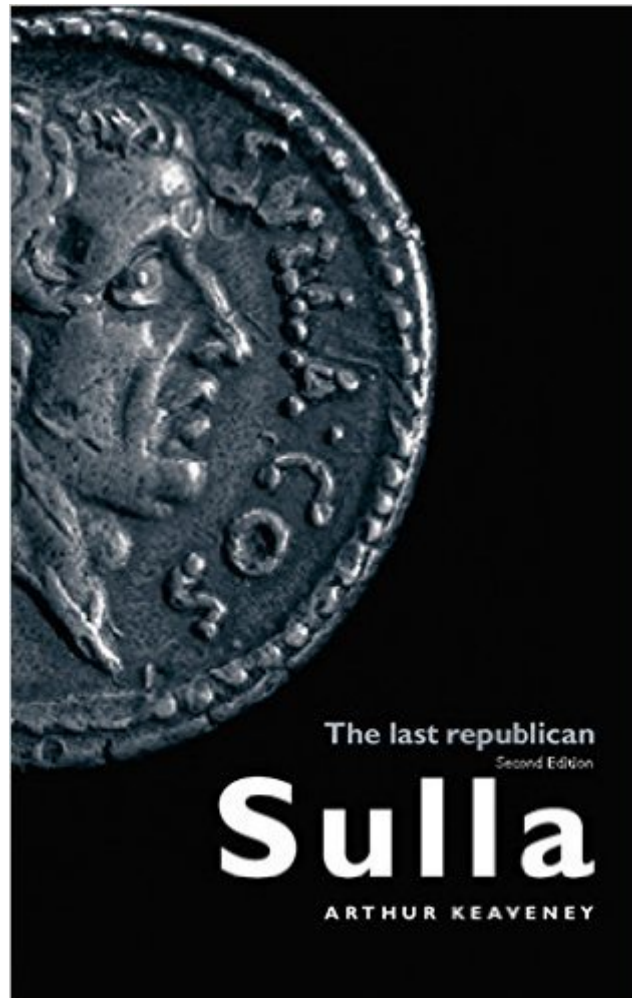


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Sulla: The Last Republican



Synopsis

In this second edition of Arthur Keaveney's classic biography, a fresh generation of students, scholars and readers are introduced to one of the most pivotal figures in the outgoing Roman Empire. A definitive book in its field, this second edition is a must read. Completely rewritten and updated to include the further discoveries of the last two decades, it challenges traditional views of Sulla as a tyrant and harsh military dictator and instead delivers a compellingly complex portrait of a man obsessed with the belief that he was blessed with divine favour. Written by a leading authority on the classical world, this lively and entertaining book transports us through Sulla's rise from poverty and obscurity to his dictatorship of Rome, highlighting his dedication and achievements in better ordering the Republic before his decline a generation later.

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Customer Reviews

This is a rather superb biography of Sulla, the Roman Dictator, the victor of Mithridates and the warlord who emerged victorious from Rome's civil war against the "Maristes". As the author makes

clear from the beginning, Sulla has been much maligned and has received an overwhelming amount of "negative press", both from ancient authors and modern historians, much more in fact than Marius, who was at least as unscrupulous. As he also shows, this mainly because he was the first Roman general to march his army on Rome and attack it (twice) and he was also the first to get rid of his enemies through the "proscriptions" and a systematic reign of terror. In both cases, he would have plenty of imitators over the last half century of the Republic. What is less well known are the reasons he had for going to such unprecedented extremes, and this is where the author's contribution is particularly valuable. Essentially, it was about survival, his own, and perhaps also that of a certain idea he had of a Roman Republic dominated by the Senate. Added to this is Sulla's own character, that of a bitter scion of a patrician family who had come across hard times, despised the "populares" but was also despised by the "optimates" who saw him as a renegade. One of the main features of his personality, as the author demonstrates throughout his book, was his constancy. He is presented as utterly loyal to his friends and utterly relentless when it came to retaliating and avenging past wrongs. In sum, according to the author who seeks to largely rehabilitate him, he did what he had to, at whatever costs, and was not one to shy away from extreme measures, when he believed that these were the only viable options.

In some ways, this is one of the oddest books I have ever read. It took me a long while to figure out how to read and appreciate it. Even though I believe it to be badly flawed, I also believe it to be a wonderful case study in the difficulties of doing history. For Arthur Keaveney (AK from now on) believes Sulla to be a victim of poor historical method. AK believes that if we situate Sulla in the right historical context and with the appropriate moral compass that many of Sulla's actions that seem cruel, bloody-minded or tyrannical reveal themselves as the actions of a man determined to save the Roman Republic from itself. I believe he fails in his attempt but that is up to each individual to decide. To make a long story short, I finally came up with the idea of reading this biography as AK's attempt to recreate Sulla's memoirs which is largely lost to us. As an alternate approach, think of AK's work as a study in taking the hermeneutics of generosity to an extreme. AK really tries to see all of Sulla's life as he thinks Sulla would have seen it. I would summarize AK's presentation of Sulla as being based on three themes: 1. Sulla was famous for his good fortune. He was known throughout his life as Sulla Felix or Sulla the Fortunate. AK rightly emphasizes that to the Romans this meant that the gods blessed and approved of Sulla and his actions. This was a source of assurance to Sulla and his adherents throughout his life. Sulla was especially devoted to Apollo, Bellona and Venus (there is a good presentation of this theme on pp.33-35). By the way, this theme

leads to some of the oddest writing in the book. AK writes as if the Roman gods and the prophecies of seers and augurs are real.

Worth reading to offer a fresh look at a man and an era often maligned with a 'too facile' degree of thoughtfulness. But 'correcting' history often seems to come with taking the opposite position too far in the other direction. In that vein, this book seems to have a split personality. Portions of it are well balanced and written in a style that considers multiple explanations for the events surrounding the life of Lucius Cornelius Sulla. During these portions, Sulla's supporters and enemies are treated with an even handed consideration, allowing the reader to interpret the information available without excessive 'leading'. This approach applies to the Conclusion "Qualis fuit Sulla" (mostly) and to the period prior to the First Civil War. The portions covering the Civil Wars and his dictatorship are unfortunately more propaganda than honest history. In these most important portions of the book, Keaveney strikes a common theme -- that Sulla's actions can only be interpreted as being in the best interests of the Republic. In almost every instance in which the history reaches a decision point at which Sulla took a path that lead to his political dominance of the Republic, the author concludes that 'obviously' or that 'we can only conclude that' Sulla's intentions were pure (occasionally conceding that the man took significant pride in being the worst of enemies). Further, that these actions can only be interpreted as having been taken because he felt that this was in the best interests of his traditional understanding of the Republic's foundations. Well, the same could be said of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Genghis Khan, Pol Pot, etc. L'etat c'est moi!

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