

George Philip Baker. *Hannibal*. New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999. xv + 332 pp.
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Reviewed by James Bloom

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Given the spectacular, dramatic flavor of the Hannibal Barca saga, its no wonder that the bulk of the literature on the Carthaginian warrior's life and times is written by popular, as opposed to academic, historians. Unsurprisingly, fictionalized accounts of the Punic chieftain's life and campaigns have proliferated lately. Some historians in academe are troubled that the segmented "thematic" social studies approach displaced orderly sequential narratives of men and events at a time when popular interest in historical subjects appeared to be at an all-time high. One might point to the success of the History Channel on cable television, Ken Burns' documentaries on PBS, hit Hollywood films, and bestselling books as evidence that there has been a great thirst for spectacular historical narrative, a tradition which goes back as far as the Beauvais Tapestry.

It is remarkable that more historical films haven't adopted the Hannibal theme, replete with exotic uniforms, elephants, and hairbreadth breakouts. Consequently, if you are looking for a general overview or introduction to Hannibal's life and times, it boils down to a matter of person-

al choice based on style and credibility. So many Hannibals, so little time.

The book under review doesn't profess to engage historians in erudite debate. It was designed to enlighten the literate, albeit amateur, history buff of 1929. It has to be evaluated in this light. As such, it does a respectable job, even if it doesn't eclipse the later works by DeBeer, Lamb, and Proctor.[1] However, those more recent books are long out of print. Nor does Baker compete with the up-to-date works by Lazenby, Lancel, Peddie, or Cornell/Rankov/Sabin, all principally military studies attracting military historians and wargamers.[2] One then has to wonder exactly what readership this 70 year-old reprint addresses and what comparable works are available.

Within the past two decades, there have been several more "bedside Hannibals" to join the parade of pop biographies, notably those by Bradford, Cottrell, and Prevas [3]. While Bradford and Prevas have gone out of print, Cottrell is still available in a paperback reprint; however, I would not recommend his book over Baker's. I don't really care for Cottrell's personal travelogue tech-

nique. He seems bent upon telling the reader what marvelous insights he has gleaned from trekking the identical route where Hannibal's army marched and is prone to conjectural reveries. Cottrell's "I was there" approach makes for meandering and idiosyncratic, if lively, reading. Baker is an armchair historian and thus he depends on other authors rather than insights from personal observation. He maintains a steady, methodical course through the fragmentary remnants of facts and misinformation left to us by the ancient chroniclers.

George Philip Baker (1879-1951) wrote numerous books of popular history in the 1920s and 1930s. This era, it seems, demanded more of historians catering to the rank and file than is expected today. His output included works on Sulla, Hannibal, Tiberius, Constantine, Justinian, Charlemagne, the soldier-kings of Wessex in the twilight of Roman rule, and a "decisive battles" compendium. The term "popular history" should here be written with an asterisk. Baker always took care to read up on his topic in the then-current learned writings. He didn't merely cut and paste from the secondary accounts, but weighed their relative merits and let the reader in on his choices. He emphasized political and economic development as underlying the military capacity effecting the rise and fall of great powers. His 1935 *Book of Battles* was reprinted several times and is still regarded as a stimulating review of military turning points in the manner of Sir Edward Creasy's *The Decisive Battles of History*. His *The Fighting Kings of Wessex* is a discerning interpretation of the beginnings of modern Europe, and an explanation of the strategic thinking that lay behind the military campaigns of Dark Age England. His biographies of Roman emperors have attracted a wide reading audience as well.

Baker was an avid student of military history. Unable to serve in his native England's armed forces due to his total deafness, he worked as a civilian official for the Royal Artillery for much of

his life. He was neither professor nor soldier-scholar; his works strove to enlighten his lay audience as well as to tell an adventure story of strong leaders struggling against economic and political inevitability. Of interest to this list, Baker usually accentuates the military aspects of his subjects. He has taken the time to read the specialist accounts of tactics and strategies developed by the respective antagonists. He likes to contemplate the options open to the commanders on the spot and their decision cycle.

To say that Baker's *Hannibal* is directed towards the "grass roots" market is not to belittle it, but to provide a template for this review. The narrative flow, or story, is all-important. Erudite hair-splitting slows down the action. Theatricality and suspense should prevail. Baker is conscious of telling a rattling good adventure yarn, but yet he is more methodical than picturesque. He flags matters of controversy with brief explanatory asides in handy bottom margin footnotes, without encumbering the orderly account of sequential events. Thus, the exact route taken by Hannibal's expedition through the Alps -- a chronic problem for Second Punic War pedants -- is raised but not resolved in a concise annotation indicating the range of reliable estimates (pp 81-82). Likewise, the locus of the Battle of Cannae (footnote at p. 132) and the vexing issue of whether Hannibal should have, need have, or desired to, destroy Rome when -- and if -- it was in his grasp to do so receive similar treatment (footnote pp. 144-145 and again at p. 209). Then, at page 37, Baker embellishes Polybius to discuss the probable means by which Rome built, manned and trained a fleet capable of challenging Carthage, and the way in which Roman vanity and naiveté plagued early forays against the Phoenician seamen. Some trifling quirks may irritate, such as his whimsical characterization of Hannibal as "The Wizard".

Baker's treatment of Hannibal hews closely to the sparse, fragmentary ancient sources: Polybius, to whom he usually defers, and Livy, used as a

corrective or counterpoint where the author feels Polybius is off the mark. Appian, Plutarch and nineteenth or twentieth century analysts are also summoned. It is a straightforward sequential account. Baker was conscious that he was writing for people who probably never read the modern works he cited in his notes nor the venerable sources. He didn't "dumb down" his writing on that account though. He did try to cast it in a more contemporary vernacular, rather than the painstaking bombastic prose of scrupulous pedagogues. His learning is apparent, yet he wears it lightly.

The outmoded, leisurely phraseology of the 1920s sometimes sounds a bit quaint to readers of 2000, but as one progresses through the book it becomes less jarring, much like a patriarch telling a morality tale to his grandchildren. Nonetheless, several annoying generalities and passages of hazy rhetoric do creep in. For example, in his preface, Baker sets out his goal as using Hannibal to explain "the causes and processes by which the world we know was founded". It is this insistence on illustrating the evolution of modern politics through the struggle between Carthage, incarnated by Hannibal, and Rome that sometimes detracts from the otherwise articulate delineation of the military contest. Later in the preface, Baker tells us that Hannibal's command style contrasted sharply with that of Rome, the former being personal and somewhat despotic and dependent upon individual genius, charisma and the commonality of race among the Carthaginian ethnic group. In contrast, Baker explains, Rome fought under a system guided by men working through a "collegial or senatorial" federation. Rome was to borrow its communications, command and control system from Hannibal, as personified in his eventual nemesis, Scipio Africanus. This exegesis takes up four and half pages in the preface and is referred to again several times in the main text in equally verbose terms. Again, at pages 51-55, Baker sets out to describe the opposing military forces on the eve of war. He does so in a rather re-

dundant and nebulous discussion of ethnic characteristics, mind-set and psychology of the Roman versus the Carthaginian. A mere few sentences would have sufficed to make his rather ambiguous point that Carthage pitted "technical specialization" against Rome's "political unity". Members of this list, I am sure, would prefer hard data on the contending forces and fighting styles rather than this 19th century mode of racial and national profiling. However, Baker then goes on to describe the fitting out of the new Roman fleet, the blockade of Carthaginian ports in Sicily and the Battle of the Aegates (241 BC), and the pace picks up. The passage of the Alps (the nitpicking debate over the route is handled in a succinct, but informative footnote), the entry into Italy and the battle of the Trebia all are dealt with in a brisk and vivid recital conveying a sense of drama and suspense (pp 80-90).

Of course, Baker's account misses the scholarship on the Punic Wars since 1929, particularly the rich compendium in Walbank's *Historical Commentary on Polybius*. Nonetheless, he is careful to highlight the then-current points of controversy, footnoting the passages at issue and then weighing in with his own opinion. More often than not, he balances the several ancient sources against one another, giving sound reasons for his preference of one over the other, or, in some cases, reconciling the differences. There are sufficient references to secondary accounts: Colonel T.A. Dodge's 1890s military critique of Hannibal's contribution to the "art of war," learned chapters in the then-latest edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* as well as specialized journals in Classics and ancient history and foreign language works, such as Kromayer's distinguished study of ancient battlefields. Baker is equally at ease with descriptions of battles, organization or strategy, and he enjoys comparing the political features of Hannibal's world with those of his own era. The marginal topical sub-head-

ings, an archaic though welcome device, help the reader to follow the course of events.

In short, the book is a mixed bag. On balance, it is a solid account of the military aspects of the Second Punic War in the modern sense of economic and social context. The psycho-social meditations disconcert the reader but don't ruin the overall effect of a well-told tale. Those familiar with the "big picture" who are looking for a study concentrating on strategy and combat techniques had best acquire Lazenby's monograph or Peddie's illustrated battle book. Baker is a congenial, if somewhat loquacious schoolmaster who seeks to familiarize the intelligent neophyte with the epic struggle between Carthage and Rome. A pleasant weekend away from the tube with his book would serve the inquisitive non-specialist well.

Notes

[1]. Gavin De Beer. *Alps and Elephants: Hannibal's March*. NY: Dutton, 1956, and *Hannibal: Challenging Rome's Supremacy*. NY: Viking, 1969; Harold Lamb. *Hannibal: One Man Against Rome*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958; Dennis Proctor. *Hannibal's March in History*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971.

[2]. J.F. Lazenby. *Hannibal's War*. Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1978, reprinted with new preface, Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998; John Peddie. *Hannibal's War*. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1997; Serge Lancel. *Hannibal*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998 is translated from the 1995 French original and furnishes a needed Carthaginian perspective. All of our extant primary sources reflect Romano-centric biases. T. Cornell, B. Rankov, and P. Sabin, "The Second Punic War: A Reappraisal." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Supplement 67 (London, 1996). There are several books focusing on the Punic Wars that similarly present a good military critique of Hannibal, prominent among which are Field Marshall Nigel Bagnall's *The Punic Wars*,

(1990) and Brian Craven's similarly titled 1980 work. Both Bagnall and Craven emphasize the battles and strategies.

[3]. Ernie D. Bradford, *Hannibal*. NY: McGraw-Hill, 1981; Leonard Cottrell. *Hannibal, Enemy of Rome*. NY: Holt, 1961. John Prevas. *Hannibal Crosses The Alps*. Rockville Center, N.Y.: Sarpedon, 1998.

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