



Goodchild, H. (2006) "Review of Alex Butterworth and Ray Laurence, *Pompeii: The Living City*. London: Phoenix". *Rosetta* **1**: 58-60

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_01/Goodchild.htm

Alex Butterworth and Ray Laurence, Pompeii: The Living City. London: Phoenix, 2005, paperback edition. Pp 417, 27 plates (some colour), 3 maps, ISBN 0-7538-2076-5. £8.99.

Reviewed by Helen Goodchild
University of Birmingham

Pompeii is probably the best studied of all Roman cities, due to the unique nature of its preservation, and has attracted scholars from a wide range of disciplines since its discovery in 1738. Indeed, its fame goes beyond academic circles into the popular imagination and has been the recent subject of both a fictionalised history of the eruption by best-selling author Robert Harris¹ and a primetime BBC drama.² In this context, an updated account of life in the ancient city based on the most recent studies is timely.

Butterworth and Laurence's book begins with a lament on the fading splendour of the ancient ruins of Pompeii, damaged by exposure to time, tourists, and thievery. They argue that it is difficult for the tourist to imagine life within the walls due to the prolonged exposure of the city and the removal of antiquities – either by museums or by clandestine activities.

“No longer does the casual visitor have the information needed to imagine the city in its full glory, or bring to life, in the mind's eye, those who inhabited it” (p.5).

This is the primary aim of the authors – to bring together the huge body of scholarly work in order to create an imaginative reconstruction of the city and its inhabitants. This is not merely a study of the city of Pompeii itself, but rather a glimpse into the social history of a Roman ‘backwater’ in the last years before its destruction in AD 79. The vast corpus of data from studies of epigraphy, environment, skeletal data, material culture, and many other sources means that writing a synthesis that is both readable and a useful resource for the scholar is a difficult task. However, Butterworth and Laurence have succeeded in producing an extremely readable account, accessible to the general public and students of Roman history and archaeology alike.

Part historical narrative, part novel, the book approaches the history of Pompeii's final years in an original and evocative way. Each chapter is themed but also runs chronologically from the accession of Nero in AD 54. The chapters are arranged as a mixture of history and fiction, with the fictional sections printed in italic text to differentiate them from the historical narrative. The combination of Ray Laurence, a well-established scholar of Roman archaeology and history, and Alex Butterworth, a writer and dramatist, succeeds in bringing Pompeii to life with a blending of fact and fiction. Butterworth and Laurence cover a wide range of topics including slavery and the position of freedmen in Roman society, imperial and provincial government, religion, medicine, and the inevitable prostitution and sexuality. Events in the city, such as the riot with its neighbour Nuceria in AD 59 and the devastating

¹ Robert Harris, 2003 "Pompeii". London: Hutchinson

² "Pompeii: The Last Day" originally shown 2003 and published as Wilkinson, P., 2003 "Pompeii: The Last Day. London: BBC Books.

earthquake of AD 62 are covered in detail, particularly the responses of the local population and government.

These themes are all explored through the context of figures known, in variable detail, from the historical record (primarily the graffiti), who are then fleshed out in the fictional narrative. In some cases the lack of detail about particular individuals has resulted in a high degree of artistic licence. However, the authors state clearly in their preface that this is conjecture and they provide more than enough scope for themes to be investigated further using the original source material. Similarly, they recognise that the fact one third of Pompeii still remains unexcavated means that any new discoveries might significantly change current interpretations of the ancient city.

Although this is essentially a popular book, the division of each chapter into themes, combined with a comprehensive index and notes, makes *Pompeii* a useful introductory text for students of Roman social history. As well as giving interesting insights into the history of the city, information on the imperial regime of the time is threaded throughout the book; Nero's promising beginnings due primarily to the guidance given by Seneca and Burrus, and his moral decline. It also covers in later chapters the fall of this regime and the instability of the country during the year of the four emperors, demonstrating Vespasian's rise to power. By giving such a broad overview of the main themes of social history, however, there is insufficient space to develop these themes in any great detail, but for those wanting to follow up on any of the arguments, the comprehensive notes guide the reader towards the original source material and further reading, although inevitably there are a few gaps. The problems of dealing with such a vast corpus of data collected over a long time period and with variable recording skill also mean that it was often necessary for the authors to make leaps of imaginative reconstruction that succeed in their aim of creating a vivid picture but could be misleading for readers with little background knowledge of the period. The colour plates add context to the history, showing primarily wall paintings and sculptural reliefs to illustrate aspects of the Pompeians' daily life. In particular, there are interesting examples from the house of Caecilius Jucundus – himself a victim of the earthquake of AD 62 – showing the damage done and attempts at restoration. The book would have benefited from more of such illustrations, as well as the addition of photographs showing the buildings of Pompeii itself rather than artistic representations.

The final chapter, *Apocalypse*, deals with the eruption itself. Although this chapter has no fictional section, it sketches out the last hours of Pompeii's inhabitants based on archaeological evidence such as the location of bodies as well as Pliny the Younger's famous account.³ It is thought that many people had, and took, the opportunity to leave Pompeii before the eruption, as the volcano had been issuing warning signs – smoke rising from the mountain's slopes, dying crops and animals, and later earth tremors – but many of the city's inhabitants remained. Butterworth and Laurence explain their actions as perhaps the attitude of a populace used to such acts of nature since the earthquake of AD 62, those who could not be moved for reasons of ill health, old age or pregnancy, or those who were unable to leave such as shackled gladiators and other slaves. It is these characters that we sympathise with as they endure the fall of lapilli and the pyroclastic flows that took Pompeian lives at various stages during the prolonged eruption of over 24 hours.

³ *Epistles* 6.16, 6.20

Pompeii: The Living City was the winner of the Longman-History Today Next Generation Prize 2006 and deservedly so. This prize is awarded for the book most likely to “stimulate enthusiasm for, and involvement with history, among secondary school-children ... [with an] emphasis on books that seek an innovative approach to conveying historical information and ideas with flair and imagination”.⁴ This book achieves just that. Although *Pompeii* does not, in itself, add significantly to the field of research, it does provide a very readable synthetic account of the state of research in the city and acts as a good introduction to Roman social history to readers of varying backgrounds. It delivers its aims, in that it provides a “micro-history of that place and its ill-fortuned inhabitants... a portrait of a society oblivious to the tragic destiny that awaited it” (p.7).

⁴ <http://www.historytoday.com>