

Alexander the Great Short Guide

Alexander the Great by Charles Mercer

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Overview

Although Alexander the Great is worth reading just for entertainment and pleasure, it contains enough literary and historical merit to satisfy the more serious reader. The history student will find the story of one of the world's most remarkable leaders well-told, carefully documented, and historically accurate.

For those interested in the military and the history of warfare, Mercer's descriptions of battle tactics and strategies will be of interest. Those who enjoy classical mythology will appreciate this story of a real man who believed in and consulted the oracles, who sacrificed to the Olympian gods, and who occasionally tried to convince his followers that he himself was a god. The reproductions and illustrations of Alexander as he appeared in ancient and medieval art will please readers with artistic inclinations.

About the Author

Charles Edward Mercer was born on July 12, 1917, in Stouffville, Ontario. He received his bachelor's degree cum laude from Brown University and began working as a reporter for the Washington Post in 1939. During World War II he served as a lieutenant in the United States Army military intelligence. After the war he worked for the Associated Press in New York City as a reporter, feature writer, and television columnist. In 1949 Mercer became an editor for G. P. Putnam publishers, meanwhile devoting more and more time to free-lance writing. He has written many stories and articles for national magazines, as well as many adult novels. The best known of his adult novels, *Rachel Cade* (1946), was made into a film called *The Sins of Rachel Cade* (1961), starring Angie Dickinson. He has also written a significant number of nonfiction works, including four biographies, for young adults.

Setting

Alexander has lent credence to the theory that history is shaped by great men. Because no one was capable of taking his place, the great empire that he established fell apart after his death.

His forays into the Far East made little lasting difference to the people there, except that, according to Mercer, he has lived on as a folk-villain in the collective memory of the Afghans. But Persia has never again been the same as it was under Alexander's arch-rival Darius, a change that has had an impact on subsequent history. In modern times, the Shah of Iran considered himself descended from Darius and once held a great celebration for his own birthday in the ruins of Persepolis, Darius's capital city. But the descendants of Darius have never succeeded in re-establishing their country as the world power that it was before Alexander sacked Persepolis.

In 356 B.C., Alexander's story opens in a part of Greece known as Macedon. His parents are Philip and Olympias, the king and the queen. The strange and beautiful Olympias almost convinces her husband that Alexander is not his son, but the son of Zeus, chief of the Olympian gods. Alexander spends his childhood in Macedon under the tutelage of a relative named Leonidas who raises him very strictly and tries to curb his charge's quick temper. When Alexander is thirteen, his education is entrusted to Aristotle, one of the greatest philosophers of all time, but Alexander remains a pupil for only three years. At the age of sixteen, Alexander governs Macedon while his father fights the Byzantines. He then becomes a commander in his father's army.

From this point on, the scene shifts rapidly as Alexander joins his father in attempts to unify Greece and then, upon Philip's assassination, proclaims himself king of Macedon. After subduing all of Greece, Alexander gathers his armies to invade the Persian Empire in Asia, an expedition that becomes an effort to conquer the world. The narrative follows Alexander to the Middle East, where he conquers the Persians; to Egypt, where he establishes the great city of Alexandria; to Afghanistan and India, where he is confronted by the forbidding Himalayas.

Until this point, Alexander has hoped to reach the limit of the earth during his eastward march because, in accordance with the ideas of his day, he believes that the earth is round and flat like a saucer.

Under the impression that the Himalayas must mark the end, stories of great kingdoms on the other side of the mountains astound him. His men refuse to continue the march, and Alexander dies on the trip back toward Greece.

In the end, although his great march covered about fourteen thousand miles, it penetrated a relatively small portion of the globe, and his conquest was shortlived.



Social Sensitivity

Alexander the Great has been an attractive hero for scores of generations, as evidenced in many artistic representations. He appears frequently in Roman mosaics and sculptures, medieval manuscripts, and Renaissance paintings. The inherent problem in retelling his story is that he should not be made so attractive that readers overlook his cruelty and treachery. The modern world does not need an Alexander.

Mercer handles such moral issues sensibly. Without resorting to didactics, he provides many examples of the less desirable aspects of his subject's personality. The author portrays a remarkably young, incredibly energetic half-genius, half-madman who changed the course of history. Because not all young adults are perceptive enough to understand the subtleties of Mercer's portrayal, this book best suits those of above average maturity. Readers should be reminded that the social outlook of Alexander's time was very different from that of today. Warfare for its own sake was acceptable, and the treatment of prisoners was not always humane.

Women certainly were not afforded the same opportunities that men were, and differences among social classes were much more pronounced. Monarchs often ruled countries according to their whims. Students who recognize the changes brought about by social evolution will most benefit from reading this book.



Literary Qualities

Alexander the Great contains elements commonly found in fiction. The chronological re-creation of events constitutes a well constructed plot in which one event depends upon another, with plenty of suspense to maintain the reader's interest. The defeat of the Persian Empire and the destruction of Persepolis serve as the climax, with the action gradually declining as Alexander pushes into India. When his men refuse to march through the Himalayas, the mighty mountains symbolize the end, and a sense of foreboding permeates the narrative. Indeed, Alexander will never see Greece again.

This unusually well-written biography features a mature but clear style that employs a precise vocabulary. Mercer gives credit to his ancient sources and points out their differences. He strives to relate only the facts, mentioning little about myths and legends.



Themes and Characters

Mercer perhaps best sums up Alexander the Great's theme in the closing pages, when he quotes from W. W. Tarn's biography of the same title: "For whatever else he [Alexander] was, he was one of the supreme fertilizing forces of history. He lifted the civilized world out of one groove and set it in another; he started a new epoch; nothing could again be as it had been."

Alexander the Great contains unusually good characterizations for a work of nonfiction. Even some of the secondary characters are well drawn. Olympias, Alexander's mother, is the beautiful and mysterious daughter of the king of Epirus, a mountain kingdom near present-day Yugoslavia. She engages in mystical rites, charms snakes, and claims to be descended from Achilles, the famed Greek warrior of the Iliad.

Extremely domineering, she soon repels King Philip, frightening him with her reputed powers as an enchantress. The estrangement between Philip and Olympias troubles Alexander, who cannot please one parent without offending the other. Olympias tries to persuade her son that he is a child of the gods, and whether he ever believes this literally, he certainly thinks himself destined for greatness. Olympias's influence upon Alexander continues throughout his life.

She advises from him afar during his conquest of Asia, and after his death, she cares for his wife and infant son until she is defeated and murdered in an uprising by a Macedonian faction.

Among Alexander's generals and military followers, only Parmenio develops fully as a character. He acts as a foil to Alexander, as his relationship with the conqueror reveals some of Alexander's personality flaws. Originally one of King Philip's generals, he transfers his loyalty to Alexander and accompanies him on his great march. In the battle at Gaugamela, against Darius III of Persia, Alexander allows a wide gap to form in his own lines. Consequently, Parmenio's troops are surrounded and must request Alexander's assistance. Alexander abandons his pursuit of Darius in order to go to Parmenio's aid; meanwhile Darius escapes. The failure to capture Darius bitterly disappoints Alexander, and some theorize that he never forgives Parmenio. Yet the battle is a great success overall, scattering the Persians' military strength. Although he becomes Alexander's scapegoat, the battle's results would be inconclusive at best, had Parmenio's forces been quashed.

Another troubling aspect of Alexander's personality surfaces when he captures the Persian capital, Persepolis. He allows his troops to loot and massacre for several days. Parmenio advocates moderation and begs him to halt the bloodshed, admonishing Alexander for "demonstrating merely that he [seeks] vengeance and [does] not intend to retain possession of Persia." But Alexander ignores him, the unnecessary violence continues, and even the beautiful royal palace is destroyed by the conqueror's own drunken banquet guests.



Eventually, Parmenio becomes a direct victim of Alexander's violent temperament. A plot against Alexander's life is uncovered, and Parmenio's son Philotas has apparently known about the conspiracy. Arrested and tortured, Philotas confesses and implicates his father. Although Parmenio probably has remained loyal despite disagreements with his leader, Alexander executes him summarily, granting him neither a trial nor an account of the charges against him.

Alexander's arch-enemy and emperor of Persia, Darius is another well drawn character. He proves so clever an adversary that he becomes a somewhat sympathetic character. An able military tactician, Darius nonetheless flees to elude Alexander whenever Macedonian forces are winning a battle. Alexander never captures him, but a traitorous Persian viceroy named Bessus imprisons Darius and declares himself king. Eventually, Bessus's men stab Darius as Alexander and his troops approach. One of Alexander's companions finds the deposed Persian leader dying in a cart, and Alexander, grieved by the ignoble death of this great king, gives him a royal funeral and burial. In addition to illuminating Alexander's more chivalrous side, this episode illustrates the fleeting nature of worldly power.

Of course, Alexander dominates the biography. The author presents the known facts about this intriguing and complex personality without drawing unfounded conclusions. Mercer points out that Alexander's contradictory nature renders him a fascinating subject to study but an impossible character to fully understand. An ingenious leader and military strategist, Alexander seems to be a realist, yet his desire to be worshiped as a god defies common sense.

Perhaps he is merely attempting to please his mother and is not really serious about the matter. He seems sincerely religious, consulting oracles and offering sacrifices to the gods, but such sincerity is not necessarily at odds with military prowess.

His cruelty and his compassion are more difficult to reconcile. Sometimes he is a relatively benign conqueror; at other times he permits his troops to engage in the greatest cruelty toward captured peoples. Attempts by some scholars to justify the looting and massacres with political motives are unconvincing.

Mercer's Alexander emerges as a supreme adventurer. Although he lusts for power, his attempts to govern the conquered territories are superficial. His overwhelming curiosity about the world and his love of fighting probably inspire him more than anything else does.



Topics for Discussion

1. Alexander the Great suggests that Alexander seeks vengeance against the Persians and does not intend to retain possession of the territory. Why would he seek vengeance? Do you think that he really intends to retain possession of any of the territories he conquers, as the Romans do two centuries later? Does Alexander like conquest for its own sake?
2. What do you think of Alexander's claims that he is a god? Does he expect anyone to take him seriously? Keep in mind that Alexander's religion is far different from today's major religions.
3. Why does Alexander adopt Persian clothing and customs? Why do his men resent these personal changes?
4. Why does Charles Mercer often have to amend the statistics given by the ancient historians?
5. Why is it important for Alexander to conquer Egypt before striking off for the Far East?
6. Before Alexander's death, several rumors spread that he has died and that his death is being kept secret. Why would such an important occurrence be kept secret?
7. Why does Alexander order such an elaborate funeral when his greatest enemy, Darius, dies?
8. Why does Alexander allow his troops to loot Persepolis and to massacre the capital's citizens?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare Alexander with some other great conqueror, such as Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte. How were their motives alike or different? Were their methods similar? How did their ultimate fates differ?

2. Alexandria, the city Alexander founded in Egypt, became an important center of culture and learning. Write a report about the great libraries and important thinkers who flourished there after the time of Alexander. Was he directly responsible for any of these developments?

3. Charles Mercer explains that we owe our knowledge of Alexander to five historians who wrote in the first three centuries A.D.: Plutarch, Arrian, Diodorus, Curtius, and Justin. Read an account of Alexander by one of these historians.

Does the report seem reliable? Does the historian acknowledge his sources?

How do the account's judgments differ from those of Mercer's work?

4. Olympias, the mother of Alexander, worships Dionysus, one of the twelve Olympian gods. What were the qualities attributed to Dionysus? How were his rites conducted?

5. Compare several artistic renditions of Alexander from different historical periods. What do they tell us about the artists' attitudes toward Alexander?

6. What does the legend of the Gordian knot reveal about the character of Alexander?

7. When Alexander is about to face Darius and his superior forces in battle, his generals urge him to attack by night, but Alexander refuses, saying, "I will not steal a battle." The author offers some reasons for Alexander's decision. Do you think that they are good reasons? Do you think Alexander might have had some other reasons?

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New York: Dorset Press, 1986. By a Roman historian who intended this work to be his masterpiece. Very detailed and very good reading.

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Boston: Little, Brown, 1980. A new look at Alexander in light of recent archeological findings. Good illustrations with photographs and maps.

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1896. Reprint. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971. Not much has been written about Philip. Hogarth's work, an attempt to remedy the situation, is very readable.



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