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# THE VERACITY OF CAESAR

By J. P. V. D. BALSDON

**J**ULIUS CAESAR wrote seven books (a book to every year) on his campaigns in Gaul from 58 to 52 B.C., and three books (the first two describing the events of 49, the third those of 48) on his campaigns against Pompey and the Republican government in the civil war.<sup>1</sup> A. Hirtius, who had perhaps been his secretary in Gaul, wrote Book viii of the *B.G.*—presumably in the latter part of 44—to describe Caesar's doings in 51 and 50, to link the two parts of Caesar's work together. This we know from Hirtius' own evidence, from the modest little introduction to his book. Who wrote the surviving accounts of Caesar's campaigns from 47 to 45 (the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, *Bellum Africum*, and *Bellum Hispaniense*), we do not know at all.

These writings of Caesar were not history books (*annales* or *historiae*) but, as the name *commentarii* indicates, they were a Field-Marshal's account of the campaigns which he had fought. That is why the *B.G.* does not begin with a general account of the historical background of Caesar's appointment and of the situation which he found on arrival in Gaul in spring 58; that is why the *B.C.* does not start with a general account of the political issue between Caesar and the government at Rome at the beginning of 49. There is nothing suspicious about the absence of such introductions; it does not suggest that Caesar had something to hide.

Apart from the narrative of successive campaigns, Caesar's *commentarii* include accounts in some detail of the 'native' civilizations which he encountered; a general account of Gaul—starting with the famous 'Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres'—in the very first chapter of the *B.G.*; a sketch of the low civilization and high military skill of the formidable German Suebi (*B.G.* iv. 1–3; cf. i. 48. 4–7); a chapter on the Belgae, showing them to be tougher than other Gauls (*B.G.* ii. 4); a chapter (*B.G.* iv. 10) on the estuaries of the Rhine and Meuse and their inhabitants; an account in eighteen chapters (*B.G.* vi. 11–28) of the anthropology and general civilization of the Gauls and Germans, a sharp contrast being made between the comparative culture of the Gauls and the barbarism of the Germans; a chapter on British chariot

<sup>1</sup> In what follows *B.G.* stands for the *De bello Gallico* and *B.C.* for the *De bello civili*. The full titles of modern works referred to in the notes are to be found in the note on bibliography at the end of the article.

fighting (*B.G.* iv. 33); and three chapters (*B.G.* v. 12–14) on interesting peculiarities of Britain and the British.<sup>1</sup> Such geographical and anthropological description was, naturally enough, a common feature of the accounts which Roman generals wrote of their campaigns.

Caesar's *commentarii* on his fighting in Gaul may have been expanded versions of the dispatches (*litterae*) which he sent home from time to time to the Roman Government. Sometimes he refers to such dispatches: for example, the dispatch describing his successful fighting against the Nervii in 57 B.C., on whose reception the government proclaimed a fifteen days' holiday at Rome (*B.G.* ii. 35. 4). This is the first dispatch which he mentions; but, since he had been fighting in Gaul since the spring of 58, it is obvious that this was not the first dispatch that he sent.

The *commentarii* on Caesar's Gallic campaigns were published before 46 B.C., for in Cicero's *Brutus*, published in that year, they were praised, as they deserved to be praised, for the elegant clarity of their literary style.<sup>2</sup> They were praised, too, for their content: written in order to supply information to historians, they were so good in themselves that a historian would be a fool who thought that he could improve on what Caesar himself had written. Caesar was alive, an all-powerful dictator, when this complimentary passage in the *Brutus* was published.

Once Caesar was dead, however, Asinius Pollio, an historian himself, admitted—what it did not take great courage to admit—that Caesar's *commentarii* were not flawless (Suetonius, *Div. Iul.* 56. 4). They were written in too much of a hurry, and they were not entirely reliable; sometimes deliberately, sometimes from forgetfulness, Caesar wrote what was not true; sometimes (and this is a venial enough quality) he accepted too uncritically the reports of his subordinate officers. Had Caesar lived, Pollio concluded, he would certainly have produced a new and revised edition, free from blemishes.

Asinius Pollio unfortunately gave no examples of the sort of thing that he criticized. We, however, can easily supply a few.

When Caesar invaded Italy in January 49 he evidently hoped that his quarrel with the Senate would be settled without fighting; he pinned his hopes on a negotiated settlement. But, by his own account, his enemies were intransigent. The last possibility of negotiation was when Pompey was inside the walls of Brundisium, waiting to sail east, and

<sup>1</sup> Adcock, pp. 96 ff., like the editor of the Oxford Classical Text, accepts all these passages as genuine. The editor of the latest Teubner edition of *B.G.* regards iv. 10, v. 12–14, and vi. 26–28 as interpolations.

<sup>2</sup> *Brutus* 262, a passage followed very closely by Hirtius, *B.G.* viii, *praef.* 4 f.

Caesar was outside. At this moment Caesar released N. Magius of Cremona, one of Pompey's Chiefs of Staff whom he had captured, with a suggestion that Pompey and he should meet for discussion. Magius entered the walls and did not emerge again. Pompey rejected Caesar's olive branch. This is the account in the *B.C.* (i. 24. 4 f., 26. 2). But in the collection of Cicero's letters there is a letter which Caesar wrote at the time to Oppius and Balbus (*Att.* ix. 13a; but cf. ix. 7c, 2) from which it appears that the facts were different. Magius came with overtures not from Caesar to Pompey, but from Pompey to Caesar. The responsibility for the failure was Caesar's, not Pompey's. 'Hypocrisie', the French critic bawls; 'mauvaise foi.'<sup>1</sup>

Pompey slipped out of Brundisium and across the water; Caesar moved west to conquer Spain, with its armies and their commanders. On his way back from Spain he accepted the capitulation of Massilia. From Massilia he returned direct to Rome, to assume the dictatorship and hold the consular elections. Success followed success without interruption. So, at least, a reader of the *Bellum Civile* would judge.

'In urbem proficiscitur': 'he set out for Rome'.<sup>2</sup> The fact is indisputable. What Caesar does not mention is that before he went to Rome he had to go to Placentia in the Cisalpina, and he had to go to Placentia because Legion IX, one of his best and oldest legions, had mutinied.<sup>3</sup> It was a serious mutiny, and Caesar, who was with difficulty dissuaded from even harsher measures, put the ringleaders to death. Caesar's failure to mention it was certainly deliberate; the episode is not one which he is likely to have forgotten.

At the start of the campaigning season of 55 Caesar arrested a large delegation of the political leaders of the German Usipetes and Tencteri who had crossed the Rhine, driven west by the pressure of the Suebi at their back. These delegates had come to negotiate a peaceful settlement. The Roman army was then let loose on the general body of the Usipetes and Tencteri who, unprepared and without their leaders, were no more than a disorganized rabble: 430,000 of them were routed and massacred; those who were fortunate swam the Rhine to safety; and all this without the loss of a single Roman life. Later that year in Rome, and later still in the history books, Caesar's enemies made all the capital out of this that they could. When in the autumn the Senate, in honour of Caesar's reported successes in the year against Germans and British alike, was debating the grant of twenty days' *supplicatio*—the longest public holiday as yet in Roman history—Cato, pursuing, as

<sup>1</sup> Rambaud, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> *B.C.* ii. 22. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Suet. *Div. Iul.* 69, Dio Cassius xli. 26–35, Appian *B.C.* ii. 47.

usual, paradox, high principle, and self-advertisement in one, proposed that Rome should indicate her displeasure by arresting her Commander-in-Chief and handing him over to the Germans.<sup>1</sup>

These are specimens of Caesar's misrepresentation, or distortion, of the truth; and the critics eagerly stretch out both hands to grasp them. They are not, in fact, as gross as the critics sometimes represent them as being. In the first case, for instance, the truth is evident. Caesar released Magius, and obviously released him with a message to Pompey. Magius returned with proposals from Pompey. Caesar sent Magius back to Pompey with further proposals and wrote to tell Oppius and Balbus that he would let them know at once if there were any further developments. There were no further developments. Pompey evidently rejected Caesar's suggestions and Magius did not emerge from Brundisium a second time. Caesar has not lied about this in the *B.C.*; but he has not told the whole story.

Again, as concerns the Usipetes and Tencteri, Caesar makes two firm statements in the *B.G.*<sup>2</sup> The first is that these Germans were not seriously anxious to negotiate with him, but were intent on postponing a fight until after the return of their cavalry who were some distance away; the second that he gave the Germans an undertaking not to attack and that the Germans attacked the Roman soldiers under cover of this undertaking. Tanusius Geminus, a man who collected all the mud that it was possible to throw at Caesar and called it a history book (and who is certainly inaccurate in the only other case in which his libels against Caesar can be checked)<sup>3</sup> was, probably, the only historian to record Cato's idiotic speech, to which the Senate evidently paid no attention. Plutarch's record of Cato's proposal derives from Tanusius Geminus, and so does Appian's. Neither writer accepts Cato's version of the incident. They say, both of them, that Cato in the Senate gave one account of the episode and Caesar in his *commentarii* gave another.

Still, it is true that in these and in many other cases Caesar could not claim to have written 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. It is evident, for instance, that he minimized the seriousness of his defeats at Gergovia in 52 and at Dyrrachium in early 48.

How serious and how widespread are his inaccuracies? How is one to set to work, what tests is one to apply, to discover what in Caesar's writing is true and what is not true at all? Unbiased contemporary evidence is the only evidence which could be used with absolute con-

<sup>1</sup> *B.G.* iv. 4-15; cf. Plut. *Caes.* 22. 4, Appian *Celt.* 18 (both quoting Tanusius Geminus), Plut. *Cato* 51, *Comp. Nic. et Crassi* 4. 2, Suet. *Div. Iul.* 24. 3.

<sup>2</sup> iv. 9. 3, 11. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Suet. *Div. Iul.* 9. 2.

fidence to check the truth of what Caesar wrote; and in the 950-odd letters of Cicero's correspondence such evidence exists. Yet the points of contact are not numerous; and the case of Magius is the only one where evidence from a letter can be used to damage Caesar's credibility. As far as the writing of history was concerned, the bias of others against Caesar (in the case of Tanusius Geminus, for instance) could distort truth just as much as could Caesar's bias in favour of himself. Livy was 'a Pompeian'.<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, itself a part of bias to believe that any statement in a later historian (Dio Cassius, for example) which contradicts Caesar's account must, without further question, be true and credible.

A general recording his achievements may lie from vanity, to hide his failures. Or he may lie for a purpose which is all too familiar in the present-day world, to persuade his readers in his own interest to believe what is not true at all; he may lie for the purpose of what is today called 'propaganda'.

In Caesar's case, the problem is more difficult still. When were the *commentarii* written and—this is a different question—when were they published? What readers had Caesar in mind when he wrote? His contemporaries? If so, what section, in particular, of the contemporary reading public? The educated classes in the city of Rome itself? Or was he writing for posterity, supplying information for future historians?

There is no evidence for the solution of these problems beyond the inferences which may fairly be drawn from what Caesar wrote. Each book of the *B.G.* describes the fighting of a single year. Yet the campaign of Ser. Sulpicius Galba in Switzerland at the end of the campaigning season of 57 comes at the very beginning of Book iii (which describes the fighting of 56), not in its proper place at the end of Book ii. Can we infer from this that Caesar, who had come south of the Alps for the winter of 57/56, had completed his writing-up of the fighting of 57 before the news of Galba's misadventures north of the Alps reached him? If so, each book of the *B.G.* was probably completed in the winter that followed the year's campaigning which it described.

Why, in that case, did Caesar not complete the work by writing an account of the events of 51 and 50? Was it because, though the books had been written year by year down to the end of 52, they had not as yet been published, and that he published them as a single work in 51 or in the winter of 51/50? If so, their publication had some connexion, presumably, with the canvassing period from the summer of 50 to the summer of 49, before his prospective candidature, in the summer of

<sup>1</sup> Tac. *Ann.* iv. 34. 4.

49, for a second consulship. That is to say, the *B.G.* was published to catch votes, to remind the electorate of the immensity of Caesar's achievement in Gaul. Vote-catching and truth-telling do not always go hand-in-hand. Yet among the voters of all ranks would be many who had fought under Caesar in Gaul, and many more who, like Cicero, had corresponded regularly with friends and relations on Caesar's staff in Gaul. Plenty of people were in a position to detect misrepresentation in Caesar's book if it was too blatant.

The *B.C.* raises its own similar problems. What inference are we to draw from the fact that Book iii ends with the death of Pothinus in Alexandria at the end of 48? Pompey's murder, which would have seemed a natural conclusion, was not made the conclusion; the narrative has proceeded past that event. Why, then, did Caesar not proceed farther, to include at least the whole of his campaigning in Alexandria and Pontus before he returned to Rome in 47? Did he start by writing up the year's events at the end of each year, as he had done in Gaul, and did he, for whatever reason, get bored and give up writing at the end of 48? Or did he leave the writing till later; did he write in fact in 44 B.C. and is the incompleteness of the *B.C.* just another aspect of the witless and high-principled tragedy of the Ides of March?

Yet Caesar, who pardoned M. Terentius Varro, a Pompeian, in Spain in 49, and indeed in 47 appointed him Librarian-in-Chief of the grand new library which he planned for Rome, wrote of Varro in the *B.C.* with bitter sarcasm.<sup>1</sup> Is this something which, being the man he was, he was likely to do after 47?

Did he then write the three books of the *B.C.* before 47? Did he, indeed, publish them before 47? Did he publish Books i and ii (the events of 49) in Rome in the winter of 49/48 and Book iii (the events of 48) in the winter of 48/47? Were they, in fact, both written and published in order to enable people in Rome to see the civil war from his own point of view? In that case he may have stopped at that point because at the end of 47 he was back in Rome himself and propaganda was of smaller consequence.

There is certainly a feverish insistence in Books i and ii of the *B.C.* on stressing the reasonableness, the will for peace, of Caesar himself, and the unreasonableness and intransigence of his opponents. This was a view which Caesar was in greater need of publicizing when the issue between him and the Republicans lay in the balance at the end of 49 than at the time of his assured supremacy in the early months of 44.

If Caesar's enemies in Rome had played their cards successfully in

<sup>1</sup> ii. 17.

50 and in 49, they would have done what Domitius Ahenobarbus had already threatened to do if he was elected consul for 55; they would have recalled him from his military command in Gaul and prosecuted him as a civilian. There were plenty of possible charges. One was that in his first year's fighting in Gaul, in his campaigns first against the Helvetii and then against Ariovistus—those campaigns which opened the way to the conquest of the whole of Gaul west of the Rhine—he had violated Sulla's Treason Law, in that he had campaigned outside the boundaries of his province of Transalpine Gaul without authority from the government at Rome. If the prosecution had possessed even a small part of the ingenuity of modern scholarship, it would have had to do little more than expose the half-truths and falsifications of the *B.G.* itself in order to secure a conviction.

Caesar did not conceal the fact that, in order to fight the Helvetii, he had to march outside the boundaries of his province (*B.G.* i. 10. 5). His defence was that a senatorial decree of 61 B.C., passed soon after Rome's old allies the Aedui had been beaten by their neighbours across the Arar (Saône), the Sequani, at the battle of Admagetobriga (*B.G.* i. 31. 12, 35. 4), authorized the governor of Transalpine Gaul to take, at his own discretion, any action necessary in their defence.

The prosecution would have claimed, on the evidence of the *B.G.*, that the western migration of the Helvetii from the neighbourhood of Lake Geneva had the support and encouragement of a section of the Aedui headed by Dumnorix; that it was bound for the country of the Santones (the Saintonge) on the Atlantic coast<sup>1</sup> where, far away from the Aedui, far away from the Roman province, the Helvetii would be less of a menace than in the territory that they had abandoned. And if Caesar claimed that a mass movement of 368,000 people (*B.G.* i. 29) might perhaps have got out of control or changed direction on the way, the prosecution would have challenged his figures and suggested that it was not in fact a migration on this scale because, when the survivors (110,000 by Caesar's account) were forced to return home, there was a home still for them to return to; that they would not have been so fortunate if, as Caesar claimed, the entire people was migrating, for some other tribe would have moved in meanwhile and seized the territory that they had vacated. 'Posse Gallos internis discordiis relinquī', it might have been urged.<sup>2</sup> This migration was no affair of Caesar's at all.

What, then, of Ariovistus? 'Rhenum insedimus', Caesar might have claimed, anticipating what was said by another Roman general more than a century later, 'ne quis alius Ariovistus regno Galliarum potiretur'

<sup>1</sup> *B.G.* i. 10; Stevens, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tac. *Ann.* ii. 26. 3.



(Tac. *Hist.* iv. 73); for the fact that at the time of Caesar's arrival the Gauls lived under the menace of invasion from the—militarily—far stronger Germans is a recurrent theme in the *B.G.* Half a century earlier the Cimbri and Teutones had invaded Gaul, had even crossed the Alps into Italy; and now this uncomfortable and dangerous chapter of history looked like repeating itself. Ariovistus, a Suebic chief, had crossed the Rhine, at first with a mere 15,000 men, to win the battle of Admagetobriga for the Sequani. He had taken hostages from the Aedui and inflicted crippling terms on them; he had remained, an unwelcome guest, among the Sequani, annexing more and more of their territory. His 15,000 Germans had already swelled to 120,000 (*B.G.* i. 31. 5), and more were on their way—100 *pagi* of the Suebi on the east bank of the Rhine and waiting to cross (*B.G.* i. 37. 3).

In this desperate situation the responsible section of the Aedui, under Dumnorix' brother Diviciacus, appealed to Caesar; so did the chiefs of practically the whole of Gaul (*B.G.* i. 30. 1). The Sequani would have appealed as loudly as any, if they had dared (*B.G.* i. 32). There was an unanswerable case for Caesar's declaring war on Ariovistus, even though in the previous year, 59, the Senate had given him recognition as a friend of the Roman people.

Cross-examining counsel is on his feet, suggesting that there is not one word of truth in Caesar's picture of a German menace; that there was no distinct 'German' people, no country of Germany; that the so-called 'Germans' on the eastern bank of the Rhine were what Posidonius had described them as being (and what, it is claimed, archaeology shows them to have been)—Celts, just as much Gauls as people on the west bank of the river; that, farther east, there were the Suebi before you reached the Getae or Scyths; that to construct a people out of the Suebi, call them Germans, and picture them as inhabiting the area between the Rhine and the Elbe was sheer fabrication; and that in fact what Caesar wrote of them in *B.G.* iv. 1–3 and vi. 21–28 is partly lifted from what Posidonius wrote of the Suebi and Getae and partly an assembly of philosophical commonplaces about primitive nordic civilization. (The 100 *pagi* of the Suebi in iv. 1. 4 makes nonsense of the 100 *pagi* in i. 37. 3; Tacitus, *Germania* 9. 1 makes nonsense of *B.G.* vi. 21. 2 (cf. vi. 17. 1) on German religion, &c., &c.)

Even this is not enough. The prosecution has hardly warmed up. It now turns to Ariovistus. Ariovistus, it suggests, did not—as is stated in *B.G.* i. 31. 5—first cross the Rhine in order to take part in the fight of the Sequani against the Aedui, but came across much earlier. He was not a warrior on the grand scale at all. He was a smallish chieftain

of the Triboci,<sup>1</sup> who were settled north of the Sequani on the west bank of the Rhine some time before the conflict of Aedui and Sequani, but he and his troops were regularly employed as mercenaries by the Sequani; the conflict of the Aedui and Sequani, indeed, was really a simple struggle over the right to collect customs on all the trade which moved north and south, and east and west, up and across the Saône valley;<sup>2</sup> the Aeduan 'hostages' held by the Sequani were part of a mutual exchange of hostages in ratification of a trade agreement between the two peoples in accordance with normal Gallic custom, which Caesar either misrepresented or failed to understand. Diviciacus<sup>3</sup> was playing his own game and that of his friends, and Caesar fought to extend Roman trading interests, not to defend the independence of Gaul. The 'German nation' and the formidable power of Ariovistus were fabrications of Caesar, to justify his own campaign of shameless aggression.

The truth no doubt lies somewhere between the view of those who reject nearly every word that Caesar wrote and those who believe that every statement of Caesar is true. In the critic's chain of argument some links are strong (for instance, that his 'totius fere Galliae legati' (*B.G.* i. 30. 1) who begged aid against Ariovistus were no more than a section of the Aedui and their dependents), others (the scaling-down of Ariovistus' importance and the theory about the hostages) are weak. And there are two important factors outside Caesar's own narrative of which account must be taken. The first is that Asinius Pollio, not a sympathetic critic of Caesar, used extremely mild language about the inaccuracies of Caesar's narrative if truth was in fact perverted by Caesar as grossly as the critics claim. The second and more important problem is to know with what object the Roman government gave Caesar what, as he himself rightly emphasized, was a military command of unprecedented scope (*Dio Cassius* xxxviii. 41, supposedly derived from a source unfriendly to Caesar). What, after the visit of the Allobroges to Rome in 63, the battle of Admagetobriga, the senatorial decree of 61, the visit of Diviciacus to Rome, the threatened crisis of 60 which happily blew over (*Cic. Att.* i. 19. 2, 20. 5), was the Roman estimate of the danger which threatened the northern provinces, and perhaps Italy itself? Was Caesar the only one who thought and spoke in terms of a second invasion of the Cimbri and Teutones?

The exciting problem remains; it is not yet solved.

<sup>1</sup> Walser, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Strabo 4. 192 c.

<sup>3</sup> Who himself had given no hostages, *B.G.* i. 31. 9.

## NOTE ON BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE work of T. Rice Holmes remains fundamental. The latest work on the writing and publishing of the *B.G.* is Karl Barwick, 'Caesars Commentarii und das Corpus Caesarianum', *Philologus*, Supplementband xxxi (1938), Heft 2, and, on the writing and publishing of the *B.C.*, Karl Barwick, *Caesars Bellum Civile: Tendenz, Abfassungszeit und Stil* (Leipzig, 1951). M. Rambaud's *L'Art de la déformation historique dans les commentaires de César* (Paris, 1953) is more ingenious than convincing (for a review, see *J.R.S.* xlv (1955), 161-4). G. Walser's 'Caesar und die Germanen' (*Historia*, Einzelschriften (1956), Heft 1), of whose destructive argument the last part of my article is an inadequate précis, is a brilliant piece of work. In English, C. E. Stevens exposed the misrepresentations which he detected in the *B.G.* in 'The *Bellum Gallicum* as a Work of Propaganda', *Latomus*, xi (1952), 3-18, 165-79. Space hardly allows Sir Frank Adcock more than a passing reference to the problem in his *Caesar as Man of Letters* (Cambridge, 1956). A most convincing and humane and conservative handling of the question is that of John H. Collins, *Propaganda, Ethics and Psychological Assumptions in Caesar's Writings* (1952). This, a doctoral dissertation under Professor M. Gelzer at Frankfurt is, unhappily, available only in a very small number of libraries. It is a book which deserves to be published in a normal format and to be widely read.

## A PROPHECY FULFILLED

WITH the 2,000th anniversary of the most famous Ides of March falling next year, no doubt the name of GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR will then be flowing from innumerable pens; indeed, to judge by the experience of recent bi-millenaries of pre-Christian events, weak chronologers may be charging into the field a year early.

*The Times*, 21 January 1956

Two thousand years ago today, by modern reckoning, Caius Julius Caesar was murdered. . . .

*Daily Telegraph*, 15 March 1956