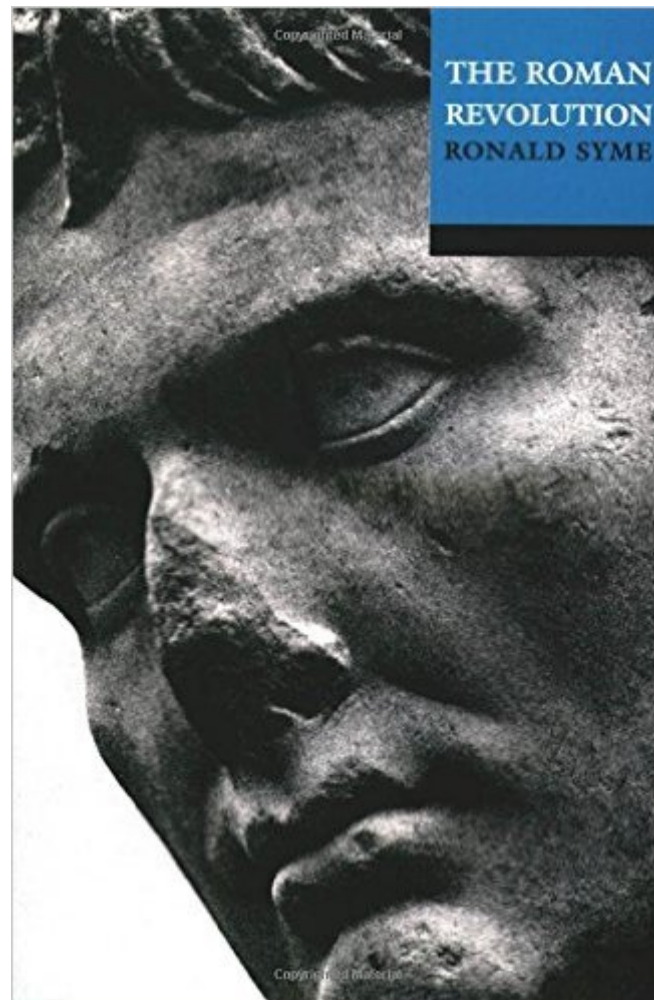


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The Roman Revolution



Synopsis

The Roman Revolution is a profound and unconventional treatment of a great theme - the fall of the Republic and the decline of freedom in Rome between 60 BC and AD 14, and the rise to power of the greatest of the Roman Emperors, Augustus. The transformation of state and society, the violent transference of power and property, and the establishment of Augustus' rule are presented in an unconventional narrative, which quotes from ancient evidence, refers seldomly to modern authorities, and states controversial opinions quite openly. The result is a book which is both fresh and compelling.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is without doubt Syme's masterwork. The praise has been lavish. A.J.P. Taylor said it was a "work of brilliant scholarship which can be enjoyed by the expert and the layman alike". Sir Maurice Bowra said "his work is extraordinarily persuasive and interesting, it is the best book on Roman History that has appeared for many years." The Classical Review wrote that is the "one of the most important books on Roman history since Mommsen. Need more reasons to read it? Well, I'll try. I'll start by saying that this is one of the top 25 books I have read - though I by no means agree with everything Syme believes. What Ronald Syme has done is to lay bare the workings of the late Republic and early Empire. To do this required an effort of scholarship and synthesis on a gargantuan scale. And yet Syme manages to render the story in a lucid, straightforward, compelling manner. His arguments are often ineluctable. You find yourself drawn along, at times unwillingly, to conclusions you thought far-fetched. The period under scrutiny is 60 BC to AD 14. Thus he covers the last generation of the Republic and the first two or three of the Empire. In a nutshell his

hypothesis is that the Republic simply was not equipped to manage what had become an empire. He believes that Rome was inevitably drawn to the rule of one. He writes of Caesar: "The rule of the nobles, he [Caesar] could see, was an anachronism in a world-empire; and so was the power of the Roman plebs when all Italy enjoyed the franchise. Caesar in truth was more conservative and Roman than many have fancied; no Roman conceived of government save through an oligarchy." Augustus, however, was a different matter. And it was Augustus, believes Syme, who wrought the revolution that forever changed the Roman way of life.

This great work of scholarly history was first published in June 1939. In his brief foreword Sir Ronald Syme speaks cryptically about its publication being a matter of some urgency. From that we have to infer that he saw it as having contemporary relevance. From a slow and careful reading I would add that we ought to be very careful and circumspect in how we draw parallels and apply lessons. I don't dispute for a moment that a thorough and precise examination of what was done over the turbulent transition from the later Roman republic to the principate gives deep insight into human motivations and political processes. However if one particular lesson comes over loud and clear to me it is how terminology can be distorted for political ends, deliberate or even unperceived. Those prone to assert that 'reading history' will in some inevitable way support some cherished preconception of their own will, if intelligent and attentive, gain a salutary insight into what history really consists of, and with that a perception of the pitfalls of dealing in glib generalisations and citing as convenient parallels things that are no parallels at all. The first job of the historian is to clarify what really, or probably, happened and to interpret accurately or at least rationally what the sources for the period tell us. This is rarely a matter of simple fact in the sense that multiplication tables are simple fact. Syme's reasoning is bold and forthright, and while he has no claim to be taken as gospel he never seems to me perverse or unreasonable. I personally doubt that Antony was the straightforward and honest type portrayed by Syme - Syme himself can't get away from the part Antony played in the proscriptions.

In this review I contribute three facts that elucidate the origin and approach of *The Roman Revolution*. The first is the reason why Syme began to question the genuineness of Augustus' constitutional settlements of the 20s BC, which historians since Mommsen had taken seriously as restoring, at least partially, the republic. In the early 1980s, I was a professor of Classics at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. On two occasions, Sir Ronald visited our university. On one visit, he spent an evening (into the early morning) at my home with two

colleagues of mine, one of whom was Professor Frank Goodyear, one of the twentieth century's leading Tacitean scholars. Amidst a haze of cigar smoke, Sir Ronald told us that he began to suspect the fraudulence at Augustus' constitution because of the constitution that Stalin promulgated for the Soviet Union in 1936, which guaranteed freedom of speech and the press, habeas corpus, etc. (Sir Ronald has undoubtedly told other people about the effect of the Soviet constitution on him, but I have never seen it in print.) (The Roman Revolution was first published in 1939, not 1937, as another reviewer asserts.) My second and third facts are from Syme's other masterpiece, his two-volume book on the Roman historian Tacitus. Most of it is devoted to explaining and extolling Tacitus' greatness. However, Syme admits that Tacitus could not escape from a defect that is inherent in writing history: Tacitus "presents characters and arranges events in undue coherence. That is the manner of historians in every age;" "Historians of all ages ... cannot help making persons and events more logical than reality;" "Wisdom after the event bedevils all historical exposition ...

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