

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

He Died Old: King of Pontus

Review Author: Henry L. Irwin

Philippine Studies vol. 8 no. 1 (1960): 200–202

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

women, although not emancipated, were treated with much more consideration than ever before. Of special significance too was Romulus' foreign policy which tried to assimilate and content the conquered rather than destroy them. This policy, which with some notable exceptions was to last as long as Rome ruled, is one key which helps to unlock the mystery of Rome's phenomenal expansion.

For the enjoyment of the reader and special interest to the student of classics, Mr. Duggan has given an exceptional authenticity to his novel. Without destroying the charm of the traditional story of Rome's origin, he explains away in a very plausible manner the mythical and preternatural circumstances that surrounded its birth. One, therefore, feels in reading the *Founding Fathers* that he is getting a genuine glimpse into life as it was lived in Italy in the eighth century B. C.

WILLIAM J. MALLEY

HE DIED OLD

KING OF PONTUS: THE LIFE OF MITHRADATES EUPATOR.

By Alfred Duggan. New York: Coward-McCann, 1959.

Most of us who now and then take up a history book to read are already subtly prejudiced in favor of everything Roman, due, no doubt, to the propaganda imbibed by the reading of the classic authors, Caesar, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, etc. At the time of our high school and college studies we tended to take everything at face value. A classic author was to be admired, not criticized; to be reverenced as an oracle of his age, not to be questioned as to his truth and sincerity. When we campaigned with the mighty Caesar in his conquest of Gaul we cheered at his victories over the Gauls, the Belgians and the Germans and grieved at his reverses. Little did it concern us how the Germans or Belgians felt about the bulldozing Roman general entering their domains, killing their people and destroying their homes and property. So too when Cicero fulminated his curses or lavished his honeyed praise we unquestioningly took sides with his views and forever afterwards branded as villain or hero those whom he had categorized as such. As I said in the beginning: we have been historically biased by our early reading of the classics; biased not only historically but politically, yes, and even in our literary tastes and ideals.

Now here comes a book from the pen of Alfred Duggan, who professes to have a mission to offset a lot of classical prejudices by giving the other side of the picture. In his life of Mithradates he has attempted not only to bring out of historical obscurity a personality truly great, but also to advance some new data concerning what very nearly proved to be a new oriental empire. Before entering upon his

main task Mr. Duggan gives us what I consider one of the most valuable sections of his book—the prologue. It takes the form of a panoramic view of Asia Minor: its geography, its cultures, its clash and blending of nationalisms, its history. It is an enjoyable and satisfying synopsis of a particularly interesting arena of events. The author begins by declaring his intention of correcting the classical prejudice against Mithradates and the whole lot of peoples and heroes dubbed by the Romans as "barbarians." He says:

"We of the West remember the Romans as bringers of civilization. Gaul, Britain and Spain were made by Rome. Rome taught us to live by law, to obey our rulers, to dwell together in the crowded confines of the city. Without Rome we might be coolies ruled by brigands, as some industrious and productive nations who have never endured the Roman discipline have remained throughout history nothing more than coolies, looking for brigands to rule them.

"But that is not the whole story of Rome. In the course of their amazing expansion the Romans collided with peoples of an older culture, peoples who had already learned the good life and could live it; in everything but military skill superior to the blunt, uncouth farmers of Central Italy. To the Hellenized East Rome could offer nothing, nothing but the grasping hand of the tax-farmer and the blood-drinking sword of the legionary. Especially in Asia Minor the Romans were resisted by civilized men who regarded them as savages. This is a study of the greatest hero of that resistance."

In building up his hero the author sticks very closely to the facts. Because the historical sources are so meager in this case there must have been an almost irresistible urge to touch up the facts and to paint imaginative pictures of what might have been Mithradates' true heroic role; but there is no evidence of this whatever. I must confess to some disappointment that the urge was resisted to such an extent, for I would have enjoyed reading the book much more if greater color had been added. I would have liked reading the same material cast into the form of an historical novel, similar to the fictional biography of a Roman soldier which Mr. Duggan gave us in *Winter Quarters*. In fact my chief criticism of the present history is that in many places the text is extremely dry and therefore hard to digest. The style is heavy with fact and incident but lacking in vivid description of places and scenes, clothing, food and furniture. All this would be considered quite legitimate in the type of history to which this belongs; provided, of course, that proper cautions accompanied the departures from strict historical fact. It is just such "coloring

"up" of history that makes Lamb's life of Jenghis Khan such absorbing reading.

Compare, for instance, Mr. Duggan's account of Mithradates with that of Cicero. Of course Cicero was an orator, and as such could take all kinds of liberties with the facts—as he certainly did. But to illustrate what I mean: the flight of Mithradates from his kingdom after his first defeat at the hands of the Roman general, Lucullus, is described by Cicero as follows: "The flight of Mithradates from his kingdom reminds us of the way in which Medea in the legend fled long ago from that same Pontus. The story goes that in her flight she scattered the limbs of her brother along the track which her father would follow in pursuit, in order that his pursuit might be checked by a father's grief as he collected the scattered remains. In the same way Mithradates left behind him in Pontus as he fled the whole of the vast store of gold and silver and all his treasure... While our soldiers were too carefully engaged in collecting all this, the king himself slipped through their hands."

A simile merely. But what an impression that makes upon the imagination! I have always noticed that my college students, if they remember afterwards anything at all about Mithradates, recall most readily the flight from Pontus precisely because of the mythical reference.

I would say in conclusion that Mr. Duggan has done the historical world a great service by writing this life of the King of Pontus. He has brought to light a great personage who has too long remained in obscurity. No one before Mr. Duggan has bothered much about him. King of Pontus, Liberator of Hellas, statesman, paramount chieftain, King of the Bosphorus—all these phases in the life of his hero the author has well brought out. By mastering the tactics of the Roman legions Mithradates fought the "unconquerable" Roman army to a standstill. Even when beaten, he refused to admit defeat. He slipped away from his conquerors, built up a following of allies, collected an army, fought, retreated, went into hiding, only to emerge again and again to inflict considerable damage on his enemies. He kept this up, fighting indomitably and ruling wisely, until his late sixties. It may be truly said that Mr. Duggan has accomplished with entire success his object of establishing Mithradates as the greatest hero of the resistance to Rome, and as a man who was "every inch a king."