

THE CONQUEST OF GAUL



SCALE IN ENGLISH MILES
0 50 100 200 300

AUL

◆ THE BARNES & NOBLE LIBRARY OF ESSENTIAL READING ◆

THE CONQUEST OF GAUL



JULIUS CAESAR

TRANSLATED BY REV. F. P. LONG

INTRODUCTION BY CHERYL WALKER

CONTENTS

THE BARNES & NOBLE
LIBRARY OF ESSENTIAL READING

Introduction and Suggested Reading
© 2005 by Barnes & Noble, Inc.

Originally published circa 49 BCE

This 2005 edition published by Barnes & Noble, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Barnes & Noble, Inc.

100 First Avenue

LIST OF MAPS	IX
INTRODUCTION	XI
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	XIX

BOOK I

SECTION I. THE HELVETIAN WAR	1
------------------------------	---

SECTION II. ARIOVISTUS AND THE GERMANS	20
----------------------------------------	----

BOOK II

THE CONQUEST OF THE BELGAE	41
----------------------------	----

BOOK III

LIST OF MAPS

BOOK IV

SECTION I. THE USIPETES AND TENCTERI 81

SECTION II. FIRST EXPEDITION TO BRITAIN 92

BOOK V

SECTION I. SECOND EXPEDITION TO BRITAIN 103

SECTION II. ATTACK ON THE WINTER CAMPS 118

BOOK VI

SECTION I. PUNITIVE EXPEDITIONS IN THE NORTHEAST 141

SECTION II. ETHNOGRAPHY OF GAUL AND GERMANY 149

SECTION III. THE HUNTING OF AMBIORIX 159

BOOK VII

SECTION I. THE RISING OF VERGINGETORIX 170

SECTION II. THE SIEGE OF GERGOVIA 189

SECTION III. LABIENUS AND THE PARISI II 207

SECTION IV. ALESIA AND THE END 212

ENDNOTES 235

GAUL

GERGOVIA

CAMPAIGN OF LABIENUS AGAINST THE PARISI II

ALESIA

FRONTISPIECE

194

208

217

INTRODUCTION

AMONG THE MOST DURABLE AND ENGAGING TEXTS IN WORLD literature, Julius Caesar's *Conquest of Gaul* tells how he and his legions conquered much of modern France in less than a decade (58–51 BCE), despite determined resistance. Perhaps the most famous Roman ever, Gaius Julius Caesar created a legacy which has resonated, for good or ill, throughout Western culture. Architect of an imperial system, eponymous sponsor of a reformed calendar system, orator second only to Cicero, conqueror of Gaul: Surely those accomplishments in the diverse fields of politics, applied mathematics, rhetoric, and military science would justify his eminence. Nevertheless, the high literary quality and historical value of this seemingly modest account match its exciting story of diplomatic maneuverings, shifting alliances, and military actions; the final chapters culminate in the revolt of the united Gallic tribes under Vercingetorix, France's first national hero, and are as compelling as any contemporary spy thriller.

Until his assumption of command in the Cisalpine and Transalpine provinces in 58 BCE, Julius Caesar's life and career had given few indications of the extraordinary man who, at his death in 44 BCE, ruled the Roman Empire and was shortly thereafter elevated to divine status. Born in 100 BCE to a distinguished, although not politically prominent, patrician family, Caesar associated himself from his teens with the great general Marius, the husband of his aunt Julia and the head of a faction (the so-called *populares*) which struggled against the conservative senators (the so-called *Optimates*) for control

of the Roman State during the 80s BCE. Although the young Caesar flaunted his connections on at least two occasions, the public eulogy he delivered for Julia and his refusal to divorce the daughter of the Marian consul Cornelius Cinna at the request of the dictator Sulla, he survived the proscriptions and assassinations of this brutal era and seems to have enjoyed the standard aristocratic upbringing and early career path of the times: study, travel, riotous living, and scandalous sexual escapades. When in 63 BCE he decided to stand for the office of *pontifex maximus*, the elective priesthood which was typically awarded as the capstone for the most distinguished senior politician, he did so in the face of strong opposition from other candidates, especially in light of the fact that he had not even held the praetorship, much less the consulship, which was normally a political minimum. On the day of the election, after masterful political scheming and massive bribery, he kissed his mother before setting out and said, "Today, Mother, you will see your son either as high priest or as an exile." This neck-or-nothing attitude typified Caesar's political behavior for most of his career: he gambled on himself and his policies for high stakes, and his planning and organizational ability shortened the odds to favor him.

During his praetorship (62 BCE) and consulship (59 BCE) Caesar espoused positions and causes which excited great passion, and his methods alienated the *Optimates* even more than did his cooperation with Pompey and Crassus (the First Triumvirate). As compensation for his work in establishing Pompey's settlement in the East and in relieving Crassus' friends, the tax farmers of Asia, of their legal obligations, Caesar became governor of Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul for five years (58–53 BCE). From this not uncommon circumstance, Julius Caesar would generate the military forces and political clout which made him, first, a conqueror of the territory from Northern Italy to the far side of the English Channel, then a contender for world dominion in 49 BCE.

The Conquest of Gaul is a year-by-year account of this significant period, outlining each year's military campaigns as if from a slightly detached, albeit Roman, point of view; "Caesar" is the third-person general, the Romans are "our men," and there is no clear statement

of the authorial identity or purpose. Unlike post-retirement memoirs, evidently written up and published directly after the military campaigning season, in between his other responsibilities as provincial judge and governor and as Roman politician and statesman *in absentia*, each book appears as a largely self-contained unit, dealing with the particular events and characters as they arise. Thus there is no overarching analysis of the whole, no "grand scheme of conquest"; instead, each set of events triggers new factors, draws in new tribes and personnel, redirects and reshapes what seems to be the Roman reaction to foreign policies. From the rather unprepossessing start of the conquest in Caesar's refusal to allow the Helvetii free passage through the Roman province or through allied territory, we can chart how the Roman presence alters the local balance of power, opens up new possibilities in alliance and confrontation, and inevitably leads to the next boundary skirmish, until only the ocean and the difficulty of logistical support stop his advance in Britain. The revolt of Vercingetorix showcases the fortifications at Alesia, one of the most detailed descriptions of siege warfare and its skirmishing to survive antiquity (7.68–84); the subsequent battle and negotiations provide insight into specific protocols. Although each decision is presented as if according to its particular merits, and nowhere does the phrase "divide and conquer" occur, the continuous advance of Roman interests cannot be denied. Along the way we are treated to descriptions of military valor and cowardice, military ruses and routines, the daily activities of reconnaissance, gathering supplies, and coping with weather and topographical obstacles. At this level of detail it is difficult to deny the plausible historicity of the text; to lie or exaggerate such matters, which are of common knowledge to thousands of participants, particularly when many are in correspondence with friends in the capital, seems pointless.

Like its companion *The Civil Wars*, Caesar's *Conquest of Gaul* belongs technically to the genre of *commentarii*, a classification here containing elements of autobiography and memoirs, history, journalism, political pamphleteering, even occasional notes on natural history and geography. Yet this brilliant work by a major character on a pivotal event in Western history remains difficult to assess in terms

of either authorial agenda or target audience. Without other surviving prototypes of the genre or information of the Gallic campaigns, we are greatly hampered in judging Caesar's literary originality and accuracy, and his seemingly transparent style allows him to slip unobtrusively away from the reader.

Our scholarly suspicion and skepticism mostly focus on the selection of background material, description of motives, and arrangement. Reflexively and on principle, we cannot imagine that any author/participant, no matter how honest or conscientious, can describe events in a fashion untouched by the "personal baggage" of his own background, position, beliefs, and understanding; even historians who strive for such objectivity usually discover that cultural and linguistic assumptions wreak additional havoc. Caesar seems not to have ascribed to such lofty standards, and he had the added temptation of presenting himself to the Roman reading public in this stark narrative in a peculiarly restricted guise, one which spotlighted his military acumen and his decisive leadership. Yet, despite our skepticism, the lack of evidence precludes us from proving that Caesar in fact lied or distorted consciously what he knew to be true; the numerous examples of Gallic bravery and Roman error prevent us from asserting any such unsophisticated model. We may suspect the suppression of Caesar's own personal ambition as a motive or a downplaying of the degree of Celtic civilization and urbanization or the exaggeration of Ariovistus' arrogance in the breakdown of the Roman-German alliance, however whether these exceed acceptable parameters allowed to differences of opinion is impossible to judge. As Horace would say in the next generation, however, "the art is to conceal the art." The use of *The Conquest of Gaul* as a primer by generations of schoolchildren has partly obscured the deceptive simplicity of Caesar's language and style; their often-reluctant efforts to plumb the mysteries of a foreign language and cultural milieu have left the impression that this is an elementary text suitable for beginners and of primary concern to military buffs. Once we have recognized the inadequacy of this description, however, we must attempt to replace it with some better picture of the intended audience. This is no simple matter, as immediately the problems of literacy and performance

arise. The Roman literary experience was unlike our own. Instead of the visual, the Romans concentrated more on the auditory; until the fourth century CE, when St. Ambrose surprised his associates by reading without speaking aloud (St. Augustine, *Confessions* 6.3), literary texts belonged more to the open world of performance than to the closed circle of initiated literates. Thus the question of who can read is less compelling than whether one knows someone who can read and whether the text is available. (Moreover, the popularity of Caesar's contemporary Cicero should indicate the level of sophistication found in the Roman audience of the period; these were not times that suffered fools gladly.) Certainly the vocabulary and syntactical complexity are less rich than in Cicero's usual speeches, and that may reflect an attempt to target a less educated demographic than Cicero's. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the difference between a stand-alone narrative such as *The Conquest of Gaul* and one speech among many, as Cicero's typically were; when several previous speakers have laid out the facts and details, a less precise, more allusive vocabulary and a more elaborate sentence structure may be appreciated as a stylistic challenge, where a single text must first clarify the narrative line. Ultimately, we must conclude that the many attractions of *The Conquest of Gaul*—information on military and political strategy and practice, inspirational speeches on the cusp of battle, battlefield anecdotes, compelling historical narrative, exquisitely concise and precise diction—inhibit a definitive portrait of Caesar's intended reader.

After eight years of campaigning in Gaul (the first seven written up by Caesar, the eighth by his lieutenant Hirtius), Caesar went on to confront Pompey and his foes, the *Optimates*, particularly Cato the Younger. Five years (49–45 BCE) of civil wars ensued, marked by unparalleled horrors and heroics, as well as reforms in labor law, the calendar, debt management, and the establishment of colonies of military veterans. A year after that, Caesar was assassinated by members of his own inner circle. Even in an era known for larger-than-life characters, Caesar accomplished an extraordinary amount of work across several disciplines in an astonishingly brief time. The myth-making proceeded apace. During the 30s BCE Sallust, who had

served as governor of New Africa under Caesar in 45 BCE, wrote an historical monograph on the subject of the conspiracy of Catiline in 63 BCE, the year of Cicero's glorious consulship. Yet the consul here is at best a bit player, and the moment of dramatic truth is implausibly shared between the praetor-elect Caesar, speaking against the execution and on behalf of the imprisonment of the conspirators, and the inflexible tribune-elect Cato, insisting that the conspirators have forfeited their rights to due process and deserve summary execution. Already we see the elements of political propaganda in Caesar's championing of a *populatis* cause, due process, and Caesar's own reputation for clemency, the mythic confrontation between Cato's traditional values and the innovations to come, the historical realization that both belonged to a particular generation which could not last and that one outlived the other by less than two years. The political propaganda machinery of Caesar's adoptive heir Octavian, later the emperor Augustus, kept the memory of "his father the deified Julius" bright and intense through the early years of Octavian's career: although as the number of Caesar's beneficiaries diminished and Octavian developed his own following, the bond was allowed to weaken. Under the later Julio-Claudian emperors, there was a nostalgia for the "good old days" of the Republic, in which the civil wars and uprisings were forgotten and only the freedom and power of the ruling senators were recalled. In this imaginative recreation of the past, Julius Caesar figured as the ambitious, treacherous tyrant who, at the moment of victory in the civil wars, has his dining table pitched so he may see the faces and bodies of the fallen. Between these two extremes, the patriotic conquering general who expanded the Empire and the brutal autocrat who destroyed it with his ambition, the life and characterization of Caesar has become a political fable of great continuity and significance for Western thought, from Dante in the *Inferno* and the Renaissance play of Shakespeare to the use of the English *nom de plume* Junius, who attacked the policies of George III in the 1760s, and the biography of Douglas MacArthur called *American Caesar*.

With the exception of a few fragments and references, only *The Conquest of Gaul* and *The Civil Wars* have survived from a prolific and

gifted author. While we would not expect his numerous edicts and political memoranda to have transcended their medium, the lack of speeches and letters is more remarkable, as Tiro, the editor of Cicero's letters, is known to have collected the correspondence between the two, and Cicero's praise of Caesar's diction and delivery ought to have garnered some scholastic attention. The disappearance of a poem *The Journey*, produced during the course of a month-long trip to Spain, and the *Antitrala*, a scathing rebuttal to the laudatory works written after Cato's suicide in 46 BCE, may have done more for his reputation than their survival; Augustus suppressed some material believed to have been juvenile works. A two-volume treatise *On Analogy*, also missing, shows an unexpected direction to his scholarly interests. Finally, however, we must weigh *The Conquest of Gaul* on its own substantial merits, both as historical artifact and as literary product. As artifact, whatever its absolute value as factual history, and as literature, it encapsulates a vision of the Roman West at a pivotal moment in a compelling and thoughtful manner which defies both easy analysis and the attrition of time.

Cheryl Walker is Lecturer of Classical Studies at Brandeis University, where she teaches Greek and Latin, as well as ancient Greek and Roman history. She is the author of *Hostages in the Roman Republic* (forthcoming).