



WELCOME TO THE APRIL MEETING, HISTORIANS!

Our next meeting is Tuesday, April 2 at 6:30 to discuss *Rubicon: The Last Days of the Roman Republic* by Tom Holland published in 2003. Tom Holland is a highly regarded British popular historian. A graduate of the University of Cambridge, he has written histories of Rome and of Islam. He is also a best-selling novelist. And one of the strengths of *Rubicon* is Holland's ability to make history into an exciting narrative. Mind you, the story of the end of the Roman Republic lends itself to popular narrative. It is a story of political intrigue and big personalities. It is the story of the Roman elite giving over their civic responsibilities and personal freedoms to

an emperor. It is not the story of the United States. Holland, like Mary Beard in *SPQR*, reminds us that the Romans were very different from us in the way that they understood the world culturally, morally, and politically. Yet their story affects how we understand civic responsibility and accountability today. British classical historian Richard Miles says that *Rubicon* passes the "so what?" test. When you finish the book, you know that you have learned something that matters. Tom Holland makes that lesson a thrilling narrative.

The last century of the Roman Republic is a tumultuous period about which we actually know very little. Like other historians, Holland relies heavily on the writings of Cicero. Tying these writings to the known historical events allows Holland to develop a sweeping narrative of the tremendous changes that rocked the Roman Republic as a competitive oligarchy gave way to rule by one man. Ancient Roman institutions were dismantled by their own members. Cicero provides a unique perspective as he sometimes viewed these changes with horror and sometimes was an active part of the change, if only to put forward his own political career. Holland uses this perspective as well as the few other documents of the time to paint a picture of the flesh and blood men who carried out these changes as Rome moved from a regional power to true superpower status.

Above all else, *Rubicon* is the story of a cast of glorious characters, names known to us through history: Caesar, Cicero, Sulla, Pompey, Cato, Spartacus, Cleopatra, Brutus, Antony. This is a story of politicians and generals, slaves and gigolos. It is the fascinating details about these characters that will stay with you. Did you know that Caesar was a fashionista? Pompey was known for deeply loving the wife to whom he was currently married. Crassus was the man with the money who knew that they erected statues to generals, not the man with the cash. Hence his hatred of Pompey. Holland paints vivid portraits of people whose motivations we understand even though their world was very different from ours. But the major character in *Rubicon* is the Roman Republic in all its complexity and glory.

As you read, remember that our American post-industrial world is very different from the Roman world. However, this does not mean that we cannot learn valuable lessons from the steps that led from the Republic to the Empire. Holland does a masterful job of explaining the Roman institutions that grounded the Republic. How were these institutions dismantled from within and why? What role did giving increased power to the mob play in the end of the Republic and how could the people have protected the Republic against the aristocrats in the Senate? Which politicians are most responsible for the move to empire and why? What are the strengths and weaknesses in men like Crassus, Pompey, Cato, and Caesar?

I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday, April 2 at 6:30 to tell stories of great men and the end of an era. Come prepared for a lively political discussion to rival the talk in the Roman Forum during the tumultuous days of *Rubicon: The Last Days of the Roman Republic*.

Donna McBride