

Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988. Pp. xii, 319. 17 figures. Hardbound. \$ 25.00.

The question of the reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire remains a live one for the student of Roman history and a popular topic of discussion in academic circles. Ramsay MacMullen of Yale University, who can always be counted on to come up with a provocative analysis of any basic and controversial topic, has produced a highly documented book of several hundred pages to which are added three appendices, 63 pages of closely printed notes, a detailed 34 page bibliography, and assorted diagrams, graphs, and an index that presents to the reader a new perspective on an old subject, namely, that a principal factor in the decline of Rome was the steady loss of focus and control over government by the systematic and traditional thwarting of the aims of that government by high-ranking bureaucrats and military leaders. MacMullen rightly asserts that «No account of the 'decline', nor so much as the word itself, can claim validity if it does not apply to and assist in explaining the empire as a whole» (p. 56). He also makes it clear «the 'Rome' that 'declines' is thus not one single thing but many things, and the search for any one cause across the board is futile. So, too, is the search for any one period in which all aspects of Roman civilization were much changed. No such crucial period exists» (p. 5). In all of this the power of the military cannot be overlooked, but neither can its limitations.

MacMullen makes it very clear that there was no significant overlap between public and private power and that much was done to divert governmental force, which MacMullen calls «*misdirection*» – a *misdirection* that was widely characterized by venality – in the government, in the army, and in the Church, even if honesty is praised (cf. Cicero) but not practiced. This venality had become *consuetudo* and scandal did follow.

MacMullen calls his book an exercise in historical sociology. After reviewing select scholarship on Roman decline and culling from it what he deems useful and appropriate, he describes what the powerful looked like, their public demeanor, where and how they lived, and how well known they wanted to be, what power was and how it worked and when and why it didn't, illustrating Rome's ultimate impotence by concentrating on certain incidents from the fourth and fifth centuries. MacMullen puts the end of his study somewhere between 406 and 429.

The author's four chapter titles are intriguing and at the same time revealing: «Choosing a Theme»; «Power Effective»; «Power for Sale»; and «The Price of Privatizing Government». By «power» the author means «only the contrary of obedience». MacMullen acknowledges that «During the better centuries of its history, enormous amounts of psychic and physical energy, the resolve and muscle of its citizens, could be brought to bear mostly on war but also on the spreading of a pattern of effective ties of obedience throughout the Mediterranean world. They made law enforcement possible, and public construction, and so forth. Local or central government was able to transmit its will through an armature of influence and obedience joining urban, provincial, and imperial leaders and their dependents. It functioned effectively because a generally accepted code of obligations pervaded both its public and private relations. Between those two, in fact, there was little distinction. Gradually, however, a competing code made converts among leaders and dependents alike and diminished the capacity to transmit and focus energy. Both public and private power came to be treated as a source of profit, in the spirit

of slaves, freedmen, supply sergeants, and petty accountants. The results were seriously dysfunctional» (p. x).

In a real sense, MacMullen is describing the effect of an ethic that tolerated favors and favoritism but not their sale, implicitly encouraged the practice of bribery and extortion made possible through the ambiguity of the law, the larger number and intrusiveness of laws and government bureaucrats, the isolation of the emperor, and a prevailing higher level of violence, with the result that more and more public officials exercised their authority for private profit. The consequences were a decline in power, in honor, in obligation, and in military security, as the effects of corruption were widely felt in governmental and military circles.

Certainly, MacMullen has provided us with much food for thought, though his analysis to a great degree centers on the premise of the corruptibility of human nature as the primary cause for the decline of Rome and intimates (even if he denies) that we are witnessing similar corruption and decline in American public life in our own day.

Corruption and the Decline of Rome is indeed another thoughtful and worthy contribution to our understanding of the functioning and malfunctioning of one of the world's most powerful political and military powers.

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Iamblichus: Exhortation to Philosophy. Including the Letters of Iamblichus and Proclus' Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles. Translated from the Greek by Thomas Moore Johnson, with a Foreword by Joscelyn Godwin. Edited by Stephen Neuville. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Phanes Press. 1988. Pp. 128. Cloth \$ 25.00. Paperbound \$ 14.95.

Iamblichus of Chalcis in Syria (ca 260-330 A. D.) was a pupil of Porphyry, who was himself a pupil of Plotinus. In the *Exhortation to Philosophy* Iamblichus goes directly to Plato and Aristotle and, in Joscelyn Godwin's words in his Foreword, «reduces the immensity of Plato's and Aristotle's thought to manageable proportions» and exhorts us «to add a further dimension to our lives, and one that is definitely rich», one that would seem to suggest that «the practice of philosophy is nothing more or less than what we would call meditation». Thomas Moore Johnson's translation was done in 1907 and published in an extremely limited edition in 1920, which is now not readily available. It is now the first time that this rare work is made generally available to the greater public.

Iamblichus early argues that «wisdom alone is good and ignorance alone is evil» and that «philosophy is the desire for and the possession of science» (pp. 35-36). He makes the Platonic distinction between the body and the soul, with the soul divine and good and ruling over the body. It is a soul characterized by reason, courage, and desire. In a characteristically Platonic way, Iamblichus insists that the soul is better than the body: «For the soul is of such a nature that it urges and checks, and says what to and what not to do» (p. 47). The primary function of the soul is the acquisition of truth. The element of intellect and insight is divine, according to Iamblichus. In fact, he calls it a god. It is, of course, the soul alone that can contemplate the realities of things, that is what we know as, the Platonic Ideas.