A General History of Rome from the Foundation of the City to the Fall of Augustulus, B. C. 753-A.D. 476

Merivale Charles
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HISTORY OF ROME.

B.C. 753—A.D. 476.
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A General History of Rome

From the Foundation of the City to the Fall of Augustulus,
B.C. 753—A.D. 476.

By Charles Merivale, D.D.,
Dean of Ely.

"Historia scribitur ad narrandum non ad probandum."
Quintilian, Inst. Orat. x. i. 31.

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PREFACE.

The Breviary or Compendium of Roman affairs by Eutropius extends from the foundation of Rome to the reign of Jovian, in the year of the city 1117, as commonly reckoned, or A.D. 364. The summary which is now offered to the reader reaches more than a century further, and terminates A.U.C. 1229, A.D. 476. This, it will be allowed, is a long period to embrace within the limits of a single volume, to which it seems convenient to confine it. It will be well to preface the work with a few words in explanation of its object and its method.

The title of a General History is given to this book, first, because it is addressed to no special class of readers, but rather to the reading public in general, who may desire to be informed of the most notable incidents in the Roman annals, the most remarkable characters which play their part upon the Roman stage, and the main course of events, together with their causes and consequences. With this object directly in view the writer has no occasion to load his pages with references, or justify his statements by notes and critical discussions, for which his prescribed limits would allow him no room. It is for the orator, says the great critic of antiquity, to argue and persuade; the historian may confine himself to narration. But in cutting myself off from the resource of notes and references, I must at the same time refrain from disquisitions and speculations which cannot be conducted safely or fairly without them. These I must leave to the critical inquirer and the professed student; my pages are addressed, as I have said, to the general reader,
who will be content to accept the conclusions which I present to him. In former works, which cover a large part of the course now before us, I have gone fully into the critical analysis of our historical authorities. In this shorter compendium I take the liberty of adopting the results at which I then arrived, and often of merely abridging my earlier narrative.*

But this little work may also claim the title of General, inasmuch as it traverses the whole career of Roman history from the reputed foundation of the city to its capture by the Vandals, and the extinction of the Western Empire a few years later. Roman history travels through three principal stages, which it may be interesting to define more particularly.

1. The first of these may be designated as the “antiquarian.” The reputed history of the great conquering people presents this striking peculiarity, that while it continues for several centuries to be merely legendary both in its main features and its details, it is found on examination to be curiously adjusted to the existence of many actual institutions. The institutions survived; it is certain that they must have had an historical origin; their origin appears to be accounted for by the narrative before us. It is the function of the antiquarian to trace these institutions to their real foundation, to distinguish between the accounts we can accept as historical and those we are bound to reject as fictitious or imaginary; he must collect, compare, and sift the authorities, full as they are of inconsistency and contradiction; he must analyze and criticise them at every step; and while he is obliged to advance many conjectures, he must explain the grounds on which he forms them, and show the means by which they may be defended. After all the critical labors of

* I beg to acknowledge my obligation to the proprietors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for the use they have allowed me to make of my article on “Roman History” in that publication, and especially of the chapter on the history of “The City.”
Niebuhr and his successors in the art of historical construction, we have really advanced but little beyond the rude destructive process of Perizonius and Beaufort; we have trampled upon a great deal which the earlier critics had upset before us, but we can hardly be said to have raised any substantial edifice in its place, since we have so generally agreed to reject as visionary the most brilliant theories of our great German master. The local discoveries of Mr. Parker have their historical value, inasmuch as they confirm the reputed sequence of events in various interesting particulars; but the inconsistencies of the narrative can still only be explained by referring them to legends and traditions of no historical character. For myself, I am constrained to admit that there is scarcely one particular of importance throughout three centuries of our pretended annals on the exact truth of which we can securely rely.

Nevertheless, the history of Rome must not be written without the relation of these particulars, as they have been handed down to us by the ancients. They were accepted as historical by the Romans themselves, and as so accepted they played their part in forming the character of the people, and even in directing its career. They sank deeply into the heart and moulded the genius of the Roman race. They constitute the basis of half the best Roman poetry, and swayed thereby the imagination of both conquerors and rulers. Virgil and Ovid more especially can be but half understood by any one who is not conversant with the poetic myths of Livy; the course of Roman thought and action can be but imperfectly appreciated by those who are not aware how strongly they were influenced by the legends which taught the people that they were the favorites of the gods, and that this favor had been manifested to them on a hundred imaginary battle-fields. It is impossible, as I have said, to sift our early records critically in a work like the present; but it would be a great mistake to pass them over
altogether. I have not disguised how little stress I lay upon them as historical documents; but my plain course was to relate the story which the Romans have themselves transmitted to us much as they would have themselves related it, for the sake of its antiquarian interest, while at the same time I do not fail to warn the reader of the insecurity of the ground over which it leads him.

2. The second period of Roman history may be designated as the "dramatic." No other annals, it may be fairly said, either ancient or even modern, are so rich as these in the representation of human character. There is no personage of mark that comes across the stage, from the fifth to the ninth century of Rome, who does not leave a distinct personal impression on our recollection. From the Scipios to M. Aurelius we seem to traverse a long gallery of national portraits, every one of which brings a real individual man before us. The Sulla, the Marius, and the Caesar of Roman history are there presented to us each with traits of character as subtly distinguished from the others as the Macbeth, the John, the Richard of our great English dramatist. The Brutus, the Cassius, the Antony of the historians stand apart from one another as clearly on their pages as in the tragic scenes of the most illustrious master of human character. Shakespeare, it will be remembered, has made no attempt to delineate any leading personage of the Grecian annals. Of all the heroes of Athens and Sparta, there was none presented to him to whom, as a painter of human portraits, he felt his genius attracted. But it would be worthy of a Shakespeare to discriminate between the shades of astuteness in an Augustus and a Tiberius, of selfish cruelty in a Caligula and a Nero, of military bluntness in a Vespasian and a Trajan; between the roving curiosity of a Hadrian and the morbid self-inspection of an Aurelius. But all these characters have been passed in review in the course of the works on Roman history which I have formerly published. The portion of the present volume which