

Alston, Richard, *Rome's Revolution. Death of the Republic and Birth of the Empire*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York 2015). xx+385 pp. 18 figs. + 7 maps. ISBN 978-0-19-973976-9. US \$29.95.

This latest contribution to the OUP series “Ancient Civilization and Warfare” (edited by Richard Alston and Robin Waterfield) is an engaging and useful addition to the introductory literature dealing with the transition from Republic to Empire. Written in lucid and flowing prose, Richard Alston’s book should prove an excellent textbook for survey courses and seminars at the high school and university level as well as being accessible and of interest to the general public. In focussing upon traditional political and military history, moreover, it provides a welcome antidote to the flurry of biographies that have appeared in recent decades.

Alston has divided *Rome's Revolution* into eighteen chapters that provide a narrative extending from the assassination of Julius Caesar on 15 March 44 BC to the magnificent public funeral that followed the death of Augustus on 19 August AD 14. Roughly 20–30 pages apiece, each chapter deals with a specific theme and a discrete period of time. For instance, the eighteenth and final chapter (“Death of an Emperor”: pp. 321–337) covers the period extending from Augustus’ pinnacle of success in 2 BC to his death and funeral sixteen years later, setting forth the relationship between political and military events and the jockeying for position of various protagonists with a view to the moment of the monarch’s demise. The first, introductory chapter provides readers with an overview of the problems facing the modern historiographer, and a brief flash-back to 49–45 BC and a longer one dedicated to 133–49 BC are provided in the second and third–fourth chapters. From the fifth chapter onwards, however, the narrative begins to advance in linear fashion, after one last, complicated flash-back to 44–43 BC when picking up the thread on the eve of the battle of Mutina in the spring of 43 BC. Each chapter, it should be added, is divided into sections that range in length from two to six pages. By this sub-division of chapters, Alston elegantly resolves the problem of providing readers with a narrative that integrates *l’histoire événementielle* with structural analysis. The section “Buying Rome” (pp. 278–283), for instance, provides a useful, synthetic discussion of the known statistics as regards the expenses required to establish a new consensus in the wake of victory at Actium.

Alston’s historical recreation of the period 44 BC – AD 14 furnishes readers with what is in essence a thoughtful commentary upon and a much needed corrective to the grandiloquent narrative of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* that is so often uncritically transmitted. Both the unmitigated violence of the epoch and the conscious subversion of the constitution of the Republic emerge in great detail from a narrative that has the virtue of being furnished with excellent notes providing readers with reference to the ancient sources upon which Alston depends. Too often art historians and archaeologists seem to transfer to the political sphere their aesthetic judgements of the artwork of Augustan Rome. (Anyone who doubts this ought to look at what their undergraduate students write about the period, where ingenuous claims about the virtue of Augustus

abound.) This is to confuse categories and to do a disservice to the historical record. The architecture of the Third Reich may arguably display aesthetic refinement even though that is not to everyone's taste. On the other hand, there can be little dispute that the violence upon which the Third Reich was based is indefensible. There is probably an excellent book to be written on this subject of cognitive dissonance. Is it legitimate to equate aesthetic excellence with moral excellence? Can the scholar of material remains and visual imagery be excused for neglect or ignorance of the literary and documentary record? Be that as it may, Alston provides a welcome revisionist narrative of the Augustan achievement, highlighting the contrast between literary sources and the material culture. Pompeius Magnus had been labelled a "teenage butcher" in his early years, as we learn from a citation of the work of Livy by the indefatigable reader Valerius Maximus, and it is difficult not to imagine that Livy would himself have applied the label to Augustus had he felt at liberty to do so.

The treatment of the Perusine war affords insight into Alston's method as an ancient historian. As is to be expected for a book of this nature, he heavily abbreviates the sources' narratives so as to produce a brief, general overview of this conflict. Relatively limited in duration, but memorably violent and resolutory, the Perusine war was described at length by contemporary authors. However, many of the most useful details (e.g. the precise troop strengths of the nine commanders involved; cf. App. *BC* 5.50: 13 veteran legions and 6,500 cavalry) have disappeared from later authors thanks to the exigencies of compression and a taste for the more picturesque or dramatic. Given the change in modern *mores* and the intrinsic interest of the material, Alston could have cited at least one or two of the texts inscribed upon the sling-bullets that were shot during the siege of Perugia or the verses that Octavian composed against Fulvia (cf. Hallett 1977; Hollis 2007: 284–285 no. 161; neither of which appears in the bibliography or the notes). The omission of the dialogue between L. Antonius and Octavian from its natural place in the narrative is comprehensible albeit unfortunate (for allusion, however, see p. 165 and 364 n.17). The destruction of the city of Perugia is reported in a matter-of-fact style that reflects our contemporary world's indifference to mass violence. Numerous pathetic details are transmitted by the ancients, offering insight into the shock felt at news of the eradication of this populous city of venerable antiquity. Such things arguably do have a place even in a modern historian's reconstruction. Be that as it may, however, Alston's handling of Octavian's treatment of the prisoners of war raises further issues. What was the ultimate fate of L. Antonius? Apparently he was not killed outright, otherwise that would have been preserved in the sources. Therefore, he died soon thereafter of natural causes while entrusted with governing Spain under the watchful gaze of one of Caesar's collaborators (cf. Syme 1989 corr.: Ch. 2, for a brilliant treatment of mortality amongst the elite). Obscure internal exile as in the case of M. Aemilius Lepidus seems improbable at this juncture. More intriguing, rather, is the fate that awaited those who had fought under him. Unfortunately, Alston ruins the praiseworthy citation of Octavian's words as reported by Suetonius by failing to observe the difference between *oratio obliqua* in Latin and direct quotation in English and adjusting the Latin accordingly: *moriendum est*. Moreover, discussing the evidence in a note, he makes an inadvertently misleading statement. Not all

sources agree that 300 knights and senators were executed at the Altar of the Divus Iulius. It would have sufficed to emphasise the *scribunt quidam* that Suetonius uses to create distance between himself and what he is relating (Suet. Aug. 15). On the other hand, Alston is extremely convincing as regards the inherently vindictive nature of Octavian's treatment of his prisoners. In closing, Alston nicely establishes a clear nexus between the conclusion of the Perusine war and the establishment of the peace of Brundisium. Last but not least, Alston's postponement of the testimony of Vergil and Propertius to the very end of the chapter allows posterity – in the form of defeated contemporaries writing at a later moment – an opportunity to express their dissenting voice. This form of narrative closure seems altogether appropriate, especially in light of the fact that Augustus himself chose to pass over the entire episode in complete silence when composing the *Res Gestae*. In short, problems are not lacking, but Alston provides modern readers with an account that has the merits of being synthetic and in important respects critical.

Alston will produce a second edition in the coming years, it is to be hoped, and there are some problems that could be productively faced when doing so. Battle narratives, for one, are always difficult to compose, for the simple fact that the ancients looked upon the landscape in a manner quite different from that obtaining today. The account of the grim, silent combat at Mutina, for example, is brilliant (pp. 93–95; cf. Syme 1939: 174). However, as recent work has shown, the narrative of Appian is fundamentally unreliable, contrary to other accounts and arguably drawing inspiration from Homeric models (Bucher 2005). Another problematic aspect is that of statistics. Alston seems unaware of the fundamental, ground-breaking publication of Walter Scheidel (1996; cf. Westall 2009). The figure of 300, which is given as the number of Romans allegedly sacrificed to the Divus Iulius by Augustus, is a “rhetorical number” and as such is tantamount to “a lot” in contemporary English (p. 364 n. 31: “has the feel of an estimate”). The cultural setting of statistics must always be kept in mind when seeking to make use of these apparently neutral artefacts. A third problematic aspect is that of omitted modern literature. The end-notes do a brilliant job of reminding students and the general reader that it is of the essence to work with the sources, i.e. ancient literary accounts and epigraphic documents as well as the visual evidence so often privileged in today's world of the image. The end-notes, with their relentless citation of sources such as Cicero, Appian, and Dio, provide a salutary corrective to the confusion commonly found thanks to the infelicitous custom of designating modern interpretations as sources. Despite his invaluable emphasis upon the ancients, Alston would be well served, however, were he to take account also of more of the fundamental contributions of the past 150 years. This reviewer was surprised not to see the names and works of Timothy D. Barnes, Alison Cooley, Matthias Gelzer, Dietmar Kienast, Ida Östenberg, Christopher Pelling, John Rich, Greg Rowe, Susan Treggiari, and Peter White – to name but a few – listed in the bibliography. Moreover, other colleagues such as P.A. Brunt, Emilio Gabba, Walter Scheidel, and Kathryn Welch, but many of their key contributions are missing. The work of reconstruction of necessity commences with the ancients, but cannot be deemed finished until the moderns have been duly consulted. In the end, the ancient historian resembles the investigator of the scene of a crime, and,

abbreviated though it may be, a record of those who have passed before is extremely useful. A fourth problematic aspect is that of the use of quotations. Much more could have been done. Why not cite one of the jokes about Julia that are reported by the polymath Macrobius in that author's *Saturnalia*? Or what of Dio's account of a memorable dinner *chez* Vedius Pollio? The most useful model for such a use of citations remains Michael Crawford's classic textbook on the history of the Republic. A fifth and final aspect that merits revision is that of cartography. Aside from the surprising absence of any map representing the city of Rome, the maps overall could benefit from reflection upon excellent models such as those furnished by John Rich's translation of Cassius Dio's narrative of the establishment of the Augustan monarchy. As a coda, it is to be noted that at least two of the images (figs. 9, 16; cf. Nicgorski 1987 for convincing objections to the caption for fig. 2) do not represent the people whom they allegedly portray.

In conclusion, this is a book to be warmly recommended, for it is highly readable and promises to fill an urgent need for historical narrative devoted to the traditional themes of politics and warfare. By turns it is a book that is entertaining, thoughtful, and engaged with the problems of the present, which are the reasons why non-academics tend to turn to history. Moreover, by its example it quietly but firmly encourages readers to return to the written sources. In so doing, it provides an antidote to the misuse of the visual evidence and the glorification of Empire that has become customary since the end of the Cold War.

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