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Book Review by Richard Talbert

BESTRIDING THE WORLD

SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome, by Mary Beard.
Liveright, 608 pages, \$35



Drawing of high relief sculpture, 96 inches wide, depicting Tellus (Mother Earth) holding children in her arms. Auras (land and sea breezes) are at her sides. From the Ara Pacis, altar of Augustan Peace in Rome, consecrated in 9 B.C.

ANY BOOK BY MARY BEARD IS LIKELY to be worth reading, and this one is for sure. In the lengthy line-up of rival attempts to package the history of ancient Rome within a single pair of covers for the general reader, *SPQR* (Latin acronym for “The Senate and People of Rome”) is a strong competitor. Beard, a professor of classics at the University of Cambridge and classics editor for the *Times Literary Supplement*, knows her stuff in depth (the book comes with a hefty bibliography), but here she displays the precious talent to single out broad themes with just a few well-chosen details for illustration, rather than parading her erudition or overwhelming you with a litany of indigestible names and dates. She writes, moreover, in a robust, lively style. Also refreshing is her frankness about the severe limits on our understanding of how Romans thought, or why

their leaders or populace did what they did. Like it or not, the ancient writings or statistics or other material needed to answer many questions are lost.

Granted, plenty of fresh finds still keep coming to light, an exciting trend boosted by incredible advances in technology. But realistically we must accept that numerous writings are beyond recovery, and in the case of statistics the data may never have been recorded anyway. Even so, this frustrating predicament should not deter us from formulating questions, developing hypotheses, and then debating them. Most welcome therefore is Beard’s unswerving rejection of the temptation to become merely romantic about the Romans, or to preach that we have A Lot To Learn from them. Rather, she’s sufficiently sensitive, clear-eyed, and shrewd to know that the past is seldom simple. Issues and perceptions need to

be treated from a range of perspectives, and a willingness to piece these together painstakingly and balance them is to be applauded. These are merits that give her book great strength and appeal.

SO, AFTER SUCH PRAISE, IS THERE MORE to say? No and yes, I think. No, because you should read the book without delay. Yes, because some features of it call for comment. First, it’s a letdown that more of the evidently generous production budget could not have been spent on increasing the mere handful of maps—all in grayscale and grouped together as front matter rather than spread through the book. Disclosure: I am known as a mapmaker, so this may seem an all-too-predictable comment from me. But still, who would deny that for the purpose of following the rise of a village on the riv-



er Tiber through domination of the Italian peninsula to annexation of the entire Mediterranean and far beyond, maps can offer a vital aid at every stage? Readers could justifiably want more.

Second, in the same vein, while the insertion of color pictures is splendid and the grayscale ones scattered through the text also represent varied and imaginative choices, it's a puzzle that more pictures and plans were not added, including some bigger ones that might even have been permitted a full page. As it is, the three-quarters page allowed for the monumental tomb of Eurysaces the ex-slave baker makes an unusually large picture among the grayscale ones, which in multiple instances are restricted to a mere quarter-page. General readers understandably enjoy pictures and find them informative, and there is a wealth of choice from Rome's imperial period to engage the photographer, but those opportunities are barely exploited here.

Third, and more important, Beard's book aptly reminds us of the plain truth ignored by historians at their peril, that one book just cannot Do It All. The history of the Romans presented for the general reader poses stern challenges in this respect. There's no dodging the fact that their story is a long one. The site that would eventually be developed as the city of Rome was occupied by 1000 B.C. at the very latest—which makes an obvious starting point. But then when to end the book? Further disclosure: I too have written a history of Rome (college-level textbook), and with my co-authors have agonized over the question of endpoint. We opted first for around 300 A.D., the period of Diocletian and Constantine, but met with loud disapproval from colleagues demanding that we extend it at least to the break-up of the Western empire around 500. Having duly done that in our second edition, we were then assailed by demands for continuation to Muhammad (600s) and even Charlemagne (800).

BEARD, IN OPTING TO COVER FROM EARLIEST Rome to the emperor Caracalla's grant of Roman citizenship to almost all free persons in the empire in 212 A.D., is much less expansive. The balance of her coverage is likewise untypical. Her first chapter demonstrates the methods and difficulties of tackling Roman history with reference to the conspiracy of Catiline in 63 B.C. Her next two then address the later reconstructions of early Roman society and institutions by historians and others in antiquity, and the delicate matter of how accurate these are likely to have been for a period when literacy was minimal and a historical consciousness had

yet to develop. The conflicting reconstructions are liable to shed more light on the preoccupations of their imaginative authors' own day than on the irrecoverable realities of early Rome. Beard's deft appraisal of these dilemmas is impressive and absorbing. The upshot, however, is that it's past page 150 when she finally reaches the period (from around 300 B.C.) in which Rome first stands out as a community of more than local importance. Many readers, I suspect, will find this a slow start.

Likewise untypical, and surprising, is Beard's choice of endpoint. As she acknowledges, Caracalla's grant seems to have proven a non-event. He may have promulgated it on a whim as a grandiose gesture, without weighing the consequence that Roman citizenship—a privilege attractive to those with lesser status, plenty of whom served Rome loyally to gain it—now lost its allure once everyone was a citizen. What practical benefit, if any, the new citizens gained from the grant remains obscure. The unique Year of the Six Emperors (238 A.D.), only a quarter-century later, could be a more telling endpoint. In this alarming eruption, sectors of society not

yet reconciled to their increasing irrelevance (notably, the senate and populace in Rome itself) lashed out at the alternative priorities of frontier armies facing heightened external pressures that would soon in fact threaten the empire's very survival. In addition, just prior to 238 three women from a memorable Syrian family took a prominent part in ruling the empire for almost 20 years, a unique reversal of gender roles surely of interest to Beard with her special concern for the place of women in society. For a one-volume Roman history to end, as hers does, well short of the extended death-threat that the empire experienced during the 3rd century A.D. is neither a wrong choice nor even a bad one, but it will invite some disappointment. After all, one of the most remarkable phases in the Roman story is how the empire successfully remade itself after the trauma of that century. This was a miracle comparable to the painful emergence of one-man rule from the wreck of a Republic that could no longer control the aristocratic rivalry on which it depended, nor function without the government (in a modern sense) that it had denied itself in rejecting kingship.



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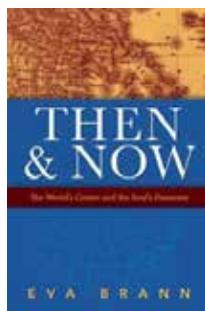
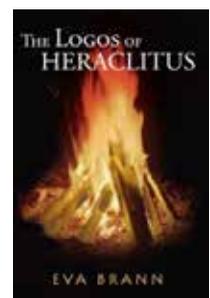
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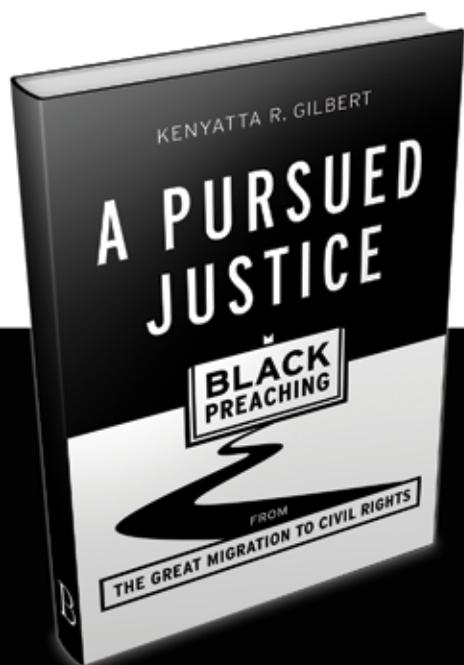
TIMEFRAME ASIDE, A FURTHER RESPECT in which one book just cannot Do It All is focus. While far from neglecting ideas and institutions, Beard certainly indulges a predilection for individuals of all ages and social levels and their private lives, especially Cicero (on whom she is an expert) and people on the margins. She presents them and their often pitiful circumstances with vividness and insight. However, readers with different preferences should be warned that comparable attention is not given to big-picture themes such as imperial grand strategy. One consequence is that the empire's amazing stretch at its most expansive lacks the emphasis it deserves. It is not to be underestimated. The northernmost Roman milestone known—today in the Museum of Scotland—was erected by army roadbuilders in the Edinburgh area during the early 140s A.D. By chance, at the *very same time* a legionary detachment established a fort on the Farasan islands, as we first learned in 1998 from a Latin inscription recorded there. This is a location near the southern end of the Red Sea, today Saudi territory and as remote to most of us as it must have been in Roman times, although well positioned to safeguard the empire's flourishing seaborne commerce with South Arabia, East Africa, the Persian Gulf, India, and Sri Lanka.

A FINAL MISSING DIMENSION IS THE comparative one. Perhaps this is rather much to hope for, but it too—like the focus on private lives on TV's *Downton Abbey*—is currently in vogue and full of potential, although admittedly tricky to handle. But, for example, when Americans who love their Interstate highways and take them for granted read here about the freedom of movement permitted to everyone in the Roman empire (except slaves and, ironically, senators), it's understandable if they're not overly impressed. This readership needs informing that, among premodern imperial powers which invested heavily in constructing highways, Rome was unique in making them available without restriction, with not even tolls payable except the occasional customs due on commercial goods. Contrast this with the multiple restrictions imposed in China and in Tokugawa Japan, including on who may travel (with extra hindrances for women in Japan), and on which highways (in 3rd-century B.C. Qin China, many were built for the emperor alone). More broadly, it would be worth speculating that if a time machine could arrange for an Inca inspector to visit the Roman empire during the first three centuries A.D., he would likely be appalled by the Romans' lack of drive to extract more

labor, resources, and loyalty (through religion, for instance) from their conquered peoples. To him, Rome's rulers would seem lazy softies who recklessly squandered golden opportunities. Rome's subjects in general withheld their assessment. Most liked the *Pax Romana*. For centuries, other peoples outside the empire, too, marveled at it despite its glaring inequities. In a cruel world, they viewed it as a safe, stable, and prosperous haven, just as millions in Africa and Asia view Europe today. Roman self-assurance, though arrogant, had its attractions. Hence what one admirer scratched in Greek on a desert rock in southern Jordan of all places: "The Romans Always Win"—a graffito first spotted by the British ambassador out for a picnic in 1987! Let's hope that Mary Beard will write a sequel to her *SPQR*.

Richard Talbert is William Rand Kenan, Jr., Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the founder of its Ancient World Mapping Center (awmc.unc.edu). His books include The Romans from Village to Empire (Oxford University Press) and Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World (Princeton University Press). His next book, Roman Portable Sundials: The Empire in Your Hand, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press in January.

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