
The World University Library aims 'to provide authoritative introductory books for students which will also be of interest to the general reader'. Under these terms of reference Dr Balsdon's book looks at the Roman Empire from 241 B.C. to 476 A.D. His aim is more to provide a picture than to write a history, though he starts with an account of how Rome's expansion began, and the description of the empire is always set in its framework of history. Roman imperialism, which started with fear, from the earliest struggles for survival to the destruction of Carthage, later became more of a deliberate policy, as the material benefits of empire began to make themselves felt. But the reader is warned of the danger of comparisons with modern colonial empires, where trade provided the impetus.

The central, and longest part of the book is concerned with the empire from Augustus to the Antonines, giving a reasonably detailed account of the administration, the civil service, the army, the tax and judicial systems and other important topics. The blessings and drawbacks of Roman civilization are clearly indicated, even though Balsdon describes that civilization as 'almost entirely dead' – particularly in education and the arts and sciences. Diocletian's reorganization is summarized in some detail.

A book of this sort will inevitably hover somewhat uneasily between the student and the general reader, between, for example, a detailed list of Latin administrative terms and a slightly unnerving generalization, such as 'Romans were never people of great sophistication and culture'. However, as an introduction, and within the the limits imposed by its size, it is a sound and useful work. There are a number of good illustrations, though their relevance to the accompanying text is not always obvious; also maps, charts and an excellent bibliography.

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