

Julius Caesar: The People's Dictator by
Luciano Canfora

Trans. by Marian Hill and Kevin Windle. Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2007. (ISBN: 978-0-7486-1936-8). 392pp.

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The life of Julius Caesar is a fascinating one, in a period of history of momentous changes for the Roman republic. In this book, Luciano Canfora traces the developments in the life of Caesar that led to his having great influence over Rome in the final stages of its Republican existence, aiming to draw out the details of his interaction with the Roman populace which resulted in their ardent support, at least for a while.

On the whole, this is a well-written piece which traces effectively the rise and downfall of the 'dictator for life'. The translation is capably handled and retains a clarity of expression throughout that makes it eminently readable. Concise, well-labelled chapters enable quick reference for those seeking information on particular periods of Caesar's life, and there is a wealth of reference to both ancient and modern sources resulting in the feeling of a thoroughly considered and well-balanced biography. This useful reference factor is also very much in evidence in the highly detailed chronology appended to the main body of the text, providing not only a thorough, easily-navigated summary of important dates, but also a comprehensive list of the ancient sources which provide further information.

Whilst both lucid and well constructed, the book is weakened slightly by being apparently unsure of its target audience. The basic but thorough treatment of its subject matter would be invaluable to those who are new to the study of Classical civilization and politics,

as Caesar is so outstandingly influential in the story of both. However, it leaves many gaps in its explication which the reader is assumed to be able to fill. One of the most notable of these concerns Sulla. Despite receiving regular passing mention, Sulla's career, aims and achievements are rarely given more than scant attention. His is an important shadow over the text, which opens with his persecution of Caesar during his time in power, and culminates with comments about Caesar's desire not to imitate this previous military dictator. It would have been profitable to the less knowledgeable reader if Sulla's deeds and personality had been sketched out in a little more detail, even if that were restricted to a few brief paragraphs at relevant points in the text; as it stands, Canfora fails to make clear what made Sulla so dislike the young Caesar's character and political views, as well as why Caesar should later see his efforts as comparable to those of his enemy, and what exactly he hoped to imitate or avoid in his own dictatorship.

Were this a book aimed at the experienced Classicist, such omissions may have been less notable. However, the book has very little to say that is new that might entice such a readership. The theme of popular support and its attainment do run throughout the text, but are not prominent enough to fully justify the 'People's Dictator' subtitle, and no strong conclusions are drawn on the issue that could be pointed to as an original contribution to research in this area. Disappointingly, in recounting the final stretch of Caesar's life from the plots against him to his assassination, this thread is hardly evident at all, and there is no real discussion of the extent to which the dictator had retained his appeal to the public – most of the focus given to the political faction responsible for his death. There is also surprisingly little mention of the public reaction to the assassination. The author instead satisfies himself with a

straightforward recounting of the events, pieced together from the sources as accurately as possible, with no real discussion of related issues.

However, the time and effort that Luciano Canfora has put in to assembling a coherent picture of Caesar's life from youth to death, and beyond to deified immortality, should not be underestimated. His blend of information – mainly from the major sources Suetonius and Plutarch alongside Caesar's own writing – is skilled and creates a coherent, believable image of a man at the centre of momentous events. Canfora notes in his introduction to his work that he has attempted to avoid the potential pitfalls of viewing Caesar's impact on the course of history as 'inevitable', seeing it as vital that events should not be thought of as necessary steps to an unavoidable outcome. This approach reminds the reader that, at any of various important points in the narrative, events could have played out very differently, with potentially far reaching consequences for the development of Roman – and hence European – history and politics.

This is a solid and readable account of the life of one of the most important protagonists in a crucial period of Rome's history, and serves as a reminder of the facts, legends and myths of Caesar as culled from the ancient sources available to us. It is unfortunate that it lacks a little in accessibility for the novice to the field, whilst providing nothing that the experienced reader does not already know. In failing to effectively target either an audience new to Classics or an academic readership, the resulting work sadly seems to fall between two stools, and risks losing members of both groups. Reading as a new biography of Caesar rather than a solid investigation of a theme running throughout his life, this book is perhaps best suited to an intermediate audience, aware of the

historical background, yet looking for a detailed biography based on a synthesis of sources without the need to pick through and evaluate those sources themselves. Canfora's book would serve that purpose admirably, laying out the knowledge we have clearly and coherently. This may not be the definitive piece on Caesar's life and popular appeal, but it is an engrossing read that reminds us why that life is so worthy of attention.

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