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Reviews of:

De la Bédoyère, G. 1999. *The Golden Age of Roman Britain*. Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd. Hb., 194 pages, 91 figs., 27 pls., ISBN 0 7524 1417 8, £25.00.

Faulkner, N. 2000. *The Decline and Fall of Roman Britain*. Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd. Hb., 192 pages, 75 figs., 27 pls., ISBN 0 7524 1458 5, £25.00.

The appearance of two books devoted to the fourth century in Britain ought to be welcome. There has been little written since Esmonde Cleary's useful synthesis, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (1989), that has not dealt with the period as either the last act of the Roman occupation, or the prologue to the fifth century AD 'Dark Age' (cf. e.g. Dark 2000). This dearth of monographs is even more surprising when viewed against the background of growing academic interest in the general field of late antiquity (which is also reflected in several other recent Tempus publications: Knight 1999; Reece 1999; Swift 2000). What is interesting about these two volumes on Britain is that they paint quite different pictures of the province in the late Roman period. What is disappointing is that neither makes it sufficiently clear to the reader why this should be possible, and this is partly because neither can really claim to have taken full account of the many developments that have occurred in the last ten years in approaches to understanding the Roman world.

Comparing these books at a fairly specific level, Faulkner comes off best. Though told from a particular point of view (see below), his story is generally more inclusive with regard to the different social groups of Roman Britain than Bédoyère's. His narrative actually covers earlier periods of Romano-British history in some detail, reaching the fourth century only in Chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 thereafter present an in-depth social portrait of the last phase of provincial administration; they are followed by a chronological table and select bibliography. In many respects this is a fairly traditional account of Roman-British history, complete with some traditional flaws, such as an over-reliance on simplistic applications of Tacitus, and a rather monolithic view of 'Roman' culture which is embedded in the approach to Romanization-as-elite-emulation established by Millett (1990) and since critiqued (e.g. Freeman 1993). Although there is some useful discussion of the problems with this paradigm (pp. 149-157), it comes rather too late to be convincingly woven into the narrative. Nonetheless, there are some significant insights with regard to other specific points (e.g. on aspects of late towns; pp. 126-30). What is most distinctive about the book, however, is the author's ideological commitment to exposing the exploitative nature of the Roman empire.

Faulkner's position is clearly influenced by Marxism, indicated from the outset by his view of the linear nature of history, driven by revolutions; his emphasis on the agency of 'the people'; and his use of an analogy between the Roman empire and the contemporary capitalist/'imperialist'-dominated world (pp. 11-12). This is not in

itself a problem – far from it, as it reflects a more politically appealing world-view than that of Bédoyère (see below). However, when such a position is presented without any acknowledgement of the specificity of this understanding of human social life, there are dangers, and as with Bédoyère's approach (though more honestly and less condescendingly – cf. Faulkner p. 11 with Bédoyère p. 91), alternatives are excluded rather than engaged. The reader is often thus provided only with fairly stereotypical characterizations of plucky peasants and 'rotten Romans' (to borrow the title of Deary 1994, e.g. p. 120), which deny any individual variation or agency free from the "inner workings of history" (p. 11). It is not, moreover, quite as novel as Faulkner claims (p. 10; cf. Hunter-Mann's earlier (1993), more openly Marxist account of late Roman Britain). While Faulkner does admit that "the clash of competing 'historical imaginations' is the way knowledge of the past advances" (p. 11), the implications of any such differences of interpretation for the conditions of archaeological 'knowledge' remain an unexamined point, to which I will return below.

In stark contrast to Faulkner's perspective, Bédoyère's title reflects the fact that he is explicitly and solely concerned with the 'villa elite' of fourth century Britain, whose material culture, in the form of mosaics, elaborate architecture, and precious-metal goods, evokes a picture of great prosperity. The underlying theme is that this elite was, or aspired to be, thoroughly 'Roman', as expressed through such possessions. The text is part historical narrative, part thematic discussion. The introduction is followed by chapters on Carausius' revolt, and the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine. Subsequently, towns, the country, religion, art and culture are considered, always with a view to the elite. The last two chapters cover late fourth-century and early fifth century history and the significance within this context of treasure-hoards. Also included are a list of historical dates, a site gazetteer, some primary source references, and a short guide to further reading.

As with Faulkner's book, Bédoyère's is essentially a largely traditional account of late Roman Britain, breaking little new ground in the topics discussed, but made distinctive by a particular perspective on social life. Some sections are given useful treatment, such as the significance of Carausius' propaganda (pp. 32-6). However, where Faulkner at least tries to bring all sectors of society within his narrative frame, Bédoyère's approach is seriously weakened by its exclusivity. The focus on the 'villa-elite' is justified with the assertion that recent work on rural Roman Britain has concentrated too much on non-villa settlement, whereas "the character of any period or time in human history is often largely defined by the works, influence, and tastes of its ruling class" (p. 9) – and peasants are always just peasants. This reactionary view (which compares with that of the famous prehistorian Grahame Clarke (1983)) is not merely unpalatable as a generalization about human culture. In denying any role in the structuration of social life to politically subordinate groups, Bédoyère grossly over-simplifies the ways in which societies are constituted, ignoring the impact of, for instance, post-Colonial theory (e.g. Hawkes 1999; Webster and Cooper (eds.) 1996;) on our understanding of power relationships in the Roman world. His claims about the direction of research are also premature, as Romano-British archaeology has really only just begun to turn away from a long period of emphasis on elite settlements (cf. Hingley 1989) – although there is no denying Bédoyère's point (p. 9) that few villas have been excavated to modern standards.

Turning from these specific issues to more generally comparative themes, it is clear that here we have two diametrically opposed accounts of late Roman Britain. Both employ similar material, and indeed many of the same, well-established ways of comprehending it (use of Classical sources; the Romanization paradigm), but both approach this core subject matter with distinctive political views about how society works. Taking a positive view of this, one might say that Reece's admonition for all Romano-British archaeologists to write *their own* stories of Roman Britain (1993: 38) is being followed, reflecting an acceptance that the interpretative nature of archaeology will always generate a plurality of pasts. However, what I (as, it seems only fair to point out at this stage, a card-carrying liberal) find worrying, particularly in books aimed at a fairly broad audience, is that neither author confronts this issue. Bédoyère simply ignores it, while Faulkner explicitly states his aim as being "to 'tell the story' and to show why it happened in one way and not another" (p. 10; my emphasis). This seems to reflect the fact that both of these books follow in, rather than break with, the chronically under-theorized traditions of Romano-British archaeology. Rather than demonstrating a self-critical interest in the interpretative process, or a real concern to write completely new accounts of social life in this period, these two books leave the reader, at worst, confused, or at best with a couple of good examples of contemporary political uses of the past.

The contrast between these two books shows not that one is wrong and one right, but that there is more than one story. Both writers do their readers a disservice when they do not acknowledge this, and fail to explore some of the reasons why it is so; primarily, it is because no social reality, past or present, is ever comprehended from only one point of view. Both of these interpretations might be in some sense 'right' from the perspective of different social groups in fourth century Britain, but we should not expect one of them to explain everything. The complexities of identity in this period (Gardner 2001) cannot readily be reduced. The direction of both of these works at a wide audience cannot be used as a defence for avoiding such weighty issues. Complex themes can be made readily accessible, as James (1999) has successfully demonstrated with the subject of ethnicity. Britain in the fourth century remains a period with many problems, centred on the dynamic intersection of diverse individual and group identities. The positions adopted in these two books allow us to glimpse parts of these, but they are insufficiently self-critical to show us that there is always more to be seen.

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