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Barbara Levick, *Vespasian. Second Edition. Roman Imperial Biographies*. London; New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xxvi, 345. ISBN 9780415708890. \$140.00/£90.00.

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Preview

This is a biography for those who prefer their biographies to be more about the times than the man. Levick's *Vespasian* is a political history of mid-first century AD structured around the figure of Vespasian. Within these parameters, Levick's book remains an important and useful contribution to scholarship. As the greater part of *Vespasian* is unchanged from its first incarnation, it is sufficient to provide a brief summary of its contents before turning to the question of whether the second edition represents a substantial improvement on the first.¹

Levick opens with a discussion of Vespasian's origins, familial connections, and career (Chapter 1). This is the phase of Vespasian's life that we know least about, and Levick's sensible and cautious reconstruction is grafted onto the known framework of a typical senatorial career under the early empire. Chapters 2 and 3 consider Vespasian's career under Claudius and his role in the Claudian invasion of Britain, and the campaign in Judaea in 66-69. Chapter 4 covers the complex events of AD 69 with admirable dexterity.

Concatenations of proper names (as Syme might have put it) infuse these early chapters. While the effect of this might be overwhelming for readers not fully versed in their Tacitus, it does show Levick's command of material as well as serving as a tacit reminder that emperors or would-be emperors were not lone agents operating in a vacuum: a theme Levick returns to in Chapter 11 (*Elites*). But given the nature of the book one does wonder if some of these named individuals might not have been omitted for the sake of clarity. Some peripheral players disappear entirely after one appearance, and one wonders if we really do need their full identification at all. At other times there are prosopographical snares for the unwary, or for the uninitiated. One individual who appears more than once, Ti. Claudius Balbillus (no mere nonentity by any estimation), is styled Barbillus at his first appearance (p. 80) and Balbillus at his second (p. 190), but with no indication in the text or the notes that this is one and the same man. This is surprising in a book where detailed endnotes abound; similarly, nothing is said about the games

instituted in Balbillus' honour at Ephesus by Vespasian himself.

The second half of the book is arranged thematically. There are complementary chapters on the ideology of Vespasian's regime (Chapter 5) and the opposition to the new dynasty (Chapter 6). These chapters are followed by discussion of what may be termed Vespasianic success stories – namely how Vespasian and his administration sought to pacify the rebellious elements in the Empire (Chapter 8), achieve financial stability after the economic doldrums of the later Julio-Claudian period (Chapter 7), develop the physical environs of Rome and enhance the infrastructure of the Empire (Chapter 9), and consolidate the military position on the imperial frontiers (Chapter 10). The succession of Titus and Domitian is the theme of the last of the original chapters (Chapter 12). The new Chapter 13 takes the form of a survey of Flavian literature by genre. Verse authors get the most attention, prose authors far less: oratory is dealt with in a single paragraph.

A second edition offers an author a chance to make corrections, revise arguments, or even add new material. The publisher's preface states that this volume has been "updated to take account of the past fifteen years of scholarship, and with a new chapter on literature under the Flavians". It is perhaps on these terms that the work needs to be assessed.

Changes to the body text are scarce. Where additions have been made, they tend to be in places which serve to augment Levick's existing argument (e.g. pp. 76, 128). One feels that more could have been done on this front. Certainly, there are some areas which have not aged well, or which now require further justification. Levick's description of "Tiberius' housewifely attitude [to the economy]", was quaint in 1999, but strikes a discordant note in our (admittedly) po-faced times. Pettifogging aside, repeated casual references to class, "Marxist class" (p. 4), "class war" (pp. 30 and 117), "class hatred" (p. 30), as a key factor in historical causation is less likely to be accepted uncritically by many historians today. Moreover, there is a certain degree of inconsistency here. Levick is surely right in her demolition of Rostovtzeff's assertion that it was a proletarian hatred of the civic bourgeoisie that led to the bloodletting in Cremona in 69 (p. 166). But the same could be said of her own ascription of "class war" as "a central factor" in the outbreak of the Judaean revolt in 66 (pp. 29-30). On this point, there seems to have been a missed opportunity to incorporate or even contest some more recent views on the causes of the revolt.²

Most problematical is the addition of the new chapter on Flavian literature (Chapter 13). It is not helped by the general impression that the chapter has been shoe-horned into the main narrative. This seems clear from the Introduction, which has not been adequately revised to include the new material. Indeed, the only place in the introduction where Chapter 13 (but not its content) is mentioned is in a general statement pertaining to the structure of the second half of the book (p. 2) –which in fact is unchanged from the first edition. There also seems to have been some uncertainty as to where the new Chapter 13 would appear. A new, somewhat incongruous paragraph at the end of Chapter 11 (p. 200) seems to function as a segue to the new material of Chapter 13, only for it to be followed by Chapter 12, "Vespasian and His Sons". This reader was left wondering if it had been originally planned for the new material to have been included as Chapter 12.

The underlying question of what exactly is Flavian about Flavian literature is never addressed. Yet this is surely an important question to address; not least in order to give some sort of structure to what Levick styles as a “survey” of Flavian literature. What is clear is that Flavian literature for Levick means Latin literature. Only one major Greek author is mentioned, Dio Chrysostom, thus leaving unconsidered perhaps the most successful and influential of all authors of the Flavian period, Plutarch.³

More importantly, we have to ask whether or not this survey-style chapter adds anything to our knowledge of Vespasian or his reign. The answer has to be in the negative. Such a chapter might be justified in a biography of Domitian, certainly in a general History of Flavian Rome, but in a biography of Vespasian it seems out of place. Indeed, throughout these pages the founder of the Flavian dynasty all but disappears from view. It could be argued that the most salient points about the political aspects of Flavian poetry had already been made (pp. 86-9). But there is more. The direction of Levick’s analysis seems off the mark. Levick’s initial preoccupation with the ‘place’ of Silver Age Latin poets in the “canon” appears tangential, or worse, irrelevant. Does it really matter that Silius Italicus is not as great a poet as Vergil?

There are omissions in the bibliography, which is unfortunate for a book which purports to take into account the past fifteen years of scholarship. Leslie Murison’s valuable commentary on Cassius Dio’s post-Neronian and Flavian narratives, which appeared too late for its use in the first edition, remains unused (or at least uncited) in the second edition. Pat Southern’s biography of Domitian is mentioned in the body text but appears in neither the endnotes nor the bibliography. Even more surprisingly, the important second volume of *acta* arising from Italian-led project on Vespasian in 2009 does not appear in the bibliography.⁴ The bulk of the newer works of scholarship which are cited are from the two major Anglophone volumes which appeared since the publication of Levick’s first edition, namely, Boyle and Dominik’s *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*, and Edmondson, Mason, and Rives’ *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*. It may be noted at this point that some bibliographical slips from the first edition have not been rectified. The references to ‘Hind’ (p. 263) appear without indication of the relevant publication in either the notes or the bibliography.⁵

Minor, yet not infrequent blemishes in the form of typographical errors (introduced subsequent to the first edition) do not reflect well upon the publisher’s copyediting processes. Some are careless: “IIIvir momtalts” for IIIvir monetalis (p.11), “ordmarius” for ordinarius (p. 16), or “Iuventuth” for Iuventutis (p. 205); others are simply execrable: “Gyrene” for Cyrene (p. 145), “suthentic” for authentic (p. 128), or “Jerusalellm” for Jerusalem (p. 256). Errors of attribution, not the responsibility of the publisher, are mercifully rare; although in one instance the scholar Rashna Taraporewalla becomes “R. Tarepoewalla” (p. 297 n. 10). Of course, such errors do not diminish the quality of Levick’s scholarship, but they do dull the lustre of what is, at £90/\$140, an expensive book. It is hoped that these and other typographical errors be excised from future printings of this work.

Levick’s *Vespasian* has been a staple of undergraduate reading lists since its first appearance in 1999. It will remain so for years to come – and with good reason. As a work of scholarship it is solid, cautious, and frequently illuminating. Levick is a

sound guide for any student or scholar approaching Roman politics during the years of Vespasian's ascent and political supremacy. But as to whether this second edition offers any positive advance on the first, this reviewer is unconvinced. Given the nature of the changes, and the superfluous Chapter 13, one may wonder if it would have been better had the first edition been reprinted with the addition of an updated bibliography. To invoke a commonplace: why fix something that is not broken?

Notes:

1. Reviewed here BMCR [2001.01.20](#).

2. E.g. M. Goodman's popular yet scholarly *Rome and Jerusalem: A Clash of Ancient Civilisations* is a surprising omission. S. Mason's *A History of the Jewish War, AD 66-74* (Cambridge 2016) appeared too late to have been consulted by Levick.

3. For the Vespasianic date of Plutarch's *Caesares* see P.A. Stadter, *Plutarch and His Roman Readers* (Oxford 2014), 65ff.

4. Capogrossi Colognesi, L. and Tassi Scandone, E. (edd), *Vespasiano e l'impero dei Flavi: atti del convegno, Roma, Palazzo Massimo, 18-20 novembre 2009* (Rome 2012).

5. The correct reference is J.G.F. Hind, "The invasion of Britain in A.D. 43. An Alternative Strategy for Aulus Plautius", *Britannia* 20 (1989), 1-21. Given that Levick gives attention to the strategy of Claudius' generals in Britain, one might expect a reference to Hind's more recent, "A. Plautius' campaign in Britain: an alternative reading of the narrative in Cassius Dio (60.19.5-21.2)", *Britannia* 38 (2007), 93-106.

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