

ultimately engaged in an interpretive war over a similar, limited collection of sources. Going against the trend in diplomatic history, none of them pay enough attention to Arab and Iranian sources and this has left Karsh to make deductions from Western material. As a result, the book is unlikely to settle many historical disputes. It is best seen as a polemical riposte to Obama's Cairo speech, which was intended to reset America's relations with the Middle East. Obama suggested that "Muslim majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations." Karsh attempts to counter Obama's limited view of Middle Eastern history, not only by bringing out regional power politics but also the history of Islamist imperial ambitions.

Karsh explains much of the logic behind Obama's recent nuclear deal with Iran, which can only really be understood as part of Obama's wider regional ambition for US disengagement. The President's approach gives Iran a free hand to make unprecedented strategic gains, supposedly bringing order to the region by creating what is actually a dangerous balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In light of Obama's folly, it is very hard to doubt the broad sweep of Karsh's thesis.

## From Octavian to Augustus

DAISY DUNN

### Augustus: The Biography

By Jochen Bleicken

Translated by Anthea Bell

Allen Lane, 784pp, £30

Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus, dawdled through much of his youth before leaping into action at the decisive moment.

His great-uncle, Julius Caesar, had encouraged him to gain the military experience required for a political career, but Octavian was slow to heed his advice. Even his parents seem to have assumed—and hoped, for his sake—that he would turn down his inheritance when he was named as the late dictator's adopted son and primary heir. The fact that Octavian accepted it without hesitation was the first sign that there was more to him than met the eye.

There is nothing hagiographical about the late Jochen Bleicken's monumental and highly readable biography of Rome's first



emperor, now published in an elegant translation by Anthea Bell from the 1998 German original.

Through his early years, Octavian is presented as incredibly lacklustre, not to say spoiled. His father, a politician, came from an upper-class family from Velletri, south-east of Rome. His mother was the daughter of one of Julius Caesar's sisters, and married handsomely, first Octavian's father, then a distinguished senator. Perhaps the young Augustus had it too easy. In 45 BC, the year before Caesar died, the 18-year-old future heir had no political or administrative experience to speak of, and no military experience in the field. Mark Antony, who was one of Caesar's reserve heirs, had all three.

Bleicken has dedicated the first few hundred pages of his 620-page book (excluding the extensive endnotes) to untangling the crisis that arose after the assassination of Caesar. Brutus and Cassius and the other so-called Liberators believed that they had freed Rome from tyranny, but as Cicero realised, their act "was carried out with the courage of men but the understanding of boys . . . The tree was felled, but the roots were not torn out."

There was always going to be chaos in the wake of Caesar's death, but things might

have been marginally less chaotic had Octavian taken his parents' advice and rejected the role as heir. Mark Antony would still have faced a considerable struggle to put Rome back on an even keel, but who knows how quickly the situation might have been resolved without the conflict that resulted in the casualty-heavy Battle of Actium between Antony and Octavian.

Although Octavian's late leap to military prowess was significant in his rise, Bleicken also emphasises the way in which his beneficence presaged his victory. Whereas Antony kept hold of what he had acquired of Caesar's goods after his death, Octavian handed over much of his inheritance to the citizens of Rome, who were always grateful for gifts.

Then, at the age of 27, he charmingly asked them for their pardon for the chaos of the civil war, before providing the veteran soldiers with new settlements. The loyalty of the military was a sound investment for a man whose life would often be under threat.

Since neither Antony nor Octavian, nor indeed an alliance between them, was about to do the impossible and reestablish the defunct republic, Octavian's prevailing challenge after his victory at Actium in 31 BC was to shape, almost imperceptibly, a one-man rule that would be acceptable to a pop-

*Augustus: Liked to present himself as the redeemer of national morality*

# Books