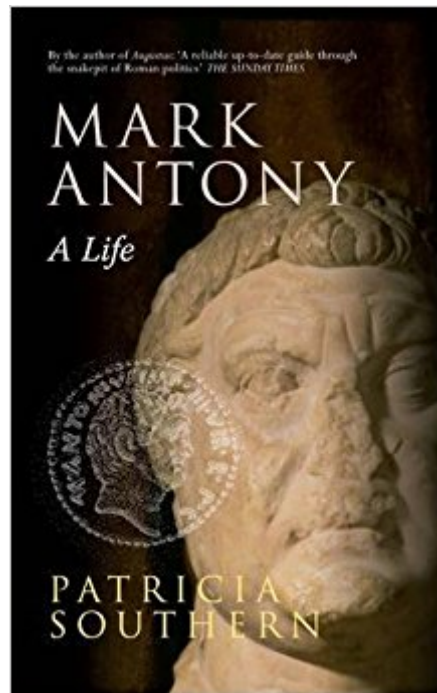




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Mark Antony: A Life



Synopsis

History has not been kind to Mark Antony, but then he was probably his own worst enemy, fatally flawed, too fond of wine and women, extravagant, impetuous, reckless, always in debt, and attached to all the wrong people. There is some truth in this list of Antony's failings, but the propaganda machine of his enemy, Octavian, ensured that these facets of Antony's character were the only ones to survive. There is no mention of the fact that Caesar, who could not afford to promote incompetent assistants, found in Antony a very able lieutenant. Nor is it acknowledged that immediately after the assassination of Caesar in 44 BC, it was Antony and not Octavian who held the state together, when it could so easily have slipped into chaos. In modern eyes, influenced by Shakespeare, Antony is perhaps the ultimate tragic hero, who gave up everything for the love of a woman, Cleopatra VII, ruler of Egypt. Octavian presented Antony as a weakling, completely dominated by Cleopatra, and therefore a threat to Rome by dint of his association with the unbridled ambitions of the Egyptian Queen to rule the world. While Antony attended to the eastern half of the Roman world, shoring up Octavian whenever he needed troops, ships, and money, Octavian eventually planned to bring him down, embarking on a smear campaign to convince the Roman people that Antony should be eliminated. The result was civil war and the defeat of Antony in the naval battle of Actium. In Alexandria, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide in 30 BC. Octavian buried them side by side, and took total control of Rome and Egypt.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for Patricia Southern's CLEOPATRA -'In the absence of Cleopatra's memoirs, Southern's

commendably balanced biography will do very well' THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH; 'Scholarly and readable... looks carefully behind the rhetoric of a hostile ancient press' DR PETER JONES; JULIUS CAESAR - 'Her style is delightfully approachable: lean and lucid, witty and pacy' ANTIQUITY; AUGUSTUS - 'A reliable up-to-date guide through the snakepits of Roman politics' THE SUNDAY TIMES.

Patricia Southern is an acknowledged expert the history of ancient Rome. Her interest began very early, fostered by books and the wonderful epic films that they don't make any more. This obsession with the Romans has never waned, so whilst working full time as a librarian she studied for a BA degree in Ancient History with the external department of the University of London, and for an MPhil in Roman Frontier Studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, where she was Librarian of the Archaeology Department for many years. She has written many books on Roman history and contributed numerous articles on Roman history to the BBC History website and the academic Roman studies journal *Britannia*.

Patricia Southern's, "Mark Antony: A Life" is a well-written historical account of Mark Antony whose legacy was negatively impacted by derogatory comments made by Octavian Caesar and Cicero. One of the reasons I read this book was to glean additional information about Mark Antony's true characterization as his reputation had been blackened by his rivals. It was frustrating to find a dearth of biographies about Mark Antony, but this book did not disappoint. Though, certainly, Mark Antony had his weaknesses, he also had a momentous triumph when he defeated Brutus and Cassius. After the civil war, he formed treaties and alliances with various rulers in the eastern Roman empire and Egypt who posed a challenge. One of his greatest achievements, though it is not widely recognized, is that he commanded a vast area of very diverse people and customs, many of whose rulers varied in trustworthiness. His diplomacy and careful sifting of who was reliable, and who was not, stood the test of time after his death. His greatest failure was not to recognize Octavian's ruthless propaganda to dispose of him and return to Rome to promote himself. This biography is well-researched and is based on various historical sources. It was clearly written and has several pages of photographs which are of interest.

Enjoyable and thorough.

finally facts not fiction about this amazing military leader. Find out the truth and not the lasting lies of

the megalomaniac Augustus who was conveniently "ill" whenever a battle was to take place unlike Mark Antony who fought side by side with his troops.

Easy read, and delves into Antony's better qualities. Doesn't demonize him as most do. Treats him as what he was...very human in his foibles, but also very competent.

Very engaging and unbiased look at a historically tainted character

In this rather superb "biography" of Mark Antony, Patricia Southern manages to present in slightly more than 250 pages a fascinating reconstruction of the warlord, his personality, his achievements, his conflicts against the assassins of Caesar, and his ultimate failure, defeat and death against Octavius. The last few decades of the Roman Republic are presented in an engaging, easy to read and, at times, witty way, with the author displaying quite a bit of dry humour which makes the book all the more entertaining to read. I hesitated for a long time before buying this book, believing I knew the story already (think of "Antony and Cleopatra" and so on). I was largely wrong, on both counts. The main events are, of course, rather well-known, but Patricia Southern's talent lies in making the characters come alive and putting the events into context. The author clearly likes Mark Antony, but given the portrait that she draws of him, there does seem to have been a lot to like. Even if biased, the portrait is a convincing one (at least it convinced me!). As she mentions herself, above all, he was human, with his (many) flaws, his (just as numerous) qualities, and his considerable talents. One of the numerous qualities of this book is to show to what extent Mark Antony's opponent and final nemesis was successful in his efforts to tarnish and largely destroy his reputation, both at the time and nowadays. This is where and how the devious, cunning, shrewd, unscrupulous, ambitious and very ruthless Octavius managed to outdo, dominate and destroy Mark Antony, despite not being a talented soldier like he was. One of the most interesting aspects of this book, however, was to show that Mark Antony was no mean politician himself. As all Roman senators seeking to rise to prominence, he knew the rules of the game, or rather he knew they were none. He could also be - and was - utterly ruthless and cruel, just as Octavius, with the best example being the proscriptions in which Cicero was murdered, as were many other opponents of Mark Antony and Octavius, or the time when each of them sacrificed (meaning executed) one of their lieutenants to "appease" the other party. All through the book, however, and as Patricia Southern rolls out the events that took place since Mark Antony's birth (around 83 BC, although there is some uncertainty), we see what she portrays as a sympathetic rogue emerging as a young and dashing

cavalry officer before becoming Caesar's loyal and trusted right-hand man right up to his murder. It is after Caesar's murder that the rivalry and temporary alliances with Octavius begin, as the latter starts building up his power base and credentials as Caesar's largely self-appointed and self-advertised heir, and as his avenger. This is where the biography becomes fascinating and there are several layers to it. As hinted at before, a second layer is to disentangle what could have been the truth and the real motivations of the protagonists from the propaganda and rewriting of history that Octavius indulged in and encouraged after his victory, once he was the last man standing. As the author acknowledges, in many cases, her proposals are no more than that because we will never know for certain what happened or what the various parties really thought or intended. However, and whether true or not, her reconstructions are at least plausible, and in most cases they entirely make sense and also seem very credible. There is perhaps a couple of instances where I was not entirely convinced, with one being the author's statement, which I had already read before, about Marc Antony being essentially a brilliant second in command. This might be yet another underestimation of Mark Antony, and possibly one of the only ones that Patricia Southern did not identify. This is because Mark Antony was clearly no one's second in command when he vanquished the "Liberators" Brutus and Cassius almost single-handed, with Octavius being of little help, to put it very mildly. An excellent point demonstrated several times through the book is that Mark Antony was at his best during a crisis, as the man of action that he essentially was. In the absence of such crises, he could be lulled into complacency, and only become aware of the threat looming over him at the eleventh hour. With regards to his Parthian Campaign, the author could perhaps have insisted a bit more on some interesting features that show Mark Antony as being well above the average warlord. One was his feint before choosing to go north and attack from Armenia. This allowed him to steal a march on the Parthians, to some extent. In fact, Roman invasions from Armenia would become a bit of a "classic" over the next century, if only because it meant advancing across broken ground for longer and therefore not offering the Parthians the opportunity to deploy their horse archers on the plain and harass the Roman army at will when on the march. This, and the fact that he had with him more light infantry and cavalry than Crassus had taken, shows that he had "learned the lessons" and did not underestimate the Parthians. The campaign did of course end in failure, and Octavius very much capitalised on this, doing all he could to prevent Mark Antony from launching a second campaign which would allow him to rebuild his credibility over the next three years. There are however two points which are particularly interesting, and which the author could also have emphasised a bit more. One is that the main reason for the failure of this campaign was the Parthian attack of Mark Antony's siege and supply train and its destruction, along with the two

full legions that were escorting it. While some historians have blamed Mark Antony for marching ahead and exposing his siege and supply train in a reckless way, the real mistake seems to have been to trust the Armenian King. He betrayed Mark Antony and withdrew with his troops (and his cavalry in particular) once the Parthian attacked the supply train, leaving the legions as sitting ducks that were cut to pieces since they were totally exposed to the Parthian horse archers and lancers and were largely unable to retaliate in kind. The mistake here seems to have been a political one, with Mark Antony being once again being too trusting, perhaps naïf, perhaps also over-confident and clearly not anticipating that the Armenian King could change sides. The campaign would clearly have been a very different one had his siege and supply train not been destroyed. The second point is that during the retreat Mark Antony managed to keep his army together and extricate most of it (probably as much as two-thirds), although his troops were hungry, short of water and harassed by the Parthians. While this still meant appalling losses that Mark Antony could ill afford and nothing to show for them, this in itself was no mean feat, especially when compared to the fate of Crassus who lost perhaps three quarters of his force, along with his own life. Contrary to Crassus also, Mark Antony even seems to have won a number of engagements and repulsed a number of Parthian assaults along the way, showing that he had clearly thought about some way of countering the harassments. Then there is what has been portrayed as the great romance between Mark Antony and Cleopatra. As the author shows (and other historians have also shown in their respective works), Mark Antony did not simply "lose it", fall madly in love and do the Egyptian Queen's every whim. If anything, it was as much a political partnership in which the Roman Triumvir was initially, and at least until the failure of his Parthian campaign, the dominant partner with Cleopatra being no more than the most powerful among his allied monarchs, as it was a (very probably genuine) love affair. The balance shifted in favor of the Egyptian queen afterward this campaign and as the final showdown against Octavius approached, because Mark Antony had to increasingly rely on the resources that only Egypt could provide. Mark Antony's dilemma was that, by doing so, he fed Octavius' propaganda to such an extent that his own officers started to abandon him and rally that of his opponent even before the battle of Actium. This brings up another very interesting feature. Throughout the book, and although the main subjects are clearly Mark Antony, his character and his actions, there is lurking somewhere in the background the actions and character of the scheming Octavius. Implicit comparisons come to mind almost all the time, with the author concluding that Mark Antony, while ruthless and ambitious, was probably not ruthless or ambitious enough. In particular, he let pass quite a few occasions when he could (and probably should) have crushed his opponent before he became too strong and Mark Antony

became too weak to win. What the book also shows is that an unsympathetic Octavius, this patient master politician and spin master, won over a more dashing and apparently more powerful Mark Antony. The later seems to have been prone to a mixture of arrogance, over confidence and perhaps even naivety at times. In particular, he seems to have believed that he could defeat Octavius in battle anytime he wanted. The later, of course, had no intention to oblige when he could destroy his ennemy in a much safer way through subversion. This is what he did and the result was Actium, which Octavius, soon to become Augustus Caesar, presented as a major victory against the forces of a renegade Roman general "bewitched" by an over-ambitious foreign Queen. In reality, it seems to have been a bit of a "damp squid", to use the author's expression. An excellent biography which is worth five stars for me. This is because it manages rather superbly to bring the sympathetic and roguish warlord who loved wine, women and song (to paraphrase the author) to life, in spite of his much maligned reputation and, ultimately, in spite of his arch-ennemy Octavius and all of his efforts to blacken the loser.

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