

August

From a series of monthly meditational essays by Eugene Halliday.

We saw last month that July had received its name from Julius Caesar. In a similar way August was named in honour of another Caesar, the emperor Augustus, whose whole career was determined by his relationship to his great predecessor and uncle, Julius.

Born in 63 B. C. in Rome into a good family, Gaius Octavius was later to be acclaimed by the Roman Senate as "Augustus". The name derives from the Latin "auges", signifying *increase* and *majesty*. All later Caesars used this title; long after blood connections with the first Augustus had ceased.

The first Augustus was given his title by the Senate in recognition of his services to the state. What were these services?

In 58 B.C. Gaius Octavius's father died. The boy was then five years old. About a year later his mother remarried and the boy Octavius came under the care of his step-father. When he was twelve he made his first public appearance by giving the funeral panegyric on his grandmother.

In or about 47 B. C. he assumed the toga virilis and, through the influence of his great uncle, the dictator of Rome, he was elected into the pontifical college.

Sharing Caesar's African triumph in 46 B.C. Octavius was in 45 B.C. made a patrician by the Senate, and one of Caesar's Masters of the Horse for the following year. In the autumn Caesar sent Octavius to Illyria to study at the college of Apollonia, Caesar himself being busy planning his Parthian campaign.

In Illyria Octavius received the news of Caesar's murder. Octavius crossed into Italy, there to find that Caesar had made him his heir and adopted him into the Julian Gens, a very dangerous inheritance. His mother and certain friends advised against its acceptance, but he refused their advice and began immediately to pay money bequeathed by Caesar to the Roman people.

Mark Antony viewed as not important the pretensions of Octavius, now from his adoption by Caesar called Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus. Brutus and Cassio also thought little of Caesar's young nephew, whom Cicero was now flattering in order to use him.

But Octavius had his own views, balanced all those who strove for power, and helped none of them. Soon he was attracting powerful allies. The consuls being armed against Antony, the Senate called for Octavianus. In 43 B.C. he took part in the campaign at Mutina and Antony was defeated. The soldiers of Octavianus demanded that he be given the consulship, and though the Senate was much alarmed by this demand, it could not prevent his election.

Octavianus now made a coalition with Antony and Lepidus and in 43 B.C. the three were appointed a triumvirate. For five years they were to re-constitute the commonwealth.

A list of proscribed citizens was drawn up. Three hundred senators and two thousand knights were assassinated. The march towards supreme power took another step forward. Territories of Italian cities were confiscated and given to be divided amongst the soldiers. At the demand of Antony Cicero was murdered. What was left of the Republican Party sought refuge either in the East with Brutus and Cassius, or with Sextus Pompeius, now supreme master of the seas.

In 42 B. C. Octavianus and Antony crossed the Adriatic to destroy the republic's last defenders. At the Battle of Philippi, Brutus and Cassius fell.

But the victors, like all power-pursuers, were soon quarrelling amongst themselves. War broke out. Three hundred of the defenders at Perugia were sacrificed by Octavianus at the altar of his famous uncle.

In 40 B.C. peace was restored. Antony married his rival's sister Octavia, and possessed the Empire's eastern half. The western half went to Octavianus. Lepidus was left with but the African province.

But the fight for power was not over. Sextus Pompeius cut off supplies of grain from Rome. The triumvirs were compelled to give him the western isles of the Mediterranean. Octavianus determined to release Rome from the threat of famine. He fabricated a quarrel with Sextus and went unsupported to attack him. Well served by his commander of the fleet, Octavianus routed Sextus and drove him into Asia where he died in 36 B.C.

As Lepidus was of no account, Octavianus and Antony were left for the final phase of the power struggle.

From 36 to 31 B. C. Antony wasted his time in abortive campaigns. Not only this, but his affair with Cleopatra profoundly shocked the Roman mind, and alienated him from Roman sympathy.

In the same five years, Octavianus strengthened his hold on the West and established his claim to be the only living saviour of the Roman Empire. Here we see the always-repeated claim of all lusts after power - the claim to be the Saviour of the World.

In 38 B.C. Octavianus married Livia and so gained a shrewd counsellor with whose help and that of Marcus Agrippa he set out to rebuild the confidence of the people, who still viewed with suspicion the man responsible for the proscriptions against them.

Antony's alliance with Cleopatra was still upsetting Roman sentiment, and rumours of Cleopatra's scheme to found a Graeco-Oriental empire worsened Roman fears. In 32 B.C. Antony put away his wife Octavia, and the exposure of his will definitely proved the ascendancy of Cleopatra. War was declared against her, the decisive battle being fought on the second of September in 31 B. C. at Actium. Antony's fleet was almost totally destroyed and his land forces surrendered.

On the 30th of August, 30 B.C., Alexandria was taken and Antony and Cleopatra killed themselves.

In 29 B.C. on January the eleventh, peace lay over the Roman world. Octavianus returned to Italy where, in the month to bear his own name, he celebrated a three-day triumph. He had shown the world the might of Roman will. He had saved the world for his fellow Romans. After many bloody battles he had restored Roman peace. He gazed around and defined himself as "the master of all things".

And Rome looked to him to preserve its world. True, he had re-established for Rome a regular constitutional government, unknown since Julius Caesar, a government based like his own mind on a tenacious purpose and most cautious regards for Roman conventions. He restored the republic, put back into function the Senate and magistrates and assembly. Everything in Roman life began to fall back into the old familiar ways. Perhaps Roman authority would now last forever.

But only a few years later the shadow of the Cross fell over Rome, and Roman might was no more so certain.

Caesar Augustus, whose name signifies "increase", had carried the Roman dream to its fullness of significance. In him had been embodied the secret ambitions of his uncle, the man whose initials were the same as those of Jesus Christ.

In August the fruits upon the trees increase their fullness. In the winter we will enjoy them. For Caesar Augustus, too, there must have been a time when, as the Emperor of Increase, he must have looked forward to the enjoyment of the fullness he had brought to the Roman world. But it is not very likely that he would have foreseen the Man who was to bring to the world an altogether different kind of fullness in which Roman violence would have no part.