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Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. x, 531. ISBN 978-0-300-13719-4.

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Anyone with time to kill and a desire to read an elegant and complete narrative of the fate of the Roman Empire will naturally turn to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. For the rest of us, there is now Adrian Goldsworthy's immensely readable single-volume treatment.

"How did Rome fall?" is a difficult question further complicated by incautious historians who indulge in dubious contemporary parallels, but this historian is worthy of his task. Goldsworthy's first book, *The Roman Army at War, 100 BC-AD 200*,¹ is a fine work of scholarship. Since then, he has produced a remarkable array of books bringing intelligent analysis to bear on Roman warfare for a much wider public. *How Rome Fell* satisfies the scholar's thirst for endnotes without daunting the dilettante. No familiarity with Latin or Greek languages is required, and Goldsworthy is careful in using the technical vocabulary of Roman government and administration. The inevitable comparisons with present-day United States are generally suggestions and adumbrations rather than homilies or exercises in *Schadenfreude*.

Goldsworthy treats Rome's fall as the culmination of a long process beginning with the death of Marcus Aurelius in A.D. 180 and ending in the early seventh century with the reign of Justin II and the appearance of Mohammad. In telling this complex story, he shapes detailed accounts of emperors, pretenders, and their supporting casts according to a few organizing themes.

One such theme is the place of contingency. Unlike Gibbon, who famously saw the empire's fall as a natural consequence of its own weight, Goldsworthy emphasizes contingent events and human choices, not inexorable historical forces. For example, if the size of the empire led to problems, it was also a source of strength. The Roman Empire, at least in the East, was for many centuries too big to fail (414). That no one wanted it to fail—a point worth further reflection—was less a matter of chance than of effective Roman cultural expansion (35) in the fortunate absence of genuinely world-class competition.

Unsurprisingly, given Goldsworthy's expertise as a Roman military historian, a second narrative thread is constant warfare. Reading him makes one reconsider the notion of a *Pax Romana*. Although the period examined saw long stretches without serious foreign threats, few decades were free of civil war (22). Emperors acquired their dominance by force and then devoted their energies—and state resources—to often futile efforts to stave off rivals. Each violent change of reign instilled greater selfishness and deeper paranoia. Roman politics lost any pretence of aiming at the public good rather than personal power: "At a basic level the emperors and government officials of the Late Roman Empire had forgotten what the empire was for. The wider interests of the state—the *Res Publica*, or 'public thing', from which we get our word 'Republic'—were secondary to their own personal success and survival" (418).

This tale of violence makes one wonder about the popularity of Roman rule. Goldsworthy's remit does not encompass the experience of those living in the cockpits of the struggle for dominance. His laconic "many suffered; a few probably profited" (142) refers apparently to the financial consequences of civil war. But the inimitable question posed in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*,² "what have the Romans ever done for us?" takes on new resonance in a context not of peace but of civil wars that spent revenues that might have gone toward the "sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health" often seen as compensating for Roman rule. There is an unexplored tension between Goldsworthy's description of the increasing self-interest of the late empire and his insistence on that em-

1. Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1996—based on his 1994 Oxford D.Phil. thesis.

2. Orion Pictures 1979, dir. Terry Jones.

pire's popularity. Constant war may have left the empire ungoverned, yet "people wanted to be Roman and associated freedom with belonging to the empire and not independence from it" (16). But what price did imperial citizens pay for the privilege of being fought over? Did they think that price reasonable or could they simply not imagine a different world? Was the government less defective than Goldsworthy asserts? He draws no comparisons here between Roman and modern societies, but the reader's mind wanders in that direction.

Besides contingency and civil war, a third theme is a healthy skepticism concerning (especially, single-theory) explanations of the fall of Rome. We do not, Goldsworthy claims, have compelling evidence that the Sassanid Persians posed a more dangerous threat than their Parthian predecessors (406). The barbarians of the fifth century were conquerors, not raiders. Speculations about Roman economic decline draw on thin and ambiguous evidence (408). Lead poisoning in the Roman elite goes unmentioned, and Goldsworthy does not follow Gibbon in blaming Christianity for eroding Rome's traditional political virtues.

Instead of theorizing about the fall, Goldsworthy simply offers an intelligently crafted narrative history. Central, of course, is the chronicle of the careers of emperors, but in each chapter he avoids a monotonous litany of civil wars by exploring pertinent aspects of the larger story. Thus, the chapter on Commodus and Septimius Severus is also a handy briefing on the Roman army. One meets Caracalla and Geta in a chapter, appropriately titled "Roman Women," examining the power of mothers and grandmothers over boy emperors. Later chapters treat, among other subjects, Rome's relations with the Parthians, changes in the Roman economy, the absorption of barbarians into Roman territory, and the impact of Christianity.

Those who have read Goldsworthy's earlier work may be surprised that he says so little about actual fighting in this book, but he gives as much operational detail as the sources and the balance of the narrative allow. Many will be relieved that lack of evidence precludes a blow-by-blow account of a hundred or so civil wars.

Although the story of repeated civil war is only occasionally varied by an emperor dying in bed, Goldsworthy's prose keeps one's attention. In a lesser writer, a single brief paragraph moving from the ornate nature of imperial dress through the size of the imperial bureaucracy to official depredations against the populace might seem a collection of non-sequiturs, but here it suggests craftsmanship. In short, *How Rome Fell* is a pleasure to read.

True to its origin as a paper delivered at a symposium on grand strategy sponsored by U.S. Office of Net Assessment, the book concludes with a few thoughts about contemporary America in an "Epilogue—An Even Simpler Moral." While Goldsworthy asserts that Rome and the United States are very different places and eschews simplistic parallels and bleak predictions, one cannot read his observations about Americans' expanding national institutions and diminishing sense of public commitment without recalling ancient Rome and shuddering.