DECLINE AND FALL OF POMPEY THE GREAT

By H. P. Collins

(29 September 1953 was the bimillenary of Pompey's death)

ALTHOUGH the last phase of Republican Rome is so familiar to us, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus remains a figure rather than a man. His was the statue beneath which the murdered Caesar fell, and he is still for most of us the figure in the background: Shakespeare passed him by. His vast fame has left the man himself remote.

It was his tragedy that he could not read the writing on the wall. It was partly clouded for him, as all things gradually became clouded, by the deepening shadow of his own portentous greatness. With his solid abilities, too, he had not a streak of genius or political insight. History can show few worse statesmen. He became the chief agent of the doomed Republic without realizing that it was doomed, and lived quite uninspired by that republican idea which animated men so different as Cicero and the younger Cato.

If he had not been outclassed, and defeated in battle, and finally eclipsed, by Julius Caesar, he could have lived in history as the Roman Empire’s mightiest architect. He claimed with some reason to have subdued three continents. If not a great general, he was certainly a very good one, and in his younger days he could always get the best out of his soldiers. He was, above all, a good organizer. His campaign against the Mediterranean pirates, whom he swept from the seas in three months, was an unqualified triumph.

He was stabbed to death at Pelusium by hangers-on of the Egyptian court 2,000 years ago on 29 September. The squalid end, pitiful to recall, was all too fitting a climax to his last phase. Like Caesar after him, he deteriorated, and far more markedly. Yet even now—such extreme bias has he provoked in historians—his real features are hard to read.

He was not born into the privileged class of Optimates, nor in fact very fortunate in his father. Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo, who from rather obscure origins became one of Sulla’s generals in the Social War, left a peculiarly evil name behind him. He was a soldier of some ability, but detested by his men, who are strongly suspected of having murdered him. He was mean, avaricious, and cruel—faults with which his son was never charged. A plot by his own officers to kill him in 88 B.C.
had been foiled by the 18-year-old boy’s adroitness—Plutarch gives a pretty if fanciful account of the incident. This was the year the great Sulla made his successful march on Rome: a sign that the old Republic was breaking up.

At 17 Pompey was involved in the war against the Italian colonies, and for some years knew no life but the tented field; but before this he had sat for a time at the feet of the Stoic philosopher Posidonius of Rhodes. He never showed the deep vein of scepticism of a Cato or a Brutus, but he acquired some superficial taste for letters. He was a mild and pleasant-looking youth, with a winning manner and the knack of giving graciously. In moral character he was far above most of the better-off Romans of his day.

His home life was simple; he had no taste for Eastern luxury, and Greek manners made no deeper appeal to him than Greek culture. Once when he was unwell a compliant physician—he hated complaisant physicians—suggested that a thrush might stimulate his Excellency’s appetite. The delicacy proved hard to find, and at last a servant suggested that the kitchens of Pompey’s old rival Lucullus might be able to furnish one. ‘Oh,’ said his Excellency, ‘so if Lucullus were not a sybarite Pompey must starve!’—and ordered the Roman equivalent of cheese-and-beer.

As a soldier the young man showed all the old Roman virtues, which were becoming rather uncommon. He was authoritative and hardy; reliable, temperate, and brave. After his father’s death in 87 B.C. he was prosecuted on various improbable charges, and owed his life to the praetor Antistius, whose daughter he married. While Sulla was subduing Mithridates of Pontus in the East, the Popular party of Marius and Cinna seized power in Rome. Pompey escaped from the camp of his new leaders, for whom he had no love, and retired in 84 B.C. to the large estates which his avaricious parent had acquired in Picenum in the north-east.

Here he raised three legions, an unprecedented feat for a young man who had never held high office. Politics and arms were all one career under the Roman system, and the generals (who were also admirals) were the ex-magistrates. Pompey threw in his lot with the victorious Sulla when he returned from the East to the inevitable Civil War. Equally with the tried commander Metellus and the wealthy Crassus he was ranked as Imperator, and gained an easy victory over the Democrats in the north. Sulla crushed the Samnites and Lucanians at the very gates of Rome, and got himself proclaimed Dictator. Hellenized and cynical, indifferent to Roman traditions, he carried out a cold-blooded
and systematic massacre of his enemies and rewrote the Constitution, giving over the government and the law courts wholly to the Optimates. Sulla was a very able man; but he missed the one chance of securing a lasting Republic on a wide popular basis when he turned his back on the colonials.

Pompey was sent to mop up the opposition in Sicily, and captured and put to death Carbo, the Democratic consul. This uncharacteristic harshness he justified by Carbo’s crimes against Roman citizens. Crossing to Africa, he speedily defeated Cinna’s son-in-law Domitius Ahenobarbus and his native hordes, restored the dethroned Hiempsal to the throne of Numidia, and already heard himself greeted by the heady title of Magnus.

Sulla, dismounting outside the city gates to receive the young general, also greeted him as Magnus, perhaps a little drily. Pompey asked for a Triumph, but was told that only a senior magistrate could be paid that honour. ‘More men worship the rising than the setting sun’, retorted Pompey. The Dictator cupped his ear; and Pompey was obliged to repeat the remark, in his rather slow tones. Sulla contemplated him for a moment and then remarked indifferently, ‘Let him triumph’. Pompey aspired to have his chariot drawn into the city by Numidian elephants; but they proved too bulky for the gates, and he was reduced to the more conventional horses.

He did not become a favourite with the Optimates, who could not forget that he was not one of them, and neither he nor they had the vision to foresee that one day he would be their last hope, their only possible generalissimo. Sulla, on the eve of his surprising retirement, was anxious for the future of his step-daughter Aemilia, and induced Pompey to divorce Antistia and marry her. Pompey showed more independence of Sulla, but also that lack of judgement that so handicapped him all his life, by supporting the disreputable Democrat Lepidus for the consulship, thus sowing the dragon’s teeth.

Sulla took the bold step of laying aside his power and retiring to a life of hellenized luxury at his private villa. Here he died a year later (78 B.C.), though not of the loathsome disease his detractors’ imagination has conjured up. Largely through Pompey’s influence, and in spite of strong opposition, he was given the most magnificent public funeral Rome had ever seen.

The Republic had now entered its final phase. Greed, corruption, and decadence were the rule among public men, and there was more superstition than religion among a people who had perhaps never been very spiritual. The provincial nobleman, preoccupied with his fish-
ponds, was no more edifying than the urban politician. The Popular party could not find good leaders, and was often courted by the worst type of high-born demagogue such as the adventurer Clodius. The Equites, the middle classes, cut off from the Senate and the courts by Sulla, were in eclipse.

The weakness of the Senate and the State’s want of moral authority made the last century B.C. the era of outstanding men. Those who think that the Romans came to grief ultimately because of their intellectual limitations point out that the master-figures, Sulla and Caesar, were both enemies of the State and that Sulla really had a Greek, and Caesar a universal, mind. But Pompey, the outstanding man, or at least institution, at Rome for three decades, was intellectually very typical of his countrymen. He showed the native grauitas, the efficiency, and also the streak of stupidity. Yet we can like him, and regret that he became spoiled; for he was honest and uncommonly humane and never became a law unto himself. In spite of his ambition, he again and again disbanded his armies—parting with his sole power, for he had no gift of winning men in civilian intercourse.

Aemilia died in 77 B.C. and Pompey married Mucia, who became the mother of his two sons. But he did not enjoy domestic life long, for soon after Sulla’s death Rome was involved in three wars simultaneously. Lepidus rose in arms against the Senate; in Asia Lucullus required many legions, constantly reinforced, to keep Mithridates and his ally Tigranes of Armenia at bay; and that eccentric genius of guerrilla warfare, Sertorius, held Spain, of which he had been propraetor, as the last stronghold of the Marian cause. Having defeated Lepidus at Modena, Pompey was given the pro-consular command in the West to reinforce the veteran Metellus, though he had never held the previous offices prescribed by the Sullan laws. As a sharp-tongued senator remarked, he went not as pro-consul but pro both consuls!

We have learned so much in the last fifty years about the possibilities of guerrilla warfare that we are not surprised it should have taken Pompey nearly four years of campaigning to subdue Sertorius’ Spain. The great adventurer was slain at table by an ambitious lieutenant, Perperna, in 72 B.C. Pompey put Perperna to death and destroyed unread Sertorius’ papers, which must certainly have incriminated many prominent citizens at home. A lesser man would have kept them as a weapon.

Meanwhile Rome had been badly shaken by the revolt of the gladiators under the gallant Spartacus. Crassus, better remembered for his wealth than his generalship, had broken up the insurrection in 71 B.C. and
Pompey, on his homeward march from Spain, routed the scattered survivors, afterwards saying with complacency that Crassus had won a battle, but Pompey had torn up rebellion by the roots.

He was granted another Triumph, and though the patricians liked him less and less, he was elected consul for the year 70 B.C. This was in defiance of all laws, as he had never been quaestor, or even in the Senate. His colleague was the influential, incongruous Crassus. Some notion of this noble Roman may be gained by recalling his fire-brigade. Conflagrations were frequent in the city, and when one broke out he would call on some householder in the vicinity and offer to buy the imperilled property at a low figure. If the agreement was signed he at once brought along his fire-brigade to put out the blaze. He was a clever advocate and speaker, but self-interest was the only bond between him and Pompey.

The consuls proceeded to modify Sulla’s laws. Five years before, the patrician reformer Cotta had restored a measure of freedom to the people’s tribunes, and now Pompey further revised the dictator’s policy. The Senate was purged of some of its extremists, the censorship was revived, and by the lex Aurelia monopoly of the courts was taken away from the Optimates, a majority of the jury now being either Equites or a new class of tribuni aerarii. At the end of his year of office Pompey, who loved home and hated the Forum, retired to domesticity. Plutarch, who wrote his Life, says he ‘thought true dignity soiled by the touch of the vulgar’. It is a little difficult to guess what dreams of—strictly constitutional—greatness he indulged; but he seems to have seen himself as a sort of supreme feudalist, lord of an empire within an empire. In Spain the new quaestor, a nephew of Marius, was less scrupulously thinking of a dictatorship that should replace the moribund Republic in the fullness of time. Julius Caesar was the rising hope of the Popular party, and a man of more social resource than Pompey.

Rome’s preoccupations had left the Mediterranean pirates unchecked, and they now infested the whole inland sea, so that there was even a danger of famine. By a special decree, the lex Gabinia, Pompey was put in command of all Rome’s maritime regions. In forty days the seas east of Sicily were freed, and in another forty-nine days the marauders had been swept from their strongholds in the western Mediterranean. Instead of crucifying them, in the conventional spirit, the conqueror settled them in new colonies along the coasts, and they justified him by becoming orderly members of society.

He visited Athens, making rather a parade of his piety, and going on to Cilicia was greeted with the tidings that he had been given, by the
lex Manilia, supreme command in the East, supplanting the excellent Lucullus. His elaborate disclaimer of this new honour irritated some even among his friends. He was now forty, and not improving with middle age. Innocent of the uglier faults, he was consumed by self-consciousness. His natural and amiable serenity was lost in small jealousies and affectations. Nor could he carry it off: his virtues were not of the glamorous order, and he deceived himself more easily than others. He should have been a Cincinnatus; but he yearned to be the central figure, the patron of men, the diplomat and social paragon.

The middle-class Cicero had spoken eloquently for his appointment, but the stiffer patricians and the Popular party did not really relish it. He sailed for Asia with some 50,000 men—taking Theophanes of Mitylene with him as a sort of court-biographer! His campaign in the East was a long one. He made an alliance with Phraates of Parthia, and succeeded in keeping Tigranes neutral, and inflicted a heavy defeat on Mithridates's army at Nicopolis on a winter's night of 66 B.C. The tough old despot retreated eastwards to Colchis and round the Black Sea, where he spent the last three years of his life in rallying fresh forces, with a view to descending on Italy from the north. But Pompey's frontiers were now on the Euphrates.

Deviating southwards, he occupied Syria, reducing Jerusalem with her mighty walls, where in October 63 B.C. he penetrated the Holy of Holies, sword in hand, and stood awed before the simplicity of a religion that knew neither visible gods nor idols. From this hour, according to the Rabbis, his fortunes declined.

He spent most of 62 B.C. in organizing Asia Minor. He had reached apotheosis now. He could boast—and did!—of taking 800 ships, 1,000 fortresses, and 900 towns, and bringing 20,000 talents to the Roman treasury. He had carried the eagles of Rome from the Atlantic to the Caucasus. He returned in 61 B.C. to triumph a third time (his car blazing with precious stones), and treated his captives with a clemency that must have seemed strange to many Romans. But afterwards he made a long speech to the Senate which pleased nobody at all.

The next ten years were murky in the story of Rome and Pompey, and made the ascendancy of Caesar inevitable. Pompey divorced the unfortunate Mucia and entered into a political match with Caesar's young daughter Iulia. She was a devoted wife, and had she not died of a shock while pregnant seven years later, and their little son died soon after her, the final rupture might have been averted, for better or worse.

The coalition of Crassus, Pompey and Caesar, the First Triumvirate, must have been almost as shocking to many serious party men as the
Fox-North coalition. In the scandalous state of Rome, now further
demoralized by such degenerates as Catiline and Clodius, some authority
was urgently needed; but the coalition ‘never coalesced’. Caesar
secured the consulate for 59 B.C., and Pompey was able to return once
more to domesticity, but two years later, owing to a corn famine, he
was made corn controller for a period of five years. He gave the Romans
their first stone theatre, an admirable move if it had been reserved for
the drama. But he always miscalculated popular taste, and when he
staged spectacular fights between gladiators and elephants even the
hard-boiled Roman plebians rioted in protest against the cruelty—to
the elephants.

In 55 B.C., after prolonged scenes of violence, Pompey and Crassus
were again elected consuls, and they carried some minor reforms.
Caesar’s command in Gaul was extended to 49 B.C. Pompey was
appointed to Spain, but kept his army at home, which was of course
irregular. Through his friend Aulus Gabinius he put Ptolemy Auletes
on the precarious throne of Egypt, and thereby sealed his own doom.

With Caesar in the west discovering Britain and Crassus ingloriously
dead in Armenia, the murderous gangs that infested Rome got quite
out of hand and it became impossible to hold elections. So in 52 B.C.
Pompey was made sole consul, anticipating Caesar’s despotism without
his far-sighted consciousness of destiny. Later in the year Metellus
Scipio, whose daughter Cornelia became Pompey’s fifth wife, was joined
with him in the consulate. Cornelia was not the fashionable Roman lady
of the day: she was a scholar and mathematician with genuine musical
gifts.

He tried by legislation, rather late in the day, to tighten up the pro-
cedure at gangster trials, to combat the all-corroding corruption, and
to regulate the appointment of consuls and praetors to and from the
provinces. But he found he had to exempt Caesar by special decrees,
which inspired Tacitus’s wry comment that Pompey was the author and
first violator of the Pompeian laws. In the early spring of 50 B.C. he fell
seriously ill at Naples. How much he stood for to the simple country
town was shown on his recovery, when he made a sort of triumphal
progress round Italy amid the wildest enthusiasm. He had now quite
lost his air of modesty. ‘I have only to stamp my foot and legions will
spring up’, he observed, dismissing the menace of Caesar.

The Senate could do nothing but give Pompey supreme command at
home, for Caesar was determined to stand for the consulship for the
year 48 B.C. without parting with his armies. He played on Pompey’s
frailties cleverly and offered to resign his command if his rival would
do the same. The Senate dared not entertain such an offer, and were confident in the support of all Italy except the Transpadanes. Caesar encamped at Ravenna and in January 49 crossed the Rubicon. In April he found Rome almost deserted by his opponents.

Indeed, this year Caesar was at his swiftest and most brilliant, while Pompey, with much larger but vastly poorer forces, was not his old self. He was a veteran by the standards of his time, and though Plutarch gives a lively description of him as heartening his followers by his youthful vigour in athletics and horsemanship, he had been a very sick man. Beneath the surface there was a sinister deterioration. He had long been unable, as Heitland puts it, ‘to keep his greatness in repair’. The poet of the Pharsalia, though he made Pompey his hero, saw him as a shadow, magni nominis umbra.

Shaken by defections, in March he set sail from Brundisium across the Adriatic, encamping near Dyrrachium to rally the support he could count on in the east. At the same time he consolidated his command of the seas. A waiting game was justifiable, though Cicero thought he ‘did nothing either brave or wise’. Caesar, consul-elect and for eleven days dictator of Rome, was compelled to wait and clear the whole of the west to secure food-supplies by land, as he could do nothing at sea. Being left with a free hand in Italy, he was able to establish an invaluable personal ascendency. By January 48 he was strong enough to cross to Epirus and confront the Pompeian hosts.

Pompey’s nucleus of Roman veterans, whose interests he had always made his care, were a small minority in his polyglot and dissolute camp. Agamemnon, as he was ironically called, had great prestige; but he lacked the old authority. Oriental potentates make bad subordinates and worse military counsellors; elated by a minor success against Caesar, they pressed for a decisive battle, while the bored Romans allotted fat prizes of state among themselves as if they were already home and Caesar dead. The huge camp was given over to luxury and revelling.

Caesar boldly struck southward and inland, as if he were going to attack his enemies’ base in Thessalonica. Pompey, who could well have reoccupied Italy, was induced to pursue him. On the plains of Pharsalus he gave battle in the intense August heat, trusting to his superior cavalry resources. It is not a battle of which we know the details clearly—even the exact site is still debated—but it seems that bad discipline and fighting inferiority rather than tactics lost the day. Caesar’s infantry were too well trained and far too adroit for the Asiatic horsemen, who broke and fled, and the reverse soon became a rout.
The sudden collapse of his almost legendary supremacy seems to have unnerved Pompey, who fled on horseback with a few friends to the mouth of the Peneus, and he set sail in a small boat to Mitylene, where Cornelia was waiting for him. Plutarch gives a piteous description of her grief and self-reproaches. His old confidence revived a little, and he began to assemble a fleet and reorganize his eastern resources. But unhappily he decided to ask temporary shelter of Egypt's boy-king, a son of Ptolemy Auletes. The degraded mercenaries and eunuchs were terrified of receiving him, for fear of Caesar's wrath, and at the same time afraid to turn such an illustrious fugitive away—for might not great Pompey still become lord of the world? But if they killed him, as the soldier of fortune Achillas pointed out—'dead men do not bite'. Caesar, he argued, would be delighted.

Achillas' galley, with two former Roman centurions among those aboard, put out to welcome him. He was rowed ashore, in full view of the anxious Cornelia. Few men can have walked so incautiously to their death. As he stepped on land he was stabbed from behind several times and fell without a cry, covering his face with his cloak. His head was hacked off and his body thrown into the sea, whence it was retrieved next day by two humble Romans and given rough-and-ready cremation. The timbers of a derelict boat that had been stranded nearby served as a funeral pyre.

Such was the miserable end of Pompey the Great, one of the most constitutional and humane of the world's conquerors, if also one of the least able to support the weight of his own importance. If he added lustre to the moribund Republic, he was not the man to avert the impending doom: he had neither the vision nor the self-disregard. His limitations kept him the instrument rather than the master of fate. If he had beaten Caesar at Pharsalus—a dubious benefit to the world—the forms of constitutional government at Rome might have been preserved a little longer. But the Senate could hardly have survived long against their own corruptness and the violent resentments of the mob. Another Clodius would have been the alternative to another Catiline, and a strong dictatorship must have soon become the only course.

If imperial Rome was to enter upon a new phase and a new glory, Caesar was the man best able to prepare the way. Good feeling and respect for freedom may incline us to Pompey's cause; but on the long view of history we must see that he was not the type of Roman, and indeed his was not the Rome, to control the destinies of a changing world.