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The Fall Of Constantinople 1453 (Canto Classics)



Synopsis

This classic account shows how the fall of Constantinople in May 1453, after a siege of several weeks, came as a bitter shock to Western Christendom. The city's plight had been neglected, and negligible help was sent in this crisis. To the Turks, victory not only brought a new imperial capital, but guaranteed that their empire would last. To the Greeks, the conquest meant the end of the civilisation of Byzantium, and led to the exodus of scholars stimulating the tremendous expansion of Greek studies in the European Renaissance.

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Customer Reviews

Runciman's account of the Fall of Constantinople is an excellent book to read. Beginning with the Ottoman advance into Europe in the later 14th century, and ultimately ending with the City's capture in 1453, he weaves a story that is both historically accurate as well as emotionally moving. We read about the desperate attempts by the last Byzantine Emperors to look for help from an increasingly indifferent West. We note the internal strife between the Christian kingdoms of the Balkans, both Latin and Orthodox, that created disunity and allowed the Ottoman sultans to conquer territories one by one until Constantinople was completely surrounded and isolated. We also hear of the sad accounts of the conditions within this once great City that was hailed as the Eye of all the World. By the time of the City's capture, it was a hollow shell of its former glory. It is the last chapter in the thousand year history of Byzantium, and all its characters appear to face a noble and heroic end defending their capital. Yet, the Ottomans, Runciman says, brought a new breath of vitality to

Constantinople and its conquered territories. The City was rebuilt, and the Greeks survived as best they could, up until the early 20th century. Runciman also suggests the Ottoman Turks were the better conquerors than the Latins might have been since the Greeks and Slavs were allowed to keep their Orthodox faith and culture, something that might have been forcibly lost under the Papal West. With superb writing, excellent narration, and great historical analysis, Runciman has written a fantastic book, and one that has been the standard for decades now. Highly recommended

Sir Steven Runciman was one of the English language's (if not the world's) leading scholars of the Crusades and the Eastern Roman Empire, and this brief but powerful book shows why. Norwich and his popular-history volumes of Byzantine history may be a more contemporary, personality-driven look at the story, but nobody can match, in my opinion, Runciman for both breadth of scholarship and elegant, intelligent, and highly readable prose. Runciman shows that the fall of Constantinople to the Turks on May 29, 1453 (550 years ago today!) was both inevitable and of mostly marginal historical significance (except, of course, to the people of the city itself). It had always seemed to me an event of epochal importance -- history's pages finally slamming shut on the Roman Empire. But in literally his first sentence, Sir Steven disabuses us of this notion, or that the fall marked the close of the Middle Ages. Indeed, "only the Papacy and a few scholars and romanticists had been genuinely shocked at the thought of the great historic Christian city passing into the hands of the infidel" (p. 179). For the most part, it was part of the rising tide of Turkish conquest, alarming in a general way, but not immediately catastrophic to the dying empire's fickle co-religionists in the West. Runciman's narrative is engrossing, full of political tension, military conflict, and the religious disputes that always colored Byzantine history. His characterizations are insightful, his descriptions colorful, his writing elegiac -- at times even poetic -- well-sourced (both Christian and Muslim authorities are consulted), and frequently entertaining, even when discussing a sad and even horrific topic. His larger works may not be to everyone's taste (for topic more than style), but a short work like this one, on an interesting and oft-neglected theme, is a worthwhile read for any student of history. Highly recommended.

The story of Constantinople's fall is epic. It was the capital of the Byzantine Empire, which was, in actuality, the eastern half of the Roman Empire -- an empire which, according to many history books, "fell" in 476 A.D. In fact, only the western half of the empire succumbed to the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, and Vandals -- the eastern half of the empire survived for a thousand years, referred to as "Byzantine" by historians about the time of the Emperor, Heraclius (610-641 A.D.), in

deference to the fact that by that time the empire was largely Greek-speaking, and "Byzantium" was the original name of the site upon which Constantinople was built. Runciman tells the fascinating story of the fall of the city straightforwardly; he provides ample footnotes for the novice, and the volume also contains a number of useful maps. The book is especially good at capturing the impending sense of doom that enveloped Constantinople as the 15th century wore on - thanks to the religious schism between Latin and Orthodox Christianity, no help would be forthcoming from the West, and one can only admire the steely resolve of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI, who resolved to resist the onslaught of the Ottoman Turks, despite the Sultan's generous terms if the city would surrender. This is a concise and eminently readable account of a turning point in the history of the Western World. Highly recommended!

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