

*The First Emperor—Caesar Augustus and the Triumph of Rome by Anthony Everitt
John Murray 2006.*

In spite of the fact that nearly 2000 years have passed since the heyday of Augustan Rome, the Roman Empire and its first and greatest Emperor still exert a powerful fascination.

The First Emperor, by the author of the superb Cicero (2001) tells the story of the demise of the Roman republic, the fragmentation of Rome during the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, the assassination of Caesar and the triumvirate of Lepidus, Mark Antony and Octavian, and the latter's eventual—and by no means guaranteed—triumph as Rome's Princeps.

The ground may be well trodden, but like a brilliant recording by a virtuoso orchestra of a much loved symphony, Anthony Everitt reveals details and nuances in this rich story that may easily have been missed. He also meets and debates head-on some of the major myths of the Augustus story, and is not disposed to accept well-rooted and time-honoured nostrums.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of The First Emperor is its depiction of the creation of a 'First Family' in Rome, and how far the reality was distant from the myth; intrigue, premature deaths, sexual misdemeanours and other human frailties combining to make Augustus' latter years far from peaceful or rewarding.

Anthony Everitt's judgement of Caesar Augustus is overall a benign one, and having read this excellent biography it would be hard to disagree with him, or with his assertion that he is one of the most influential Europeans of the last 2000 years.

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