

Antony and Cleopatra by Adrian Goldsworthy.

Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2010.

Following his superb biography of Julius Caesar published in 2006 to great acclaim, Adrian Goldsworthy has turned his attention to one of history's most fascinating, mutually destructive and ultimately tragic partnerships, Antony and Cleopatra. The Roman blue blood and the Graeco-Egyptian monarch, brought together initially by pragmatism (hers) and destroyed by a mixture of hubris and passion.

Goldsworthy points out that there is a paucity of first hand information about Cleopatra, and most of what there is comes from the pen of ancient historians whose writing may be as much informed by bias as by facts. Much more is known about Antony in his various official capacities before and after the assassination of Julius Caesar, and during the period of the triumvirate and his fatal conflict with Octavian.

Antony and Cleopatra follows the individual lives and backgrounds of its two protagonists, presenting them as fully rounded individuals with personal histories before they came into each other's ambit, and greatly informing what they did as a couple. Goldsworthy makes clear the deadly climate of intrigue at the Egyptian royal court and the fetid swamp that was Ptolemaic politics.

Much of the material in Antony and Cleopatra has been treated elsewhere, though here with its ultimate focus on the fatal pair some of it takes on a fresh meaning, but there is new material too – the chapter on Antony's ill-fated expedition against the Parthians being a notable example.

In the end it is the death of Antony and Cleopatra that seals their immortality, rather than their lives, and the pathos of their love's final hours is perfectly expressed.

Adrian Goldsworthy points out that the Roman and his Egyptian queen were interred together, and that their final resting place has not been found, even though marine archaeologists claim to have discovered the remains of her palace beneath the sea off Alexandria. He expresses the hope that they will remain undiscovered and undisturbed and having finished this masterful re-telling of their story one cannot but concur.

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