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Written by **William P. Hoar** on June 25, 2024

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The Review

Resurveying Roman One-man Rule

***Emperor of Rome: Ruling the Ancient Roman World*,** by Mary Beard, New York: Liveright, 2023, 512 pages, hardcover.

History that is shy to embellish a bit is liable to be dreary. *Emperor of Rome: Ruling the Ancient Roman World*, both erudite and entertaining, is decidedly not dull.

When there are facts and eyewitnesses, they are mentioned. But this is ancient Rome — and that also means absurdities and scandalous behavior are rampant. When some of the conclusions of sources from the period seem suspect, author Mary Beard — who has been called "the world's most famous classicist" — says so directly. But she doesn't abandon such accounts altogether.

Beard also wrote the bestsellers *The Fires of Vesuvius* and *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (which went from Romulus and Remus to Caracalla nearly a thousand years later). A retired professor from the University of Cambridge, she is also a television personality in the U.K. This wide-ranging narrative was deservedly named as the book of the year by *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, and *Smithsonian*.

There's a copious cast of main characters, frequently called "one-man rulers" in these pages; the setting is wide. The covered rulers — using Common Era (CE) and Before Common Era (BCE) designations, not A.D. and B.C. — stretch from Julius Caesar (assassinated in 44 BCE) to almost 30 emperors after that, ending with Alexander Severus (assassinated in 235 CE). The territory ruled by these men was vast; at its largest, it reached from (using modern terms) "Scotland to the Sahara, Portugal to Iraq, with an estimated population, outside Italy itself, in the order of 50 million."

This is not the Roman Republic. The emperors that we meet — in a book about imperial power that is set up thematically, not chronologically — have a good deal on their plates. As the author recounts, "Emperors made laws, waged wars, imposed taxes, adjudicated disputes, sponsored buildings and entertainments and flooded the Roman world with their portraits."

Readers will know the reputations of some of them; others are almost forgotten. Unpredictably, the author starts with a character who does not even get a single sentence in the massive *Oxford History of the Classical World*. Here's the lead-off hitter in the book: a Syrian cross-dressing teenager named Elagabalus (emperor from 218 CE, when he was age 14, until his assassination in 222). Various accounts assert, among other distinctions, that he was known for employing whoopee cushions as a party trick (said to be the first recorded in Western culture); never wearing the same shoes twice; *marrying* a Vestal Virgin; and allegedly showering his "fellow partygoers with flower petals in such over-generous quantities that the guests were smothered and suffocated." Authenticating that last one is a full-color plate in the book (one of many) painted by a 19th-century artist. (We have spared readers other nastier episodes.)

The author calls such anecdotes examples of how some Romans imagined emperors at the very worst.

Even an early Roman biographer of Elagabalus, writing nearly two centuries after that ruler's death, admitted that a lot of such tales of the emperor were probably made up by those who wanted to curry favor with a rival.

Beard also has the other side with a number of her subjects, looking at the everyday lives of emperors as problem-solvers.

Which part will most readers recall? That may be debatable. But do consider that a lot of folks remember a lie for 10 years, but forget the truth in 10 minutes.

"Same Play, Different Cast"

With such a large field to canvass, the author has a lot to choose from to make her points. Exaggerations and tall tales, in her view, serve as a magnifying glass exposing "what seemed 'bad' about a 'bad' Roman ruler." But some of what we know is real and some is propaganda from the past, and the factual and fictional duel. When there's a hole in what's recorded, she tells us. And, when we finish, she writes, she hopes that "readers will go away from this book not frustrated by *how little* we know about these rulers of two thousand years ago, but amazed by *how much*." (Emphasis in original.)

Although the number of players and period of time are assuredly extensive, even Marcus Aurelius observed that in many ways, one-man rule did not change: "Same play, different cast."

Both generalists and those with a greater appreciation of history will find generous samples in this buffet. Meanwhile, don't worry if you can't recall exactly when a particular emperor ruled or in what order, the author reminds as she goes along. (It is a boost. This reviewer's mnemonic device from high-school Latin classes — "another tom cat caught napping" — runs out after the first five emperors: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero.)

For the overall batch, there's a list up front, with succinct facts, dates, and affiliated coins pictured for each of the main players. The handsome volume has 160 illustrations and a 16-page color insert; also useful are maps, a comprehensive timeline, and a description (called "What's in a Name?") that shows the birth names and other designations of the emperors. Be thankful: If we were to use complete designations (e.g., "Elagabalus" becoming "Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus"), it would be a longer volume. For those pining for a family tree of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty, you're in luck: There's a two-page spread of that complicated diagram.

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Mary Beard (Creative Commons/UC3M)

Related further reading is also offered, chapter to chapter, as opposed to individual footnotes, and that too aids the reader; each chapter also adds current places to visit, when available. Let me add one to the list: I do believe the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, outside Rome, are now reopened for shows. (I saw an astounding "Aida" performance there, complete with exotic animals, in 1970.)

Why did Beard stop where she did? She explains that after Alexander Severus (some refer to him as Severus Alexander) was murdered in 235, the "job description" began to change, and for the next 50 years, "rulers came and went rapidly, rivals seizing power from each other in quick succession, in long periods of civil war." By this time, we've been led through, among other things, the basics of one-man rule, the art of succession (sometimes messy), "power dining," what's in the palace of the emperor and the people in his court, and what he did on his job and in his time off, and have met him face-to-face (with not-very-accurate likenesses) in scads of portraits.

Of course, we do get a full dose of the imperial role in the Colosseum and the (much larger) Circus Maximus with its horse- and chariot-racing. Then, when readers are on the last laps, we see how some emperors get deified. (Factoid: There were 33 members of the imperial family who were declared gods or goddesses, counting Julius Caesar and including several emperors.)

The Seamy Side

Scrutinizing centuries-old accounts from afar is a risky business; it's Beard's business. She usually tells us when evidence is scant. A current allusion (in a discussion about "power dining") is when she points out, "Some of these stories are probably no closer to the literal truth than the modern myths of royal or celebrity dining that are the stuff of tabloids and magazines." She is also a bit hesitant about Bill Clinton's claim that *Meditations* is the single "book (other than the bible) that had most influenced him."

You might be surprised that the famous (or infamous) threat of Caligula to make his favorite racing horse ("Incitatus") a consul doesn't pass her fact-check. And fans of Marcus Aurelius and his celebrated *Meditations* may not appreciate the author's slighting treatment of that work, which she translates as *Jottings to Himself*, generally avoiding the more familiar name, in part, she says, because it "sounds rather too profound or mystical."

That said, Beard on occasion just passes along some stories by earlier historians, such as when discussing "Pliny's Domitian," who is described as

> an arrogant tyrant, a cruel cheat, a thief and a murderer, laying his greedy hands on "every pool, lake or meadow" in other men's estates and positively revelling in the elimination of the most distinguished characters in Rome. No senator, or property was safe. They all lived in terror of the invitation to dinner in the monster's lair, of the charges trumped up by his secret police, and finally of the ominous knock on the door.

Yet, it turns out that Pliny did very well under Domitian, leading more recent scholars to debate the level of his hypocrisy.

With this being a sweeping review of ancient Rome, you expect (and get) dollops of raunchy behavior. For example, there is Tiberius on Capri, where he "notoriously retreated in 26 CE, for the last decade of his life, with all the later fantastic rumours of sex games in the swimming pool and enemies eliminated by being thrown from the clifftop." According to Suetonius, recounts Beard, "the emperor's main residence on the island included bedrooms covered in erotic paintings and a library of sex manuals, in case his flagging partygoers should need inspiration." (Beard, be advised, is not as graphic as Suetonius. My version of the Robert Graves translation of *The Twelve Caesars* is higher on the bawdy scale, and also notes that the island was widely and openly called "Caprineum" — a play on the word *caper*, or "goat.") Indeed, that "private sporting-house" bears a resemblance to Jeffrey Epstein's "pedophile island" of more recent vintage.

The emperor's court members are featured in a chapter on "palace people," giving us a different view of the role of slaves (and freedmen) of that period. Beard cites one, whose tomb declared him to be a "finance officer," who took care of Tiberius' funds in Gaul. This slave (one Musicus Scurranus) had his own staff and got his own memorial tombstone when he died. Cited were his 16 "underslaves," including secretaries, cooks, a doctor, a "wardrobe supervisor," "silver stewards," and a woman who was probably his partner. Slaves did not "form a single homogenous category," explains Beard, adding, "Some would have appeared less unequal than others."

Pen-pushing

The Roman economy, per se, doesn't have a large part in *Emperor of Rome*, but Beard does not neglect how wealth and money were at the heart of imperial power. The emperor, as she reminds us several times, "was by far the richest man and the largest landowner in the Roman world." And, notes the author, the Romans did not even have a word for "the economy."

With that said, a chapter called "On the Job" describes a very different picture of a ruler with his correspondence with distant provinces. (She also points out that micromanagement isn't easy when a letter to the edge of the empire takes two months — one way.) One of the main duties of the emperor, as Marcus Aurelius was told by his tutor, is to "send letters all over the world."

Obviously, there were staffers to help. Still, as Beard reminds us, there was no "grudge, grievance, problem or law case" that "was in theory too trivial to send in his [the emperor's] direction." (Counting just senior administrators, there was just one staffer for every 330,000 inhabitants of the empire, Beard calculates — which sounds as if the emperors imposed a lighter touch than our modern neo-imperial

rulers.)

It is difficult not to think about current events when reading about, for example, Caracalla in 212 giving full Roman citizenship to all inhabitants of the empire, affecting perhaps 30 million people. Ancient historian Cassius Dio and Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) are among those who suggested that move was made for tax revenue purposes; Beard appears to be of mixed mind regarding the driving force. It certainly wasn't done for votes.

While "papyruswork" might not be the first thing one thinks about when considering a one-man ruler, it was a key part of the job. Members of the public were not shy about pressing little pieces of papyrus (*libelli* in Latin) into his hand with requests. If this aspect of the emperor's role might be less attention-grabbing than what went on in the Colosseum or Circus Maximus, it is still noteworthy.

Beard leans on exchanges from Pliny and the emperor Trajan (who ruled 98-117) for much of her analysis on a Roman ruler as "letter-writer, decision-maker and administrator." As she puts it:

> Exactly how big a slice of the emperor's time all this took is impossible to know. It was a symbol of Vespasian's notorious over-commitment to duty that he was reported to have been receiving delegations on his deathbed. And we have no clue which is more typical: the four or five *libelli* a day that, according to one fragment of papyrus, Septimius Severus and Caracalla received on a visit to Egypt between 199 and 200 CE; or the six hundred a day that, according to another papyrus, the governor of Egypt — lower down in the pecking order — received a few years later.

Where there's writing, there's also reading. Retired Professor Beard reminds us that Augustus reputedly sacked a governor "for making a crass spelling error," even though the emperor was said to be an "erratic speller" himself.

This is not a "dusty stacks" history; Beard provides some smiles and chuckles as we travel with the emperors. And, as she is wrapping up her volume, she even reprises what she calls one of the "funniest works of Roman literature to survive," and the only one "ever to have made me laugh out loud." (It may not tickle everyone's funny bone that way, but give it a try. And, clearly, she hasn't heard about the Latin professor who was beaten up by two *hoodla*.) There's no space here to give it justice, but you can still find "The Pumpkinification of (the Divine) Claudius," aka *Apocolocyntosis (divi) Claudii*.The short work has been attributed to Seneca. (One public-domain version is available online via Project Gutenberg.) This skit covers Claudius' travels to Mount Olympus after being declared divine by the senate upon his death; suffice it to say, the gods disagree and send him packing.

Not all emperors seemed serious about being deified. Near the *finis* of the book, Beard quotes a line attributed to Vespasian on his deathbed. That one did prompt a chortle from this reader. "Blimey," the emperor supposedly says, "I think I am becoming a god." (The English classicist maintains that hers is an "apt translation for the slightly archaic '*Vae*' of the Latin.")

While this volume may not be a stairway to heaven, it's certainly elevating. n

Castro's DIA Mole

Queen of Cuba: An FBI Agent's Insider Account of the Spy Who Evaded Detection for 17 Years,

by Peter J. Lapp with Kelly Kennedy, New York: Post Hill Press, 2023, 264 pages, hardcover.

Who is the "Queen of Cuba"? That is the moniker given to the top Cuban analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) who became "Cuba's most important spy" and "one of America's greatest enemies."

She did this largely while operating in plain view. Her family background didn't set off alarms. Her father served in the U.S. Army (both he and his wife were from Puerto Rico); a brother became an FBI agent (as did his wife); and a sister also worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a translator whose career included helping break up a ring of Cuban spies in Miami.

While this account is not devoid of suspense, it isn't a "whodunnit." We know who did it: Ana Belén Montes. What we primarily learn is *how* Ana did it (first names are usually used in *Queen of Cuba*). Young Ana's anti-Americanism (especially as concerned with Central America) helps lead to her recruitment by a Cuban agent while Montes was getting her master's degree at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced Studies.

As Ana explained years later to the FBI, she was recruited by another student in 1984, a Cuban agent named Marta Rita Velazquez, who introduced her "to a Cuban diplomat named Millan Chang German." The diplomat was a Cuban intelligence officer at the Cuban Mission with a *nom de guerre* of "El Chino."

One step leads to another. Ana Montes later acknowledged that she had no military or intelligence background, saying she was shocked at how easy it was to get her first DIA job. According to the author, Ana believed that "the DIA hired her because she was a Spanish linguist, because of her degree, and because she was a woman." She winds up, essentially, with two jobs, being paid by the U.S. government while betraying it, gratis, through espionage. Advancing quickly on her day job, she would go home at night, and type "out from memory everything she had learned that day, and wait for word from her handlers."

Her widely known arrogance did not turn out to be an overwhelming professional hindrance. Yet, if Ana had not been "brilliant at her job," we read, she "wouldn't have gained the access she did, and she could have been fired. Because she was the 'Queen of Cuba,' people invited her to their meetings, which meant she had more access. The more she produced, the more doors opened."

Over time, she became the senior Cuban analyst in the agency, spying for Havana from the inside between 1985 until she was arrested in September of 2001 (shortly after the 9/11 attacks). Ana's office was at DIA headquarters, located at (then) Bolling Air Force Base along the Potomac. According to federal prosecutors, as cited in a *Washington Post* account a decade ago,

> Montes communicated with the Cuban Intelligence Service through encrypted messages and received her instructions through shortwave encrypted transmissions from Cuba. In addition, Montes communicated by coded numeric paper messages with the Cuban Intelligence Service by public telephones located in the District of Columbia and Maryland.

She pleaded guilty and was given a 25-year sentence the next year. Even when Ana Montes was released before serving out her full sentence, she showed no remorse. She is a true believer — which is also the name of one of the several books that have been published about her.

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Deadly Proving Ground

Peter Lapp (Pete Lapp Consulting/PeteLapp.com)

Queen of Cuba adds insight both to spying and the challenges of counterespionage, featuring the personal observations of one of the top FBI agents in the Ana Montes investigation. Readers also watch author Peter J. Lapp grow in his career; he is now retired, having served as a special agent for the agency for 22 years, investigating or managing counterintelligence investigations involving Cuba, Russia, and China. Co-author Kelly Kennedy is widely published; she is the only female U.S. journalist to serve in combat as well as cover it as a civilian.

The book's sources lean on many declassified DIA documents, with the volume being sprinkled with personal and professional photographs. (These include FBI photos — such as an encryption pad used by Montes and the contents of her planned getaway bag.) Some information has been changed to protect people and programs. Since the author is a former bureau employee, the book has been reviewed by the FBI (and there are a number of blacked-out redactions).

Though the later years covered, with authorities trying to get (court-usable) goods on Montes, do drive the narrative, Ana's early DIA days are also examined. Again, we find her sympathizing "with the goals of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions." Did her actions get people killed? Lapp thinks so (as does former counterintelligence investigator Scott Carmichael, who wrote *True Believer*). As we read in *Queen of Cuba*:

> In January and February of 1987, she [Montes] spent five weeks in El Salvador and one in Guatemala to orient herself to her new job — it was her first DIA trip. It may have been her most lethal, her proving ground for the Cubans. I believe she got a Green Beret killed, but we can't put her directly in a meeting with him. But she would have been negligent in her duties at DIA had she traveled to El Salvador and not met with the senior expert on El Salvador: Staff Sergeant Gregory Fronius.

Multiple facts point to an (unproven) leak by Ana Montes prior to a deadly attack by the Salvadoran guerilla group FMLN — at a time that Fidel Castro was a key FMLN supporter. Fronius, age 27 with a

wife and two children, was killed, along with 69 Salvadoran soldiers. Years later, Lapp recounts, during Ana's debriefing following her arrest, she admitted traveling covertly to Cuba "to receive a medal, and that she was supposed to meet Fidel Castro, but it didn't work out." The FBI agent acknowledges that the death of the Green Beret couldn't be ascertained to be the work of Montes, "but she never denied it."

Espionage Tradecraft in Action

Pieces come together (not always as clearly described as they could have been) in the spy vs. spy aspects of the book. We do learn how even top Cuban officials in Havana had breaking points, leading to defections and (in one dramatic episode) a raft being rescued by a U.S. fishing boat. Defectors from Communist Cuba bring with them information leading to the U.S. government being able to read encrypted messages, eventually pointing to women committing espionage within the U.S. government. We look on as the purchase of a crucial laptop is located, passwords are found, and code names are tracked — with bumps along the way.

We see evidence of Ana's efforts. Agents are told about an academic paper — with details about Cuba's sponsorship of terrorism that was directed at the U.S. intelligence community — whose publication had been thwarted at every turn. The analyst who wrote the 80-page paper explains to a colleague that "some b**ch in DIA is blocking it from getting published." "Who?", asks the other analyst. The answer: "Ana Montes."

We get to the bottom of some aspects of spy tradecraft, including how Ana (early on, during a covert trip to Cuba) learned how to beat a polygraph exam. Nitty-gritty stuff. Later, when Ana was established at the DIA, it apparently paid dividends when she was selected for a random polygraph. She beat it, we read, "by contracting the sphincter muscles in her anus during the control questions." Later, writes Lapp, the government required all polygraph takers, himself included, "to sit on a wired cushion, which I refer to as the 'Montes Whoopee Cushion,' to prevent the sphincter countermeasure trick."

At a different level, Ana was taught by the Cubans how to receive encrypted high-frequency messages over a shortwave radio. Her methods didn't include dead drops or brush passes. Rather, as we learn, "Ana insisted her handlers meet her face-to-face," including lunches in mid-day that often included handing off classified discs.

On the FBI side of things, the former agent describes what he encounters when electronic surveillance is needed: a covert search warrant, operating within the rules of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978. The demands of the FISA Court came into play with the Montes case. Lapp acknowledges his love/hate feelings for FISA.

(That general issue hasn't gone away. This spring, despite opposition from some on both the Left and the Right in Congress, FISA Section 702, which authorizes limited warrantless surveillance of certain communications, was reauthorized for two years. It originally passed when a post-9/11 investigation concluded that the strict separation between foreign and domestic intelligence had contributed to the failure of national security agencies to intervene in the attack. Lapp's book doesn't go into recent contentions.)

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Pressure for an Arrest

FISA judges were an issue in 2001. Ana's bosses — who by then knew some of what she had been up to — wanted to fire her. The FBI still had her under surveillance, and was sneaking into her apartment hoping to find even more evidence to justify additional search warrants. In the meantime, writes Lapp, "we thought we needed to catch her in the act."

Then the 9/11 attacks happened. The descriptions in *Queen of Cuba* are harrowing. In D.C., when the Washington area was hit by the third plane, Lapp could see the black smoke rising "from my office: my office faced the Pentagon." The management of the Washington FBI field office "sent the entire office to the basement, thinking it was the safest area in the building." (This reviewer was, at the time, working near the top of the National Press Building in D.C. — watching TV coverage when the Pentagon was hit.) According to Lapp, the bureau's rank and file didn't agree with that move (surmising that spot might be topped with rubble), so they didn't stay in that basement long.

Ana got a message from the Cubans on September 11, but she didn't receive it at home, since she, like others in her position, was working late. Pressure grew for the watchers. Writes Lapp:

> Three days after the attack, Ana got another promotion: acting branch chief. She was on a battle damage assessment team. Consequently, she would know exactly how the United States planned to attack Afghanistan in its search for Osama bin Laden.
>
> We needed to act fast — we didn't think we had the case tied down yet, and there was no way I wanted this woman to go free.

As the retired agent explains, Moscow would have loved to have the American plans "for Afghanistan and [believed] that Castro would gladly hand them to his Russian allies, as well as his new minted friends, the Taliban."

(Cuba has many more arrows in its espionage quiver. As we were reading this book, a former U.S. ambassador to Bolivia named Manuel Rocha, who also had held top posts in Argentina, Mexico, the White House, and the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, was arrested. Rocha later admitted that he had, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal*, "secretly pushed Cuba's agenda for more than 40 years as he advanced through top posts at the State Department, National Security Council and the U.S. military's Southern Command," whose coverage includes Cuba.)

There's much more to grab your attention in *Queen of Cuba*. The positives far outweigh the relatively few negatives (including unwarranted denigrating of former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and a few spots that are, at best, puerile).

The arrested top spy, in the end, got a top D.C. power broker to represent her. (Plato Cacheris has also worked with, among others, spies Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen, as well as former Attorney General John Mitchell for his role in Watergate, and got an immunity deal for Monica Lewinsky for her testimony against President Bill Clinton.) Ana Montes pleaded guilty to one charge "of conspiracy of gathering, transmitting, or losing defense information to the Cuban Intelligence Service."

In exchange for the leniency of a 25-year sentence, recounts the author, Montes had to allow FBI agents — in this case Peter Lapp and his co-case agent Steve McCoy — to debrief her. Readers essentially get

to sit in on the debriefing. We also learn that dictator Fidel Castro commented "that it was a shame that someone of Ana's moral character had to do what she did because of the 'illegal' US embargo."

Information found on Ana's laptop about the National Reconnaissance Office's Special Access Program — a sensitive program called BYEMAN (even the word was classified) — "would never see the light of day. It was a special department within the top secret classified world, and the Justice Department wasn't about to put it in court documents."

The total amount of damage she caused will probably never be known.

On January 6, 2023, Ana Montes, writes Lapp, "walked out of prison and took a one-way flight to San Juan, escorted by a US marshal. She was a model prisoner, of course. I don't think she'll go to Cuba — not immediately, anyway — because she wants to be close to her mother."

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