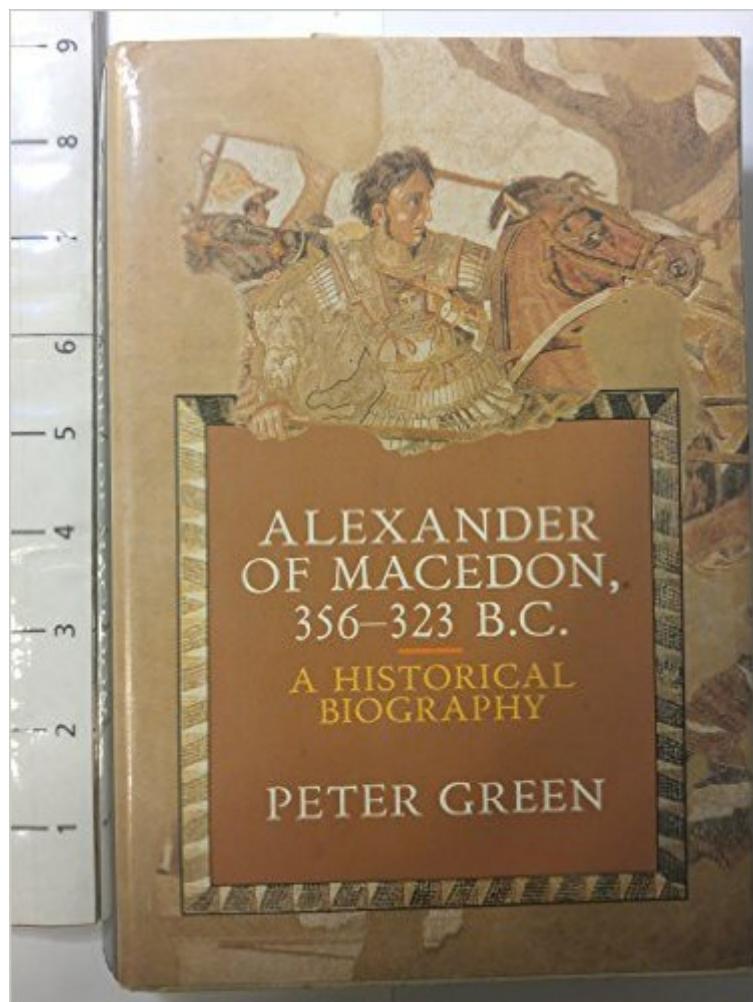


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Alexander Of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.: A Historical Biography



Synopsis

Until recently, popular biographers and most scholars viewed Alexander the Great as a genius with a plan, a romantic figure pursuing his vision of a united world. His dream was at times characterized as a benevolent interest in the brotherhood of man, sometimes as a brute interest in the exercise of power. Green, a Cambridge-trained classicist who is also a novelist, portrays Alexander as both a complex personality and a single-minded general, a man capable of such diverse expediencies as patricide or the massacre of civilians. Green describes his Alexander as "not only the most brilliant (and ambitious) field commander in history, but also supremely indifferent to all those administrative excellences and idealistic yearnings foisted upon him by later generations, especially those who found the conqueror, tout court, a little hard upon their liberal sensibilities." This biography begins not with one of the universally known incidents of Alexander's life, but with an account of his father, Philip of Macedonia, whose many-territoried empire was the first on the continent of Europe to have an effectively centralized government and military. What Philip and Macedonia had to offer, Alexander made his own, but Philip and Macedonia also made Alexander form an important context for understanding Alexander himself. Yet his origins and training do not fully explain the man. After he was named hegemon of the Hellenic League, many philosophers came to congratulate Alexander, but one was conspicuous by his absence: Diogenes the Cynic, an ascetic who lived in a clay tub. Piqued and curious, Alexander himself visited the philosopher, who, when asked if there was anything Alexander could do for him, made the famous reply, "Don't stand between me and the sun." Alexander's courtiers jeered, but Alexander silenced them: "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes." This remark was as unexpected in Alexander as it would be in a modern leader. For the general reader, the book, redolent with gritty details and fully aware of Alexander's darker side, offers a gripping tale of Alexander's career. Full backnotes, fourteen maps, and chronological and genealogical tables serve readers with more specialized interests.

Book Information

Hardcover: 617 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; Revised & enlarged edition (August 5, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520071654

ISBN-13: 978-0520071650

Product Dimensions: 1.5 x 5.8 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.9 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (116 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #469,885 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Greece #505 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Greece #784 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Political History

Customer Reviews

Only occasionally have I read a work of history that's in the "can't put down" category. DISTANT MIRROR by Barbara Tuchman, MEN TO MATCH MY MOUNTAINS by Irving Stone, and Shelby Foote's monumental Civil War trilogy come to mind. ALEXANDER OF MACEDON, 356-323 B.C. by Peter Green is now another. This material first appeared as ALEXANDER THE GREAT in 1970. This particular volume, a revision and expansion of that earlier book, is the second reprint (1991) of the title first published in 1974. For the sake of background, the author necessarily begins his masterpiece with Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon, whose achievement was to unify Macedonia and coerce the Greek states to the south to join with him in an Hellenic League. But, after Philip is assassinated on page 105, it's all Alexander as he marches his army on a peripatetic route of conquest against the Persian Empire throughout Asia Minor and the Middle East as far as present-day West Pakistan - and then back again. Twenty-five thousand miles - the circumference of the Earth - in eleven years. I kept turning the pages to see what he was going to do next. In his "Preface to the 1991 Reprint", Green makes it clear that his study of Alexander is a work in progress, and that even this book needs further revision in the light of new information. However, as flawed as the author may consider his ALEXANDER OF MACEDON to be, his masterful distillation of 17 pages worth of ancient and modern sources makes the narrative of Alexander's life sing. Green's prose is crisp and touched with a dry humor, and it never bogs down. Though Green concludes that Alexander is "perhaps ... the most incomparable general the world has ever seen", he doesn't spare his subject from charges of megalomania and tyranny.

I grew up in the age of an idealized Alexander. First was the Robert Rossen film starring Richard Burton. It was 46 years ago, and though I don't remember much detail I do remember Alexander cutting through the Gordian Knot, his affection for the warhorse Bucephalus, and the deaths of Hephaestion, and Alexander's soldiers walking past his death bed. I was struck by Alexander's loyalty, and his emotional depth. Next came a voracious reading (and later re-readings) of Mary Renault's romantic trilogy. The brave son, the bold warrior, the loyal friend - founder of cities, lover of women and men, etc., etc; heady stuff for a boy entering adolescence.

And though my intellectual interest in Alexander waned, his life as reflected in those works marked me. Not too long ago I read "The Soul of Battle" by Victor David Hanson and came to learn that not everyone held Alexander in the same esteem. I think Hanson may have even called him a "butcher." It finally dawned on me, of course, world conquest is not an act of loving kindness. A man could not be responsible for that much death and destruction and not be a brute. I figured I had to read something other than fiction to get a more accurate accounting of my boyhood hero. The .com site ran a review of "Alexander of Macedon" that caught my eye with the claim that Peter Green's biography was "one of the finest." I was immediately pleased with the title, "Alexander of Macedon" rather than the expected, "Alexander the Great." The book is not a difficult read, in fact, for history it's often quite breezy. The Alexander portrayed is no less a wonder than I always thought, but much more a human. Alexander's greatness, according to Mr. Green, was somewhat erratic, as he could be both great and petty but not in equal measures.

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