Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic by Tom Holland

Ponder The Fate Of The Roman Republic

A masterful, witty, brilliantly researched popular history of perhaps the greatest civilization ever and the events and people that led to its transformation from a republic to an empire.

On a dark January morning, Julius Caesar, the governor of Gaul, rode with his closest aides towards a river named the Rubicon, which marked the line of the frontier with Italy. A governor was forbidden to lead troops out of his allotted province – to break this severest of laws was tantamount to a declaration of civil war. Caesar was a gambler, however. Like the consummate actor on the public stage he had always been, he quoted a line from one of Menanders plays: Its time to roll the die. Then he ordered the legion behind him to advance, over the river and on towards Rome. Crossing the Rubicon was a step so consequential that it has come to stand for every fateful step in history since. When Caesar rolled his die, the result was indeed a civil war, one that would end up destroying Romes traditional freedoms and establishing a permanent dictatorship on the wreckage of her constitution.

In Rubicon, Cambridge- and Oxford-educated historian and novelist Tom Holland gives us a harrowing and exciting account of the fall of the Republic, one that begins in 100 BC, the approximate birthdate of the generation that was to bring about the Republics ruin. He then traces the development of these men into the ruling minds of the Republic, and the occurrence at the Rubicon that marked the end of the expansionism for which they had fought. Rubicon captures the suspense and drama of Romes most famous political rivalries and shows its vibrant and charged atmosphere, all the while featuring some of the most celebrated personalities in history–Julius Caesar, Cicero, Spartacus, Cleopatra,
Brutus, Pompey, Virgil, and Augustus. As America embarks on its own imperial adventures, Rubicon is the chronicle of Rome for which we have all been waiting—carefully researched and wildly compelling.

My Personal Review:
What parallels might be drawn between the present-day United States and the Roman Republic before Julius Caesar took over? It's a fascinating question, and one that seems to be an inspiration to Tom Holland, as he mentions it in the introduction to Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic. Or, maybe it wasn't one, since this is the last time he mentions it. The reader is left to his/her own conclusions on this issue, but unfortunately the back cover draws attention to this aspect making you think that's what the book is going to be about. Instead, he gives us a history of the fall of the Republic, from the late 2nd century BC to the death of Caesar in 44 BC. Holland covers all the wars, civil unrest and the decline of senatorial power as he shows us the events leading to dictatorship. The history is dotted with colourful characters (from Caesar to Spartacus to Cleopatra and beyond) and Holland brings them all to life, often in their own words. In doing so, Holland has produced a very readable account, meticulously researched, that will make anybody with even a mild interest in this time period clamour for more.

Holland begins (also in his introduction) by talking about the amount of information from this time period that we have access to, as its one of the most recorded periods in ancient history. Yet even so, it's impossible to take everything written as fact, immune to different interpretations. Instead, it's a minefield where historians have to tread carefully.

In short, the reader should take it as a rule of thumb that many statements of fact in this book could plausibly be contradicted by an opposite interpretation. Pg xx (introduction)

This is all well and good, and I'm glad that he warned us. While all history is subject to interpretation (or even outright lies, depending on what the sources are and how biased they are), the further back you go the worse it gets. However, one thing I wish Holland would have done is to acknowledge this within the text as well. It would have been interesting to see him discuss a couple of interpretations of conflicting events as he told us about them, something like:
{XX happened, according to Plutarch, but other accounts say YY happened. It seems logical to assume, given the equipment involved, that a combination of XX and YY is what truly happened.}

Instead, we get one narrative with a warning at the beginning that, we have to remember, this may not be the right one.

Holland uses a wealth of primary sources as well as sources written within the next 100-200 years after the fall of the Republic. This brings the issues sharply into focus as we get a closer look at what these people had to deal with. However, part of this goes back to the issue of bias and interpretation. Some the sources (Cicero is the primary example, but there are others) are heavily involved with these events, thus making their stories slightly suspect (or at least biased). Yes, we have to keep in mind
Hollands warning in the introduction, but its easy to lose track of this as you read the narrative.
That being said, the narrative Holland gives us is wonderful. He is very detailed, giving us somewhat of a history of each character as he introduces him/her. While this is not a history of Roman culture, but of government, he gives us enough information to get an idea of why these events were so monumental. We see the value Romans put in to their Republic and the fact that the people were able to vote on things (though of course it wasn't like our modern-day voting, where anybody can do it). With each step toward the abyss, we see the inevitability of what happened. The benefits of hindsight are wonderful, and perhaps that's where Hollands reference to current events should be placed. As we read about Marius and Sulla and other Romans who tried to enhance their own power at the expense of the Senate, are there any characters hanging around right now who are doing similar things?
Another place Holland excels is in keeping the various names of Roman characters straight (Gaius This and Gaius That). I've always found confusing whos who in the Roman Empire, but Holland helps this immensely. Even so, at times I had to stop and think who he was talking about, but the clearness of the narrative makes it a lot easier to keep organized in my brain. This also applies to the sometimes confusing events. Barbarians to the North, uppity kings to the East, slave revolts and other major events all combine to bring down the once mighty empire and allow one man to rise to the top to save it (dispensing with that pesky the people decide aspect, however). Holland is a radio personality in Britain, and I think this gives him the ability to break down the events in ways that are easier to understand. The authors description mentions he has a PhD, but it doesn't say in what, so I have no idea if its in history or not. Even so, he seems to have done his research and presented it in an easily readable, and more importantly, fascinating narrative.
For an introduction into the Roman Republic (and especially for those of you who thought Roman history *began* with Julius Caesar), this is a great book. Do yourself a favour and pick it up.
David Roy

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