

# REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

## DECLINE AND FALL

It's no secret that Isaac Asimov's classic Foundation series was a recasting of Roman history in science fictional form. The Roman Empire, by the time of Constantine the Great in the early fourth century, reached from Britain to the borders of Persia, and had become too unwieldy to govern from a single capital city in Italy. Recognizing this, Constantine founded a second capital for the Empire in Asia Minor—Constantinople, now known as Istanbul. Drawing heavily on Edward Gibbon's great eighteenth-century work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Isaac invented a galactic equivalent for Constantine's creation of a second capital, and built his books around the quest, in some far-off galactic future, for that distant Second Foundation.

He was not, of course, the only SF writer to mine Roman history for story ideas. A.E. van Vogt's Linn series (*Empire of the Atom* and *The Wizard of Linn*), which attracted some attention when it appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, was a retelling of the early years of the Empire, the time of Augustus and Tiberius, set in a future age that followed a devastating galactic war. The basic sources for this material were the first-century Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus, though van Vogt seems to have drawn much of his material from Robert Graves' historical novel *I, Claudius* rather than going, as Graves had done, to the original sources.

Those are just two of many SF works derived from Roman history. (I've done one myself, *Roma Eterna*, sections of which were published in *Asimov's* some time back.) But lately I've been reading the book of a great and undeservedly neglected Roman historian whose account of the Empire as it was entering its final phase, late in the fourth century A.D. could well serve as the basis of a really frightening science fiction series, for it is a nightmarish portrait of a terrifying po-

lice state of Stalinist intensity, full of chilling details that give us marvelous insight into the great realm as it tottered toward its collapse.

The author was Ammianus Marcellinus, a Greek who was born in Syria about 325 A.D. and lived, so far as we know, until the final years of the fourth century. Like so many of the finest ancient historians—Thucydides, Xenophon, Tacitus—Ammianus Marcellinus was a military man, an officer who saw extensive action in Rome's wars against the Persians and against the Franks in Gaul. After his years in service he traveled widely through the eastern provinces of the Empire, and eventually settled in Rome, where in old age he wrote *Rerum Gestarum Libri*, "The Book of Deeds," the book that has established him among the great historians of the ancient world. Indeed, he ranks as the last in that glorious series, since the Roman Empire as he understood it would outlive him by little more than half a century.

He didn't know the Empire was collapsing, of course. (I wonder whether Soviet historians of the 1970s and 1980s had any inkling that their empire was on the way out, either.) He simply thought it was going through a rough patch, with its greatest years probably behind it, but nevertheless he believed that it would emerge from its current time of troubles intact, and all would be well, even as it had been in the time of Augustus and Trajan and Hadrian. (Ammianus insists that the problems of the Empire were the result of the personal moral deficiencies of cruel and incompetent Emperors and not—as proved to be the case—the consequences of fundamental structural flaws that would bring the whole system down a generation or two after his death.) We, with the benefit of hindsight, can see how wrong he was. The Persians were gobbling up great swathes of Roman territo-

ry in the east, the Huns were battering at the Empire's northern frontiers, the Visigoths were on the march along the Danube, and in the west the Franks, the Gauls, and the Saxons were ravaging the Roman settlements in Britain and what now is France. The western half of the Empire would suffer defeat after defeat—in 410 the city of Rome itself was captured by the Visigoths. By 476 the last emperor had gone into exile and a German king ruled what had been the Western Empire.

Ammianus Marcellinus did not live to see the Empire's fall. But the evidence for what was about to happen is everywhere in his book. It is a stark and ominous document.

Although Greek was his native language, he wrote *The Book of Deeds* in Latin, and obviously he was proud of his mastery of that language, for he writes in a difficult, elaborate style, exuberant and sometimes overly complex, that has been a challenge to his translators. (The translation I have, a capable and readable one, dates from 1862. Penguin Books has a more modern version available, though it is abridged by about one fifth.) His intention was to begin his history in the year 96, which is where the *Histories* of Tacitus end, and continue it up to 378, the year of the catastrophic defeat of Valens, the Eastern Emperor, at the hands of the Visigoths at the Battle of Adrianople. But thirteen of the thirty-one books of Ammianus' history are lost, so that what survives today opens abruptly in A.D. 353, when Constantius II, the second of the three sons of Constantine the Great, was on the imperial throne.

Constantine had divided the Empire among his sons, who do not seem to have been a pretty bunch. Constantine II, the eldest, was given Spain, Gaul, and Britain, but soon he quarreled with his youngest brother, Constans, the Emperor who ruled in Italy and the Balkans, and was killed in 340 while trying to invade Constans' territory. Constans was overthrown by a usurper in 350, leaving Constantius II as the sole Emperor as Ammianus' book begins.

The historian shows us Constantius as

a chilly, remote figure, obsessed with his own imperial importance: "Though he was very short, yet he bowed down when entering high gates, and looking straight before him, as though he had his head in a vice, he turned his head neither to the right nor the left, as if he had been a statue: nor when the carriage shook him did he nod his hand, or spit, or rub his face or his nose; nor was he ever seen even to move a hand." Behind that glacial exterior, though, Constantius was a suspicious, even paranoid man, who had murdered his uncles and most of his cousins to assure his grip on imperial power. He maintained a network of spies everywhere and exercised a kind of Orwellian control over everyone's thoughts: "Sometimes it happened that if the head of a household, in the seclusion of his private apartments, with no confidential servant present, had whispered something in the ear of his wife, the ruler leaned about it the next day . . . and so even the walls, the only sharers of secrets, were feared."

One of the most ferocious of the Emperor's agents was Mercurius, "nicknamed Count of Dreams, because (as a dog fond of biting secretly fawns and wags his tail while full of inward spite) he wormed his way into banquets and meetings, and if anyone in his sleep (when nature roves about with an extraordinary degree of freedom) communicated to a friend that he had seen anything, Mercurius would exaggerate it, coloring it with venomous arts, and bear it to the open ears of the Emperor." Men became so reluctant to speak of their dreams, we learn, that "in the presence of a stranger they would scarcely confess that they had slept at all."

An even more sinister figure was Paulus the Chain, who earned his nickname "because in weaving knots of calumnies he was invincible, scattering around foul poisons and destroying people by various means, as some skilful wrestlers are wont in their contests to catch hold of their antagonists by the heel." We get a full account of the atrocities perpetrated in the service of Constantius by this dread figure, who was "full of deadly eagerness

and rage. As accusations extended more widely, involving numbers without end in their snares, many perished, some with their bodies mangled on the rack; others were condemned to death and confiscation of their goods; while Paulus kept on inventing groundless accusations, as if he had a store of lies on which to draw, and suggesting various pretences for injuring people, so that on his nod, it may be said, the safety of everyone in the place depended." The imperial court abounds in such monsters, men of the greatest cruelty and inhumanity; and that most of them died violently themselves does not mitigate their dark deeds.

In time the reign of grim Constantius, that man of "cruelty and morose suspicions," came to its end, and his successor, his young and enlightened kinsman Julian, took steps to restore some measure of tranquility to the troubled realm. Many of Constantius' officials were sent into exile; some, including "Paulus, surnamed 'the Chain,' men who are never spoken of without general horror, were now sentenced to be burnt alive."

But Julian perished in battle against the Persians after only three years on the throne. The army named Jovian, the captain of the imperial guards, as the new Emperor: he concluded a disastrous treaty with the Persians, surrendering five provinces as the price of peace, and died soon after under mysterious circumstances. The next Emperor was Valentinian, a military officer of high rank, who, recognizing as Constantine the Great had that the Empire was too big for one man to govern, appointed his younger brother, Valens, to rule its eastern half.

They do not seem to have been a lovable pair. Of Valentinian we are told that "he kept two ferocious she-bears, who enjoyed eating men; and they had names, Golden Camel and Innocence, and these beasts he took such care of that he had their dens close to his bedchamber, and appointed over them trusty keepers who were bound to take especial care that the odious fury of these monsters should never be checked. At last he had Innocence

set free, after he had seen the burial of many corpses which she had torn to pieces, giving her the range of the forests as a reward for her services." As for his brother Valens, "He was immoderately desirous of great wealth, and impatient of toil . . . and somewhat inclined to cruelty. . . . He willingly sought profit and advantage in the miseries of others, and was more than ever intolerable in straining ordinary offences into sedition or treason; he cruelly encompassed the death or ruin of wealthy nobles. . . . He was also insulting, hot-tempered, and always willing to listen to all informers, without the least distinction as to whether the charges which they advanced were true or false."

The catalog of atrocities goes on and on. I've barely hinted at the multitude of horrors—the feverish tone of the book, the sense that the whole vast Empire was a place of fear and foreboding, where those in power routinely carried out the most dire deeds, where the terrors of life within the realm were as threatening as the various barbarian menaces that assailed the Empire's borders. The tale that Ammianus tells—my edition of it has 623 pages of small type—is one long nightmare. We are given a vivid picture of a crumbling realm ruled by dark-souled, troubled men. Some of it is too much even for Ammianus, for, as he approaches the end of his story, he enters a period in which many of his protagonists are still alive, and he tactfully refrains from going into details of their deeds: obviously he regarded that as being too risky, as he makes abundantly clear in a reference to "the dangers which are often connected with the truth."

There is plenty here, and here it all sits, awaiting the skill of some valiant science fiction writer to turn it into a spectacular saga of the end of a great galactic empire. Three volumes at a minimum, I'd say, and I'm not going to write them: the days of my writing long sagas are behind me. But someone should dip into Ammianus Marcellinus and bring forth the treasures he offers.

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