An Imperial Possession

I have just crossed London West to East. My train left from a small settlement (Brentford) where Caesar was said to have forded the River Thames. Marching down Marylebone Road I counted 26 neo-Classical columns then my mobile rang; a TV researcher asking why film fetishises the Roman experience. Past the reconstructed remains of a Temple of Mithras in Queen Victoria Street, here a billboard announced that new Romano-British artefacts had been unearthed by London developers, adding to those recently turfed up by the Jubilee line extension (one favourite a lamp in the shape of a soldier's foot, the wick lit on the big toe). It was a forty-minute, Romanish journey that sang out Vivat Londinium! Romanis Victoria!

In truth I had also travelled through Anglo-Saxon Lundenwic, across the pre-historic Tamesa and via Viking battlefields around the Bank of England. Yet we seem less enthused by these tuftier DNA strands in our genetic make-up than we are by the 400-year span that is Roman-Britain.

As David Mattingly convincingly points out there are two reasons why our Roman inheritance is unavoidable. Because Romans landed on an island with a deep past but no formal 'history' the invaders abhorred that void and filled it: the province of Britannia has more textual and archaeological clues than any other in the Empire (and given that the Empire at its peak stretched from the Clyde to Ethiopia that is quite something). Then in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries Rome's 'Enlightening' Empire became a touchstone for Britain's own; copies of the Gallic Wars plus Virgil's exhortations; 'make your task to rule nations…to impose ordered ways…to spare those who have submitted and subdue the arrogant' were packed into the Gladstone bags of our own empire-builders.

Mattingley is, transparently, troubled by imperial ambition - 'for the majority of Britons, it is clear that in the short term the Romans were very bad news" – and has written his 622 page book to encourage us to think outside the Roman box; in fact to give that box a contemporary dimension.

Mattingly's point is twofold. Firstly, and quite rightly he explains that previous interpretations of Roman-might have rested on literature and high-end material evidence; inscriptions; statues; Hadrian's Wall. Wide-ranging archaeology (from the 100,000 Romano-British sites in the UK) now offers a richer and more subtle palate. Boudicaa's revolt is evidenced not just by the works of Tacitus and Dio Cassius but by blackened coins warped in the warrior-queen's furious flames and, (despite the fact that 'resistance is harder to demonstrate archaeologically than conformity') within a wider schema of dissatisfaction: at one point a tenth of Rome's armed forces occupied the province of Britannia. The natives put up a more tenacious fight than official sources imply.

Secondly Mattingly reminds us that indigenous characters and characteristics feature only when they tangle with Rome. We remember the determined rebel Caractacus and his Judas, Queen Quartimandua, because they impacted on imperial interests. Popular native gods were Romanised (interpretatio in Tacitus) and while the Sulis-

Minerva blend appears smooth this was not a marriage of equals. Pre-Roman divinities are frequently yoked to that bully-boy Mars or are simply obliterated. The Imperial Possession's theme is the power attendant on ownership; ownership of names, of territories and of history. We still study Roman Britain rather than Britain in the time of imperial Rome.

His is a candid argument straightforwardly put: 'Another group of elite Britons were the druides, about whom much rubbish has been written.' There is so much detailed evidence here the reading experience can be a little dense: one sunny afternoon I found my mind wandering as I embarked on yet another page of cohort-statistics. Still, attention was snapped back by a clever illustration mapping the concentration of Roman garrisons throughout the 400 years of occupation. A stark indicator of the groping reach of Rome's Iron Fist.

The book encourages the reader not to feel nostalgia for a land filled with bath-houses, villas, strigils, apples, cherries and straight, empty roads. The benefits of empire were regional and predominantly available to representatives of Rome. In a sub-conscious 'don't mention the war moment' we're also reminded just how many Germans (from Germania) ran Britain – particularly during the last 150 years of occupation. (And those north of Watford will not be pleased to hear that in 213 AD the country was divided into two sections, Britannia superior controlled by London and Britannia inferior).

I don't entirely share Mattingly's testy disapproval of the Roman occupation of 'Britannia perdomita'. There are drawbacks as well as benefits to insularity. Human history is an unbroken round of population movement, and displacement. We don't have documentary evidence for the oppression experienced within Iron Age communities: just as we shouldn't romanticise Roman Britain nor should we whitewash Britain BC. Opportunistic Iron Age aristocrats made pilgrimages to Rome to better themselves and to promote their own vigorous slave trade (I bet they didn't expect to be invaded in return.)

Mattingly is refreshingly honest about his mission. New evidence has suggested a new orthodoxy and he builds up his argument confidently: as he does so he propels us towards an important, very un-Roman activity. The need to pursue not just the strong and the charismatic (who could fail to be delighted by a lamp in the shape of a human foot) but to peer into a scanter historical landscape: to follow and appreciate those whose footfall is light.