

Book Review

REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER SCHLECT

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Ronald Mellor has collected a thorough, yet manageable, anthology of Roman historical writing, and I recommend it.

Most history source anthologies frustrate me. Typically they present brief excerpts of 500 words or so, yanked out of works that would fill 500 pages if left unabridged, and represent them as adequate tastes of the past. Because such briefs are offered up as “primary sources,” they flatter less astute readers—it’s usually students who have to read these things—into believing that they are looking at a clear, un-tampered-with voice of the past. For example, I know one anthology that presents 1 Corinthians 13 as its “primary source” for Christianity, wrenching a great passage out of its context, leaving the hapless reader ignorant of Paul’s concerns about the Corinthian church. The passage comes

off much different when read as God intended: following chapter 12 and preceding chapter 14. If it is problematic to read only little bits of the Bible, we should be similarly concerned about excerpting the Battle of Marathon out of the intricate weave of Herodotus’ whole tapestry. On the other side, I sympathize with anthology editors because they are motivated by the plain truth that all teachers confront: students cannot read everything. (Neither can their teachers, despite our petty attempts to come across as though we are omniscient.) Whenever I assign readings to

my students, I make the selections, and therefore, like an anthology editor, I control and spin their exposure to the past. But I will not hide the fact that this is what I am doing.

A good anthology is one whose editor understands not only the practical necessity for anthologies, but also their downsides. This is one such anthology. As a teacher, I simply do not have the time to work through the entirety of Polybius, Livy and Tacitus, much less Suetonius and others. I wish I did, but there are only so many hours in a scope and sequence. However, Mellor provides enough from each writer to allow readers to

discern the writer’s purpose, priorities, methods, style, and frame of reference. He also gives enough to help readers appreciate why it is that these writers hold a secure place in the canon of “Great Books” in the Western tradition. Read-

The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of the Major Writings

Ronald Mellor, editor

*New York: Routledge, 1998,
534 pages, \$30*

ers will not come away from this anthology with the mis-impression that “I have seen Rome and know all I need to know,” but rather, “I have seen enough of Roman grandeur to realize that I know only a glimmer of its vastness.” There is nothing pretentious about this anthology and thoughtful students will come away from it with a sense that they now must read *all* of Livy, *all* of Tacitus, etc. Anthologies ought to beget humility in the reader, not arrogance. Mellor has done that, and in so doing he has provided us all with a fine instructional tool.