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Ronald Syme, *Approaching the Roman Revolution: Papers on Republican History*. (edited by Federico Santangelo). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xv, 428. ISBN 9780198767060. \$140.00.

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Preview

Approaching Sallust might have been a more apt title for this generally stimulating collection of twenty-six essays, ably assembled and annotated by Federico Santangelo. With perhaps one or two exceptions, these previously unpublished essays were written by the late Sir Ronald Syme between the publication of his *The Roman Revolution* in 1939 and *Sallust* in 1964. As one might suspect, Sallust and Sallustian themes loom large across these studies.

The background to this collection may be summarised briefly, as the details will be known already to many readers of BMCR. When Syme died in September 1989, he left behind scores of draft papers and notes. Some of these were in typescript, but many were written on the backs of scrap paper—old letters, envelopes, circulars—which were then filed away in repurposed cigar boxes. The decade after Syme's death saw the addition of four significant volumes to the Symean corpus. There appeared two major collections of this previously unpublished material, which were edited by Anthony Birley: *Anatolica: Studies in Strabo* (Clarendon Press, 1995) and *The Provincial at Rome* (Exeter University Press, 1999), in addition to the final volumes of *Roman Papers* also edited by Birley. The baton has since been passed to Santangelo as the unofficial editor-in-chief of Syme's *Nachlass*. Aside from this present collection of twenty-six essays, recent excursions into the Syme Archive have resulted in the publication of an incomplete draft of Syme's aborted biography of Caesar, also edited by Santangelo.¹

Whether we now see Syme as an essentially Imperial Historian who produced a masterpiece on the end of the Republic, or as a Republican Historian who spent most of his career trapped in the history and historiography of the Imperial period, we cannot escape the fact that Syme's works on the Late Republic continue to frame and inform much scholarly debate, particularly (and perhaps most appropriately) in antipodean Classics departments. Even so, it is unlikely that this collection will inject much further life into these debates, or open them to new

fields.

The studies assembled here fall into broad categories, which Santangelo arranges by theme and historical chronology (but not in the order in which they were composed). The mid-second century provides the starting point. Chapters 1 to 3 deal with the politics and dynastic connections of the great second century families, the Aemilii, the Marcii, and the Fulvii (the decline of the latter is treated in Chapter 19, “The End of the Fulvii”). Chapters 4 to 7 consider the dictator Sulla and the aftermath of his regime, including a fun essay on the rogue consul of 78, L. Aemilius Lepidus (Chapter 6). From here the focus turns to Sallust, with an assortment of problems arising from Sallust’s works forming the central theme of Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 12 to 18. The remainder is more eclectic. Caesar’s actions as *pontifex maximus* and Cicero’s actions in August 44 are the subjects of Chapters 20 and 21. Three essays on Augustan authors follow, Nicolaus of Damascus (Chapter 22), whose abilities are treated with considerable contempt, and Virgil (Chapters 23 and 24). The penultimate chapter (“How Many *fasces*”) shows Syme more in the mode of Hugh Last or A.H.M. Jones, as he tackles the problem of the relationship between the number of *fasces* and the level of a magistrate’s *imperium*. The final chapter presents a potted history of Rome’s involvement with the Umbrians (Chapter 26).

As one would expect, these essays are packed with keen prosopographical observations. Syme’s mastery of the literary and the then-available epigraphic sources is patent on almost every page. Most of the essays focus on addressing particular problems: for example, the date and reason behind L. Aemilius Paullus’ divorce from Papiria (Chapter 1). Some of these essays allow us to catch a glimpse of the historian at work. Chapters 13 through 18 may be read as drafts of material which would find final form elsewhere, especially in *Sallust*. Indeed, there are even some near- identical phrases and lines of argument expressed in these contributions here and in *Sallust*.

Given the nature of the collection as a whole, and the fragmentary form of some of these essays, some items are less engaging than others. The lengthy relics of Syme’s projected study of Umbria collected here under the title “Rome and Umbria” (Chapter 26) left this reviewer cold. Conceived before the revolutionary advances in Italian archaeology, this contribution is also, one feels, of limited usefulness. At times we catch the traces of battles old or abandoned. The essay on the “Abdication of Sulla” (Chapter 4) is a tantalizing pre-Badian attack on Carcopino’s 1931 monograph on the dictator. As such it is interesting, but again somewhat narrow in terms of its scholarly utility.

Santangelo does not shy away from the fact that Syme did not intend these pieces to be published in the form he left them, if indeed he ever wanted to publish some of them at all (pp. 2-3). As such, we should not expect too many revelations from the essays. They are minor works, works in progress, or even what might be termed *hypomnemata*. For whom therefore, may we ask, is this collection intended? It is unlikely that these essays will find their way onto many undergraduate reading lists, although certainly some advanced undergraduates will benefit from reading several of these studies. Professional Roman Republican historians, especially those of a more traditional bent, will also gain something by reading these works. Indeed, the range of studies here means that there is at least something for most historians of

the late Republic. But it is a third category, the historian of modern historiography, who would gain most from this collection. It is certainly this nebulous group that Santangelo has in mind as being a major audience for the book (pp. 4-5).

Santangelo's editorial work deserves to be singled out for special praise. One may justifiably say that his editorial contributions are the most useful aspect of this collection. References to (primarily) ancient sources have been discreetly supplied to those essays which had no such scholarly apparatus. Most constructive, given the age of many of these pieces, are the annotated bibliographies Santangelo supplies for each chapter, which are conveniently printed at the end of the volume (pp. 339-389). The bibliographies provide not only a comprehensive list of the most important studies, but also serve to situate each contribution in its broader scholarly context. These have been compiled and executed with due care and attention. Patently this has been a labour of love for Santangelo, and his efforts demand our respect and gratitude.

If we accept that this is a collection with limited utility and niche appeal, we must remember as well that there is another way in which we may appreciate Syme in the 21st century. "Style abides", was a dictum Syme knew well. The literary aspects of Syme's oeuvre are attracting more scholarly attention. Chris Pelling took "The Rhetoric of the Roman Revolution" as his theme for his 2014 Syme Lecture.² Syme, along with his Oxford contemporaries, the historians A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper, were masters of historical prose. Syme the consummate prose stylist is evident throughout these essays; essays, one may add, which are free from many of the portentous abstractions (to paraphrase Syme's verdict on the style of a lesser historian) which are so characteristic of his own later works.³ The more polished and substantial of these contributions are a pleasure to read. But for all that, unlike the works of Syme's aforementioned coevals, it is doubtful whether these essays will be read by many (if anyone) outside of the profession. Syme was a great writer, but his erudition did not extend to making him an attractive or accessible communicator beyond his field.

Dead dons are in vogue. One suspects a biography of Syme is in the offing. Alan Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper, Steven Runciman, Moses Finley, and Maurice Bowra have all received book-length biographies in recent years. Certainly the private, enigmatic Syme will prove a harder subject than the likes of Finley and Trevor-Roper, men who were forever in the public eye as public intellectuals and who shared a genius for courting controversy. One suspects that it will be in his words rather than in his deeds that Syme will be remembered. This collection, in addition to that which has already been published, perhaps provides us with all we need to know about the man whom Sir Fergus Millar once described as the greatest Roman historian of the 20th century.

Notes:

^{1.} F. Santangelo, "The Triumph of Caesarism: An Unfinished Book by Ronald Syme", *Quaderni di storia* 79 (2014), 5-32.

^{2.} C. Pelling, "The Rhetoric of the Roman Revolution", *Syllecta Classica* (2015), 207-247. A podcast of this public lecture. which was delivered at Wolfson College

on 14 November 2014, is available [here](#). Note also M. Toher, “Tacitus’ Syme” in A.J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2009), 317-329.

3. There are still some idiosyncratic turns of phrase, which confound standard English usage; e.g. p. 16 “The consul who fell on the stricken field of Cannae...”.

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