REVIEW


The rear cover of this slim volume promises much. As it is 'the first new commentary in English in more than sixty years', the reader may well be excited by the prospect of the incorporation of 'recent Tacitean studies and archaeological discoveries'. Presumably Benario and L.B. Rives (Tacitus: Germania, Oxford 1999) were not aware that they were simultaneously working on commentaries, both of which have been published in the same year, since both state that 1938 was the date of the last commentary, and contain no reference to the other work. Nevertheless, although Rives' commentary is considerably more substantial (251 pages to 49) it does not contain the Latin text. At $US 35.00 it is also noticeably dearer than Benario's work. Thus the two works may (perhaps) be considered to be not in competition with each other.

The reader who already has some knowledge of Tacitus and the Germania will essentially be disappointed. The book says that it is aiming to be 'readily accessible to all readers,' but in doing so, it has aimed at a low common denominator. This becomes glaringly obvious within the first two lines of the introduction. Benario confidently states (1) 'Publius Cornelius Tacitus... was... perhaps [born] in Gallia Belgica, where his father was serving as the procurator's financial officer.' It is not certain that Tacitus was in fact a Publius rather than a Gaius (Ronald Martin, Tacitus, London 1981, 26), and nor is the identity certain of the Cornelius Tacitus that Pliny (Natural History 7.76) states was serving in Gallia Belgica.

Benario proceeds with a presumption that the reader has very little knowledge of Roman history, or indeed of grammar. He explains what a suffect consul is (2), what it means for an emperor to be deified (73), who and where the Parthians were (103), and what a Roman triumph is (104), to name a few examples. In addition, Appendix I simply contains a list of the Roman emperors from Augustus to Hadrian, with their dates. Benario describes the course of the Rhine in modern political terms (64). Pages 10 to 11 contain a short but useful glossary of fifteen English grammatical terms, from 'alliteration' to 'ellipsis' to 'zeugma.'
The Latin text itself contains little that is new, being based on M. Winterbottom's *Cornelii Taciti Opera Minora* (Oxford, 1975), with 11 divergences, which Benario duly notes (11). The translation too has been previously published, in Benario’s *Tacitus’ Agricola, Germany, and Dialogue on Orators* (Oklahoma, 1991) with a few changes that are not noted.

Whatever the level a text is aiming at, it should do its best to set a good example to those using it, and in this respect the book is filled with aggravating little problems. On numerous occasions Benario refers to scholarly debate without supplying any form of referencing, or even the names of the scholars. This includes debate on when Tacitus died (2), the statement that ‘Tacitus has often been complimented, or abused, for his psychological approach’ (10), and discussion of ‘the god’ in *Germania* 2.2—‘Tuisto rather than Mannus, some think’ (65). Moreover despite all the references to the lack of a new commentary in English since 1938, it is to Anderson that Benario returns for comment on ‘vera et antiqua nomina’ (*Germania* 2.2), not actually to report what Anderson thought, but merely to quote that ‘this is one of the most disputed sentences in Latin literature.’ It is only really in discussing debate on *Germania* 33.2 (99) that proponents of the various theories are identified.

Particularly annoying, given the book’s promise to make use of archaeological discoveries, is the similar failure to reference the comments that are made. On Tacitus’ claims of a lack of iron: ‘archaeology has shown that iron is far more common than Tacitus states’ (70); on the composition of Roman shields versus German ones, the somewhat dubious claim that Roman ones were made of iron and leather (79); on funerary offerings in ch.27: ‘Archaeology has revealed numerous ancient burials with precisely these offerings’ (92); finally, on discussion of the location of Varus’s defeat (103); in each of these cases any form of referencing is missing.

The book contains a few other oddities. Despite being printed and published in Warminster, England, it makes consistent use of American spellings. Manuscript variations are universally ignored. Finally, the English translation is divided into titled sections, and each individual chapter is given a title. While this divides it up nicely and will no doubt be an aid to teaching, it creates artificial boundaries and presumptions about
the contents of each chapter and section which were not contained in the original.

In spite of these criticisms the book certainly accomplishes its goal of making *Germania* readily accessible to all readers, no matter what their background. It is relatively cheap ($US 22.00 versus $US 35.95 for the latest reprint of Anderson from the Bristol Classical Press in 1997), and the book is readily amenable to being bent open to lie flat on student desks without destroying the binding. Where other ancient sources are quoted, both the original and an English translation are provided. While Benario does not often refer to modern scholarship, he provides many cross-references to Tacitus’ other works, and a good number to other Roman and Greek authors. The English translation attempts to remain as true as possible to the Latin form, making it a useful aid to students working with the Latin.

The *Germania* deserves to be read much more than it is, and Benario needs to be thanked for opening it to a wider audience. Due to its brevity the work can be digested much more easily than can Tacitus’ much longer *Annals* or *Histories*, and it gives an opportunity to see the Roman historian honing his talents in one of his first works. It is to be hoped that many will take advantage of the opportunity this book provides to extend their knowledge.

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