Objective, Reader-Friendly, Thorough But Not Overly Technical - A Must-Read For Roman Scholars/Fans

As Adrian Goldsworthy writes in the introduction to this book, “in his fifty-six years, Caesar was at times many things, including a fugitive, prisoner, rising politician, army leader, legal advocate, rebel, dictator . . . as well as husband, father, lover and adulterer.” In this landmark biography, Goldsworthy examines all of these roles and places his subject firmly within the context of Roman society in the first century B.C.

Tracing the extraordinary trajectory of Caesar’s life from birth through assassination, Goldsworthy covers not only Caesar’s accomplishments as charismatic orator, conquering general, and powerful dictator but also lesser-known chapters during which he was high priest of an exotic cult, captive of pirates, seducer not only of Cleopatra but also of the wives of his two main political rivals, and rebel condemned by his own country. Ultimately, Goldsworthy realizes the full complexity of Caesar’s character and shows why his political and military leadership continues to resonate some two thousand years later. (20061017)

Adrian Goldsworthy’s Caesar: Life of a Colossus joins two other recent biographies from the same period to provide a rich sense of Rome in the first century BC and shortly thereafter. The other two are Everitt’s volumes on Cicero and Augustus. Among them, once gets a sense of the increasing dysfunction of the Roman Republic and the various efforts to address the increasingly unfortunate state of affairs.

Goldsworthy’s book provides a detailed view of Caesars life. Where details are sparse, he uses good sense in trying to fill in the blanks, appropriately noting where the gaps in the record lie. The volume begins by describing the status of the Republic before Caesars story begins. This includes the institutions of government and the increasing internal problems, with
murder and assassination as more typical of regime change than is good for a stable polity. The role of the Senate is well described.

After setting the stage, Caesars story is put into context. One key issue was his association with the popularis and the hostility of some of the elite of Rome toward Caesar as a result. On page 105, the author notes that Caesar had from early in his career inclined toward a popularis path.

He held his first public office in 72 or 71 B. C. Shortly thereafter, he began to ally with Pompey the Great and, later, with Crassus in the First Triumvirate. He also began a habit of spending a great deal of money to generate support from Romans. This led to a situation where he was often risking great and even crushing debt in order to build support. Normally, the risk was rewarded with success over the course of his career.

The book goes on to discuss in nice detail Caesars assignment in Gaul. Over a period of time, he accumulated a record of great success in fighting the Gauls and making Romes hegemony in the region stable. His work also generated nice revenues for Rome and loot for his troops. Upon the completion of years of service in Gaul, he expected proper recognition. When the political climate became sour, he crossed the Rubicon with some of his troops and established his political dominance. The ups and downs of Caesar trying to overcome the army of Pompey, his former partner, and stabilizing the frontier (in Egypt, where he consorted with Cleopatra) and the east.

Upon his return to Rome he was preparing to return to the east when he was assassinated. His popularis tendencies appear to have been a part of that as well as a fear by many in the elite that Caesar was to become a dictator.

This is a nice volume on the period and on Caesar as a person. The book does a fine job of placing Caesar in the context of the increasingly problematic republic. Goldsworthy writes well and the end product is well worth a look by those interested in the subject and the time.

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