Reviews of the The Twelve Caesars by Robert Graves,Suetonius

Orevise

I wanted the Penguin Graves translation, which is marvelous and was left on a train. I accidentally bought the preposterous edition with 12 photos on the cover (see my attached photo). The error is easy to make, since the 180 Amazon reviews refer not to various editions but to the work itself. The edition I accidentally chose is by an obscure translator, produced Print-On-Demand, and in fact available free at Gutenberg Project. The format is that of "Suetonious for Dummies." The font is absurdly small and each line run 15-18 words, making it impossible to read. Just a disaster of book design. To survive Amazon policy of conflating reviews, use "Look Inside the Book" to confirm the intended publisher.

Vareyma

Readers should be aware that this edition includes commentary by an 18th Century translator.
following each chapter with no clear demarcation of where Suetonius ends and the translator begins. As the preface notes: "Of the English translations, that of Dr. Alexander Thomson, published in 1796, has been made the basis of the present. He informs us in his Preface, that a version of Suetonius was with him only a secondary object, his principal design being to form a just estimate of Roman literature, and to elucidate the state of government, and the manners of the times; for which the work of Suetonius seemed a fitting vehicle. Dr. Thomson's remarks appended to each successive reign, are reprinted nearly verbatim in the present edition." It's kind of an irritating thing for a translator to do--as if we're as interested in his 1,700-year-after-the-fact opinions as in those of Suetonius--and kind of an inexplicable choice on the part of the compiler of this edition not to set them off more clearly...or, better yet, eliminate them entirely. You might want to choose a different edition of this book, but if you do read this one, be aware that the musings on Latin literature are not part of the original work and may be skipped over with little loss.

First read it when I was fifteen (If I remember correctly). Re-read it almost sixty years later, enjoiing it even more. Keen as a straight razor; objective, insightful, honest ,laconic yet not dry - this is a real masterpiece of historical biography. Suetonius concisely relates all known facts (and also some occurences that were not unanimously reported or unambiguously documented) about the first twelve Caesars, starting with Julius. Even when viewed by his contemporary (70-126 AD) set of moral, social, and judicial principles, the first dozen present less than admirable god-like figures. All (with the possible exception of Claudius) were power-hungry, ambitious, and totally ruthless. All would bribe, threaten, swindle, murder - to pave their way to power. On this universally repulsive background, only three seem worthy of admiration as just and conscientious rulers - Julius, Vespasianus, and Titus (The latter two much abhorred by the Jews for putting down the 70 AD Great Rebellion, burning down the Temple, and leading the captives in a triumphal procession in Rome. When viewed in the context of the first century AD world, their actions were actually just routine). All the rest were mowers even by the pretty lax standard of the Roman world, culminating with Caligula and Nero, who were plainly blood-thirsty fiends. It is however extremely interesting to realize that the Roman Empire enjoyed expansion, success, and thrived despite the utter lack of restraint of its rulers and their entourage. What comes to mind is the feelings of duty to the state and the personal and civic orderly conduct permeating the Roman citizens society. Enthralling

What a well-paced, entertaining chronicle worthy of the lives and times of the Caesars!

Written at the end of the “Silver Age” of Roman arts and literature, most likely around 120 AD, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (69 - 150AD) provides well-organized, fascinating profiles of these leaders and their companions. And there were certainly turbulent transition from one Caesar to the next, full of intrigue, plots, sexual frolics, greed and murder worthy of anything served up as entertainment or news today.

What sets this edition of Suetonius’ work apart is the interesting original translation by Alexander Thomson in 1796 with commentary at the end of each chapter expanding on the main artists who were contemporaries of each Caesar. These additions bring a “humanities” perspective to the main events and their impacts.

Rest assured the original translation has been updated more recently by T. Forester who has been busy publishing versions of this and other classical literature. This new edition includes an added section on “The Lives of Grammarians, Rhetoricians and Poets” which is not covered in this review.

Suetonius takes us through almost 150 years of the Roman Empire by portraying the first emperors - from the end of the Republic to the end of the Caesars (and slightly beyond). And how initial
reassurances to all by the first Caesar that this change to a single ruler-manager government was necessary for the country’s stability evolved into a mesmerizing transition from despot to despot.

There are reasonably smooth periods under Julius, Augustus, to some extent Claudius and, later, the Flavian family rulers of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian.

In contrast, there are also intervals, short and long, of egotism and eccentricity, even madness, starting with Tiberius, then, Caligula and Nero. Some were part of the bloodline, some by adoption, but could claim to be descended from the family.

With the assassination of Nero came the end of the Caesars and a remarkable interval called “The Year of the Four Caesars” (68-69AD) with three outsiders – Galba, Otho and Vitellius - claiming the dictatorship before Vespasian, an army general, solidified his grasp of the power.

With each portrait Suetonius provides insightful personal detail about each Caesar’s habits, marital arrangements and operating styles with soldiers, foes, senators and the general public. And juicy, scandalous tales about their sexual preferences and preoccupations. They were a busy lot.

Above all, they liked “control” of their worlds by any means necessary and had little reason to believe they couldn’t do what they wished – usually until too late.

The author provides a consistent and cohesive approach to presenting each Caesar:

- A concise description of his family background, childhood, key relatives and people who influenced him and emergence into public life
- Skillful tracing of the major career events and critical decisions and acts that impacted individuals such as friends, competitors, politicians and the public, first positive, then, negative (in most cases the negative stories far outweigh the positives inevitably pointing to demise of the particular emperor)
- Wrapped into this portrait, public accomplishments and quirky preferences such as Tiberius bringing in people he could watch as they performed seamy sexual acts on one another; Nero dressing his favorite eunuch as his queen to ride with in public; Domitian using morning time alone in his private quarters to catch flies and take their wings off
- A brief description of how each died (most were either assassinated or thought to be if poisoning was suspected – only three seemed to die of natural causes), the immediate reaction from the public, the army, and potential successors
- Then, a description of the man physically, his manner of dress, education or interests in the arts and artists, especially Nero who fancied himself as an artist superior to most others

The author never really explores why the Republic was not restored after various opportunities were presented. Perhaps this one-ruler form of government had been around long enough to be the “norm,” thanks to its 40-year start during the benign Augustan period. Then again, it may have been risky for Suetonius to openly speculate around his own emperor.

The drawbacks to this collection are stylistic but sufficient to make reading tiring at times. A caution to readers: the third person is used extensively so that tracking who Suetonius is referring to is difficult at times. Coupled with the lack of paragraphs, just section denotations, the text can sometimes scramble the story.

This “tell all” historical style of Suetonius is informative, eye opening and has a modern feel at times. His older contemporary, Tacitus (56 – 120AD) takes a more traditional approach to recording events
though not without delightful observations (see my 01/26/2014 Amazon review of “The Complete Tacitus Anthology).

With Tacitus doing the play-by-play adding some sly random wit, Suetonius makes for great color commentary at ringside during this age of the Caesars.

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