

Rubicon – The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic
by Tom Holland. Little, Brown 2003.

Western society owes an enormous debt to the Romans, for many of our institutions, legal codes and social structures are based on models that they established, mostly during the centuries of the Republic that are the subject of this fantastic book.

History writing –at its best – should convince one of the author's knowledge of that of which he writes, and then by its clarity and style draw the reader ever deeper in to the subject until s/he is totally immersed in it. This is unquestionably some of the best history writing that one could wish to read, made even better by the author's judicious use of phraseology with a modern resonance that sheds new light on ancient people, their motivations and actions.

What comes across in abundance from Rubicon is the fact that in many ways, for all its pretensions to superiority, culture and the rule of law, Republican Rome was a gangster state, gaining possessions and provinces through the ruthless use of violence and meting out the same to its own citizens, up to the highest in the land, when the circumstances were seen so to demand. Famous men such as Sulla and Marius, Cicero and Caesar, Cato and Catullus, are brought vividly to life, and through their personal story the saga of the Republic is brought to its close through its final civil war following the murder of Julius Caesar.

Reading Rubicon it is easy to see the parallels that its author clearly intends one to draw between the nascent Roman Empire and its modern incarnation, the United States of America. Some of the parallels are stronger than others – notably the justification used for intervention in areas and regions far from its own shores – but in total they make anyone with a true sense of history feel distinctly uneasy.

I hope Tom Holland will follow Rubicon with a similarly exemplary analysis of Imperial Rome.

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