoy’s excellent recent study of this phenomenon (Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455, 2013). It is also a largely optimistic view of the period and its emperors, with the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine having the result that ‘government efficiency increased along with its size’ and that the greater number of imperial officials ‘helped make tax collecting more efficient and fair’ (p. 60). Valentinian I and Valens, whose often-neglected reigns receive welcome attention here, also emerge as reformers who took hard decisions for the public benefit, even if their good intentions were not recognised by hostile contemporaries such as Ammianus (pp. 130–5). The positive aspects of elite life, including affectionate relationships between children and their servants, such as wet-nurses and pedagogues (pp. 29–32), are mostly in the foreground here. We are largely spared tales of widespread violence, either officially-sanctioned or extra-judicial, or a vision of a time when, in the words of Peter Brown, ‘a tide of horror lapped close to the feet of all educated persons’ (P. Brown, Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire, 1992, p. 52).

As is to be expected, the concept of generational change appears most prominently when Watts turns his attention to religion. Chapter 7 (‘Christian Youth Culture in the 360s and 370s’) focuses on the children of the ‘final pagan generation’, describing how a host of elite Romans abandoned ‘secular’ careers to become bishops or, more radically, ascetics. In the succeeding chapters, the reign of Theodosius I assumes its traditional position as a watershed moment, with a changing of the guard in political life as younger, more vigorously Christianising men come to power. Theodosius also emerges as a figure keen to ‘present himself as a religious, administrative, and social reformer’ because his failure to inflict a decisive defeat on the Goths meant that he ‘needed to find another way to justify his regime’ (p. 173). In all this, however, Watts stresses that pagan images, temples and processions did not disappear swiftly and that very many young men continued to pursue similar career paths to Libanius,
Ausonius and other officials, and to employ similar methods of obtaining and wielding influence. In fact, although he presents Ambrose of Milan as a key example of the rise to prominence of ‘outsider voices’ (p. 189), Watts follows Neil McLynn (Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital, 1994, p. 167) in arguing that the bishop was only able to influence Valentinian II in the Altar of Victory controversy because he had acted as the emperor’s representative on an embassy to the usurper Magnus Maximus. While Ambrose presented this as a battle between Christianity and paganism, he recognised ‘the purely political nature of his victory’ (p. 187), which relied on the performance of imperial service and an exchange of favours that would not have looked out of place in the career of Themistius or Praetextatus.

Vignettes such as this contribute to holding the reader’s attention and should help this excellent volume to reach an audience beyond university academics. There are also a number of pithy comparisons with the modern day, which serve to illuminate details well, although some, such as the claim that Ausonius writing sexually graphic poetry was ‘almost like a fourth-century Eminem’ (p. 64), may perhaps be regarded as a bit of a stretch. The central theme of the change in attitudes between generations also seems sometimes to sit uneasily with the introductory statement that most baby boomers did not attend Woodstock and that far more of them ‘likely spent that weekend washing their cars than straining to hear music in upstate New York’ (p. 8). In this sense, their behaviour and priorities resembled those of their parents, and this problematises the idea of identifying a distinct, defining attitude for a whole generation. This, combined with the question of whether anything resembling a modern ‘youth culture’ existed at any point in the Roman world, therefore poses the question of how much continuity there was between the ‘final pagan generation’ and the one that succeeded it in the late fourth century. Our sources, which are largely ecclesiastical, give a great deal of attention to ‘young men who dropped out of the imperial system’ (p. 210), such as Basil of Caesarea and Ambrose, but we should not forget the innumerable aristocrats who continued to see service as imperial officials or civic orators, even if most are now little more than brief entries in the Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire. Watts’ impressive book has raised these vital issues for debate and deserves to be read by anyone interested in understanding the history of this significant period of transformation.

RICHARD FLOWER
UNIVERSITY OF EXETER