Preface

January 10th, the seven-hundred-and-fifth year since the foundation of Rome, the forty-ninth before the birth of Christ. The sun had long set behind the Apennine mountains. Lined up in full marching order, soldiers from the 13th Legion stood massed in the dark. Bitter the night may have been, but they were well used to extremes. For eight years they had been following the governor of Gaul on campaign after bloody campaign, through snow, through summer heat, to the margins of the world. Now, returned from the barbarous wilds of the north, they found themselves poised on a very different frontier. Ahead of them flowed a narrow stream. On the legionaries' side was the province of Gaul; on the far side Italy, and the road that led to Rome. Take that road, however, and the soldiers of the 13th Legion would be committing a deadly offence, breaking not only the limits of their province, but also the sternest laws of the Roman people. They would, in effect, be declaring civil war. Yet this was a catastrophe for which the legionaries, by marching to the border, had shown themselves fully steeled. As they stamped their feet against the cold, they waited for the trumpeters to summon them to action. To shoulder arms, to advance – to cross the Rubicon.

But when would the summons come? Faint in the night, its waters swollen by mountain snows, the stream could be heard, but still no blast of trumpets. The soldiers of the 13th strained their ears. They were not used to being kept waiting. Normally, when battle threatened, they would move and strike like lightning. Their general, the governor of Gaul, was a man celebrated for his qualities

of dash, surprise and speed. Not only that, but he had issued them with the order to cross the Rubicon that very afternoon. So why, now they had finally arrived at the border, had they been brought to a sudden halt? Few could see their general in the darkness, but to his staff officers, gathered around him, he appeared in a torment of irresolution. Rather than gesture his men onwards, Gaius Julius Caesar instead gazed into the turbid waters of the Rubicon, and said nothing. And his mind moved upon silence.

The Romans had a word for such a moment. '*Discrimen*', they called it – an instant of perilous and excruciating tension, when the achievements of an entire lifetime might hang in the balance. The career of Caesar, like that of any Roman who aspired to greatness, had been a succession of such crisis points. Time and again he had hazarded his future – and time and again he had emerged triumphant. This, to the Romans, was the very mark of a man. Yet the dilemma which confronted Caesar on the banks of the Rubicon was uniquely agonising – and all the more so for being the consequence of his previous successes. In less than a decade he had forced the surrender of 800 cities, 300 tribes and the whole of Gaul – and yet excessive achievement, to the Romans, might be a cause for alarm as well as celebration. They were the citizens of a republic, after all, and no one man could be permitted to put his fellows forever in the shade. Caesar's enemies, envious and fearful, had long been manoeuvring to deprive him of his command. Now, at last, in the winter of 49, they had succeeded in backing him into a corner. For Caesar, the moment of truth had finally arrived. Either he could submit to the law, surrender his command, and face the ruin of his career – or he could cross the Rubicon.

'The die is cast.'* Only as a gambler, in a gambler's fit of passion,

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* Usually quoted in Latin – '*alea iacta est*' – but in fact lifted from the Athenian playwright Menander, and spoken by Caesar in Greek. See Plutarch, *Pompey*, 60 and *Caesar*, 32.

was Caesar finally able to bring himself to order his legionaries to advance. The stakes had proved too high for rational calculation. Too imponderable as well. Sweeping into Italy, Caesar knew that he was risking world war, for he had confessed as much to his companions, and shuddered at the prospect. Clear-sighted as he was, however, not even Caesar could anticipate the full consequences of his decision. In addition to 'crisis point', '*discrimen*' had a further meaning: 'dividing line'. This was, in every sense, what the Rubicon would prove to be. By crossing it, Caesar did indeed engulf the world in war, but he also helped to bring about the ruin of Rome's ancient freedoms, and the establishment, upon their wreckage, of a monarchy – events of primal significance for the history of the West. Long after the Roman Empire itself had collapsed, the opposites delineated by the Rubicon – liberty and despotism, anarchy and order, republic and autocracy – would continue to haunt the imaginings of Rome's successors. Narrow and obscure the stream may have been, so insignificant that its very location was ultimately forgotten, yet its name is remembered still. No wonder. So fateful was Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon that it has come to stand for every fateful step taken since.

With it, an era of history passed away. Once, there had been free cities dotted throughout the Mediterranean. In the Greek world, and in Italy too, these cities had been inhabited by men who identified themselves not as the subjects of a pharaoh or a king of kings, but as citizens, and who proudly boasted of the values that distinguished them from slaves – free speech, private property, rights before the law. Gradually, however, with the rise of new empires, first those of Alexander the Great and his successors, and then of Rome, the independence of such citizens everywhere had been stifled. By the first century BC, there was only one free city left, and that was Rome herself. And then Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the Republic imploded, and none was left at all.

As a result, a thousand years of civic self-government were brought to an end, and not for another thousand, and more, would it become a living reality again. Since the Renaissance there have been many attempts to ford back across the Rubicon, to return to its far bank, to leave autocracy behind. The English, American and French revolutions were all consciously inspired by the example of the Roman Republic. 'As to rebellion in particular against monarchy,' Thomas Hobbes complained, 'one of the most frequent causes of it is the reading of the books of policy, and histories of the ancient Greeks, and Romans.'[1] Not, of course, that the desirability of a free republic was the only lesson to be drawn from the dramas of Roman history. It was no less a figure than Napoleon, after all, who went from consul to emperor, and throughout the nineteenth century the word most commonly applied to Bonapartist regimes was 'Caesarist'. By the 1920s and 1930s, when republics everywhere appeared to be collapsing, those crowing over their ruin were quick to point out the parallels with the death-throes of their ancient predecessor. In 1922 Mussolini deliberately propagated the myth of a heroic, Caesar-like march on Rome. Nor was he the only man to believe that a new Rubicon had been crossed. 'The brown shirt would probably not have existed without the black shirt,' Hitler later acknowledged. 'The march on Rome was one of the turning points of history.'[2]

With fascism, a long tradition in Western politics reached a hideous climax, and then expired. Mussolini was the last world leader to be inspired by the example of ancient Rome. The fascists, of course, had thrilled to its cruelty, its swagger, its steel, but nowadays even its noblest ideals, the ideals of active citizenship that once so moved Thomas Jefferson, have passed out of fashion. Too stern, too humourless, too redolent of cold showers. Nothing, in our aggressively postmodern age, could be more of a turn-off than the classical. Hero-worshipping the Romans is just *so* nineteenth century. We have been liberated, as John Updike once put it, 'from all those

oppressive old Roman values'.[3] No longer, as they were for centuries, are they regarded as a mainspring of our modern civic rights. Few pause to wonder why, in a continent unimagined by the ancients, a second Senate should sit upon a second Capitol Hill. The Parthenon may still gleam effulgent in our imaginings, but the Forum glimmers barely at all.

And yet – we flatter ourselves, in the democracies of the West, if we trace our roots back to Athens alone. We are also, for good as well as ill, the heirs of the Roman Republic. Had the title not already been taken, I would have called this book *Citizens* – for they are its protagonists, and the tragedy of the Republic's collapse is theirs. The Roman people too, in the end, grew tired of antique virtues, preferring the comforts of easy slavery and peace. Rather bread and circuses than endless internecine wars. As the Romans themselves recognised, their freedom had contained the seeds of its own ruin, a reflection sufficient to inspire much gloomy moralising under the rule of a Nero or a Domitian. Nor, in the centuries since, has it ever lost its power to unsettle.

Of course, to insist that Roman liberty had once been something more than a high-sounding sham is not to claim that the Republic was ever a paradise of social democracy. It was not. Freedom and egalitarianism, to the Romans, were very different things. Only slaves on the chain gang were truly equal. For a citizen, the essence of life was competition; wealth and votes the accepted measures of success. On top of that, of course, the Republic was a superpower, with a reach and preponderance quite new in Western history. Yet none of this – even once it has been admitted – necessarily diminishes the relevance of the Republic to our own times. Just the opposite, it might be thought.

Indeed, since I started writing this book, the comparison of Rome to the modern-day United States has become something of a cliché. For the historian, the experience of being overtaken by current

affairs is more common than might be thought. It is often the case that periods which have appeared foreign and remote can come suddenly, disconcertingly, into focus. The classical world in particular, so similar to ours, so utterly strange, has always had this kaleidoscopic quality. A few decades ago, in the late 1930s, the great Oxford classicist Ronald Syme saw in the rise to power of the Caesars a 'Roman revolution', a prefiguring of the age of the fascist and communist dictators. So Rome has always been interpreted, and reinterpreted, in the light of the world's convulsions. Syme was heir to a long and honourable tradition, one stretching all the way back to Machiavelli, who drew from the history of the Republic lessons both for his own native city of Florence, and for that namesake of the Republic's destroyer, Cesare Borgia. 'Prudent men are wont to say – and this not rashly or without good ground – that he who would foresee what has to be should reflect on what has been, for everything that happens in the world at any time has a genuine resemblance to what happened in ancient times.'[4] If there are periods when this claim can seem outlandish, then there are periods when it does not – and the present, surely, is one of them. Rome was the first and – until recently – the only republic ever to rise to a position of world power, and it is indeed hard to think of an episode of history that holds up a more intriguing mirror to our own. Nor is it only the broad contours of geopolitics, of globalisation and the *pax Americana*, that can be glimpsed, albeit faint and distorted, in the glass. Our fads and obsessions too, from koi carp to Mockney to celebrity chefs, cannot help but inspire, in the historian of the Roman Republic, a certain sense of *déjà vu*.

Yet parallels can be deceptive. The Romans, it goes without saying, existed under circumstances – physical, emotional, intellectual – profoundly different from our own. What strikes us as recognisable about aspects of their civilisation may be so – but not always. Often, in fact, the Romans can be strangest when they

appear most familiar. A poet mourning the cruelty of his mistress, or a father his dead daughter, these may seem to speak to us directly of something permanent in human nature, and yet how alien, how utterly alien a Roman's assumptions about sexual relations, or family life, would appear to us. So too the values that gave breath to the Republic itself, the desires of its citizens, the rituals and codes of their behaviour. Understand these and much that strikes us as abhorrent about the Romans, actions which to our way of thinking are self-evidently crimes, can be, if not forgiven, then at least better understood. The spilling of blood in an arena, the obliteration of a great city, the conquest of the world – these, to the Roman way of thinking, might be regarded as glorious accomplishments. Only by seeing why can we hope to fathom the Republic itself.

Naturally, it is a hazardous and quixotic enterprise to attempt to enter the mindset of a long-vanished age. As it happens, the last twenty years of the Republic are the best documented in Roman history, with what is, for the classicist, a wealth of evidence – speeches, memoirs, even private correspondence. Yet even these only gleam as riches for being set against such darkness. One day perhaps, when the records of the twentieth century AD have grown as fragmentary as those of ancient Rome, a history of the Second World War will be written which relies solely upon the broadcasts of Hitler and the memoirs of Churchill. It will be one cut off from whole dimensions of experience: no letters from the front, no combatants' diaries. The silence will be one with which the ancient historian is all too familiar, for, to twist the words of Shakespeare's Fluellen, 'there is no tiddle taddle nor pibble pabble in Pompey's camp'. Nor in the peasant's hut, nor in the slum dweller's shanty, nor in the field slave's barrack. Women, it is true, can sometimes be overheard, but only the very noblest, and even those invariably when quoted – or misquoted – by men. In Roman history to search for details of anyone outside the ruling class is to pan for gold.

Even the narrative of great events and exceptional men, however magnificent it may appear, is in truth a mutilated ruin, like an aqueduct on the Campagna, arches striding, and then, abruptly, fields. The Romans themselves had always dreaded that this might be their destiny. As Sallust, their first great historian, put it, 'there can be no doubting that Fortune is the mistress of all she surveys, the creature of her own caprices, choosing to broadcast the fame of one man while leaving that of another in darkness, without any regard for the scale of what they might both have achieved'.[5] Ironically, the fate of his own writings was to illustrate this bitter reflection. A follower of Caesar, Sallust composed a history of the years immediately preceding his patron's rise to power, a work unanimously praised by its readers as definitive. Had it only survived, then we would have had a contemporary's account of a decade, from 78 to 67 BC, rich in decisive and dramatic events. As it is, of Sallust's masterwork, only scattered fragments remain. From these, and from other scraps of information, a narrative may still be reconstructed – but what is gone can never be repaired.

No wonder that classicists tend to be nervous of sounding overly dogmatic. Write so much as a sentence about the ancient world and the temptation is immediately to qualify it. Even when the sources are at their most plentiful, uncertainties and discrepancies crop up everywhere. Take, for example, the celebrated event after which this book is titled. That the crossing happened as I described it is probable but by no means certain. One source tells us that the Rubicon was forded after sunrise. Others imply that the advance guard had already passed into Italy by the time that Caesar himself arrived on the river's bank. Even the date can only be deduced from extraneous events. A scholarly consensus has formed around 10 January, but any date between then and the 14th has been argued for – and besides, thanks to the vagaries of the pre-Julian calendar, what the Romans called January was in fact our November.

In short, the reader should take it as a rule of thumb that many statements of fact in this book could plausibly be contradicted by an opposite interpretation. This is not, I hasten to add, a counsel of despair. Rather, it is a necessary preface to a narrative that has been pieced together from broken shards, but in such a way as to conceal some of the more obvious joins and gaps. That it is possible to do this, that a coherent story may indeed be made out of the events of the Republic's fall, has always been, to the ancient historian, one of the great appeals of the period. I certainly see no reason to apologise for it. Following a lengthy spell in the dog-house, narrative history is now squarely back in fashion – and even if, as many have argued, it can only function by imposing upon the random events of the past an artificial pattern, then that in itself need be no drawback. Indeed, it may help to bring us closer to the mindset of the Romans themselves. Rare, after all, was the citizen who did not fancy himself the hero of his own history. This was an attitude that did much to bring Rome to disaster, but it also gave to the epic of the Republic's fall its peculiarly lurid and heroic hue. Barely a generation after it had occurred, men were already shaking their heads in wonderment, astonished that such a time, and such giants, could have been. A half-century later and the panegyrist of the Emperor Tiberius, Velleius Paterculus, could exclaim that 'It seems an almost superfluous task, to draw attention to an age when men of such extraordinary character lived'[6] – and then promptly write it up. He knew, as all Romans knew, that it was in action, in great deeds and remarkable accomplishments, that the genius of his people had been most gloriously displayed. Accordingly, it was through narrative that this genius could best be understood.

More than two millennia after the Republic's collapse, the 'extraordinary character' of the men – and women – who starred in its drama still astonishes. But so too – less well known perhaps than a Caesar, or a Cicero, or a Cleopatra, but more remarkable

than any of them – does the Roman Republic itself. If there is much about it we can never know, then still there is much that can be brought back to life, its citizens half emerging from antique marble, their faces illumined by a background of gold and fire, the glare of an alien yet sometimes eerily familiar world.