

Alexander the Great Failure: The Collapse of the Macedonian Empire. By JOHN D. GRAINGER. London: Continuum Books, 2007. Pp. xix + 226. Paper, \$24.95. ISBN 978-18472-5188-6.

One could be forgiven for sighing in resignation at yet another book on Alexander. But despite its cleverly provocative title, John D. Grainger's *Alexander the Great Failure: The Collapse of Macedonian Imperialism* is not merely another book on Alexander. In fact, Grainger (G.) dedicates only 15 pages to Alexander and his campaigns. The great conqueror does represent his central concern: G. argues that Alexander's activities in certain areas, and inactivity in others, destroyed any chance his successors might have had of maintaining the empire he and they had won, thus bringing down both Persia and Macedon, a failure that "spelt misery and death for countless thousands of people" (p. xviii). To argue this thesis, G. extends his view backward and forward in time: five chapters on the growth of Macedonian power under Philip and eight chapters on its decline in the half-century following Alexander's death. The result is an interesting experiment in periodization, and G. provides a decent overview of the political and military development of the Hellenistic world for those with a casual interest in the topic. But the book does not offer much in the way of new interpretations of the evidence, and some of G.'s claims concerning Alexander require more detailed arguments than he provides.

In his opening chapters, G. gives a concise description of Macedonian society, especially the nature of Macedonian kingship and the problems it posed for those who held the throne. The context is thus set for the appearance of Philip, who is clearly the hero of this story: quick to recognize what was needed to stabilize the kingdom, Philip made key innovations to the traditional institutional structures he inherited. His "combination of military genius and diplomatic finesse" (p. 29) transformed Macedon in a matter of years from a weak, marginal kingdom to a military powerhouse and the major player in Greek affairs. G. argues that from about 350, Philip intended to attack the Persian Empire; knowing that he could not face Persia and Athens together, he aimed for at least Athenian neutrality, if not alliance. Why Persia? G. does not answer the question directly, although he adduces Isocrates' call for Philip to lead a pan-Hellenic crusade, as well as previous Greek attempts at Asia ("Xenophon's men," Agesilaus, Pammenes). G. states that "almost every successful Greek ruler had aimed to attack Persia, so it was perhaps the widespread presumption that Philip would also do so" (p. 40). This proposition raises the issue of the Greekness of the ancient Macedonians, which G. does not address. One can forgive him

BOOK REVIEW

for not venturing into such stormy waters, but to include Philip among the “Greek rulers” of the 4th century begs the question, “Was Philip Greek?”, or at least “Was Philip perceived to be Greek?” Three pages later, in fact G., writing from the Athenian viewpoint, refers to “barbarian Macedon” (p. 43)—but we hear nothing more on this front.

In the next two chapters, G. elucidates well Alexander’s failure to recognize the enormity of the task that lay before him. He focuses on the questionable decisions, lack of clear intentions, and human cost of Alexander’s campaigns, with good reason. But some of G.’s claims suffer from inconsistencies and the brevity of his treatment. For example, he states several times that Alexander’s use of the satrapal system was no more than a stopgap measure, a way of avoiding the difficult question of how to govern the empire. This fits with G.’s depiction of Alexander as “a grand opportunist” like his father. But G. also notes later on that the demise of the Persian satraps upon his return from India “was a blow to Alexander’s hopes of a combined Persian-Macedonian government” (p. 88), which would seem to indicate that Alexander had put some thought into the matter. G.’s avoidance of biography hurts him in this way. If the goal is to prove that Alexander failed, who he was must be considered; but G. seems to envision Alexander as the same man as his father, stepping into the same role as king of Macedon. G. reinforces this notion by introducing Alexander only at the moment of Philip’s death and telling us nothing of his upbringing. Thus, while Philip comes across as something of an individual, Alexander seems very flat, and we get little sense of how his experiences in a changing world—as a youth in the new Macedon, as a semi-barbarian ruler of the Greek world, and as the conqueror of Persia—might have affected him.

It is here, I think, that G.’s experimental structure breaks down. He has focused on Macedonian power as a continuity from 370 to 272. The idea is good, and contextualizing Alexander and his achievements is a noble goal. But the risk, as it turns out, is in giving an overly static view of this power and treating the men who attempted to control it as indistinguishable parts of the machine. G. is correct in saying that Alexander failed in numerous ways to live up to the challenges facing him. But those challenges were far greater and more complex than anything previous Macedonian kings had dealt with. At the same time, Alexander and the men around him could not help being affected by the new horizons they discovered. Perhaps the last half of the book could have been condensed to leave more space for G.’s arguments concerning Alexander, since the classical scholar will find little new in the bare narrative of the Succes-

BOOK REVIEW

sors, and it may strike the casual reader as a laundry list of “one damn thing after another.” G. also includes three “World View” interludes, meant to convey an idea of what was going on in other parts of the world as the Macedonian empire rose and collapsed. But in the confines of a short book such as this, these interludes cannot be carried out completely and remain somewhat superficial.

G. notes in his introduction that he does not intend to engage in scholarly controversies over details. But the endnotes do contain brief references to the basic works; there is a substantial bibliography; and G. often notes uncertainties or alternate explanations in the text. He is also familiar with the ancient sources and cites them thoroughly. The front matter contains a few misprints, but otherwise the text is relatively clean. Curiously, the battles of Issos (p. 76) and Gaugamela (p. 80) are described but not named, only to be referenced by name later.

CHRISTOPHER BARON

University of Notre Dame