

BOOK REVIEW

The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea. By EDWARD J. WATTS. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 320. Hardcover, \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0-190-07671-9.

Good titles sell books. That of this one promises a critical look at not only how cyclical notions of “decline and fall” are one of the ways history rhymes rather than repeats, but more importantly how such notions can be weaponized. I did not need Peter Brown’s endorsement on the back cover to convince me that its author was as capable as any to tackle a topic spanning over two millennia of (mostly Roman) history. Edward Watts authored a number of recent books, such as *Hypatia* (2017) and *Mortal Republic* (2018), written with an eye steadily fixed on the present moment. Beyond its appeal to my specialist interests, I welcomed this book for its affordability and accessibility to non-specialist and especially lay audiences who should benefit from being equipped with a historical perspective on this ever popular temptation to ground one’s grievances with contemporary society in the precedent of Rome.

Watts’ work essentially elaborates on an evergreen observation tweeted by Mike Duncan during the previous presidential administration, namely that the American left thinks they are living through the fall of the Roman Republic, while the right thinks they are living through that of the Empire. *Mortal Republic* may have responded to the anxieties of the former, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome* more often to the latter; but the essential point is the same: a “decline and fall” is much less often a historical process than it is a rhetorical construction serving an ideological agenda. Drawing from a rich array of primary sources, this book focuses primarily on how declines-and-falls were “manufactured” at various stages of the Roman, Byzantine and Holy Roman Empires. While its first couple chapters discuss how Republican figures like Cato the Elder and Cicero represented their respective presents in terms of the decline of traditional virtues and civility into a decadent “Republic of violence,” the bulk of the work must make do with sources with vested interests in transforming the recent past into a fallen age of iron as a prelude to a new golden age of virtue, piety, prosperity and military glory restored by the present autocratic regime. Tacitus and Pliny, for example, despite

benefiting from the capable regime of Domitian, had few qualms recasting it as a chaotic reign of terror, contrasts with which made the subsequent Trajanic order gleam all the brighter. The key takeaway from this rhetoric is how easy it is either to create scapegoats for political and military misfortunes, be they individual rulers like Commodus and Michael III, groups such as “dissolute” Greeks and heretical Goths, or collective offenses that incur divine disfavor such as abandoning paganism or venerating icons. While Watts does not state it, his is a systematic critique of reductionist ways of historical thinking, especially the kind that tie the success or failure of a state to the character and policies of whichever executive is in charge, the kind of thinking that blames the one guy for the systemic problems that the next guy will be expected to magically fix. In a word, this book is a powerful assault on the Great Man Theory, whose toxic persistence must continually be challenged.

Watts is mostly candid in identifying the present circumstances to which this book responds, namely the deepening political divisions in America (and elsewhere) inflamed by Donald Trump’s decline-and-fall rhetoric that serves his MAGA agenda. The book begins and ends by advocating for collaboration over mutual recrimination in order to arrest our present decline. This is itself a political position, and a popular one; but it nevertheless guides the reader’s evaluation of historical figures and events, treating positively, for instance, Marcus Aurelius’ humane response to the Antonine plague while putting in a more negative light Tiberius Gracchus’ more revolutionary reaction to economic inequalities. It assumes that working together peaceably with those who have vastly different interests to achieve a common good is always advisable or effectual.

A more extensive critique of the modern reception of decline-and-fall, moreover, would have better satisfied the expectations set by a subtitle that may deliberately recall Krebs’ *A Most Dangerous Book*, which devoted much more space to the modern exploitation of Tacitus’ *Germania* than Watts to his own “dangerous idea.” While Mussolini’s attempts at a fascist renewal of the Roman Empire receive due discussion, most other such modern figures like Napoleon, Hitler and contemporary alt-right ideologues amount to an ephemeral afterthought. Instead, Watts largely frames the modern reception of this idea as a series of (uninformed) responses to Edward Gibbon, whom he rarely criticizes while nostalgically honoring him as a “genius,” whose work is “timeless.” Watts singles out figures like Ronald Reagan whose use of Gibbon reflects an ignorance of Gibbon’s actual text, which comes close to implying that people should actually read Gibbon to be better informed. It is also rather tactless to dismiss celebrities who

suggested the 80s AIDS crisis was due punishment for moral decline as “innocuous,” (234) when in fact such homophobic sentiments had deadly consequences under the guidance of the Reagan administration.

These criticisms for the author, however, do not majorly detract from the value of this book. My final criticisms are for OUP, who seem to have published this book in a rush and missed a disappointing number of typographical and tracking errors. These embarrassments aside, this is a book worth reading, especially as a springboard for further study into this important topic.

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