

Cleopatra - Last Queen of Egypt by Joyce Tyldesley.
Profile Books 2008.

Most people, if asked to picture Cleopatra, would base their description on the sultry, seductive and beautiful image of her that owes more to Hollywood than ancient Egypt, and it is to rectify such misconceptions as well as to provide information on the final dynasty to rule Egypt that Joyce Tyldesley has produced her excellent, latest work.

Tyldesley traces the story of the Ptolemaic dynasty, descended from one of Alexander the Great's generals and demonstrates the huge challenge inherent in its study due to the profusion of the same royal names, particularly as the dynasty drew to a close. She describes the tortuous and danger-strewn path which Cleopatra had to navigate before she ascended the Egyptian throne, and the ruthlessness that she showed once she got there.

At the heart of the book though, as one might expect, lies the interaction between Egypt and Rome, epitomised by Cleopatra's relationships with its great leaders, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, by both of whom she had children, and Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, who proved her nemesis. Tyldesley sets these serial relationships against the background of events that changed the world, and Egypt, forever, and concludes with a moving chapter on Cleopatra's death which seeks to separate myth from reality. The final chapter details the transformation of Cleopatra into legend, a process that began within decades of her death and reached its apotheosis with Shakespeare.

This is a highly readable book by an Egyptologist who is able to combine information and interpretation in perfect proportion, and will be a source of delight to anyone with an interest in Egyptian or Roman history, or in the factual background of one of literature's great icons.

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