SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

# SPORTS? WHAT FRIVOLITY! – Part 2

Book Review: **The Roman Way** by Edith Hamilton and **Roman Passions** by Ray Laurence

Of the many books about the history of Rome in my personal library, **The Roman Way** and **Roman Passions** stand out as two diametrically opposite works.

**Roman Passions**[[1]](#footnote-1), written by Ray Laurence, is a recent publication. **The Roman Way**[[2]](#footnote-2), written by Edith Hamilton, is old school.

I do not mean to say that in any disparaging way. Written close to a century ago, the book is characteristic of the values and morality of the times. It does not delve into the daily lives of ordinary people and it certainly does not touch upon anything that may resemble sports or entertainment. The subject of sports is a relative newcomer, only recently discovered by the historians. That does not diminish the value of the book. **The Roman Way** is the epitome of the high-minded prose and how classic literature was once intended to be written and taught about.

It begins by discussing comedy by Plautus, moves on to Cicero, then to Catullus’ love story, covers the Romantic Romans and ends with the Stoics. The only complaint that I have about the choice of authors that Ms. Hamilton included in her book is the absence of Lucretius and his *De Rerum Natura*, one of my favorite poems from the classics.

I can see why *De Rerum Natura* was omitted. Lucretius’ work is more of a scientific opus than a romantic poem. In addition, in a couple of chapters it deals openly with sex, not a topic the headmaster of the Bryn Mawr School for Girls would care to discuss in public.

In order to support her position on the Roman mind, Ms. Hamilton offers a lucid explanation of realism, romanticism and the virtue of Stoicism. Thanks to her ability to express such topics in writing, she does a wonderful job in presenting the perspectives held in the ancient Rome.

**The Roman Way** is an exquisitely well-written book that I recommend to anyone interested in Roman literature.

Juxtaposed to **The Roman Way** is **Roman Passions.** The title implies that the book was written with the open-mind of the 21st century. In fact, we learn about pleasures, baths, food, erotica and violent spectacles. But nothing about sports. There are only two passing references to the chariot races, each without any further explanation.

Writing about chariot factions F.R. Cowell wrote, *Passions aroused in favor of one or other of these colors could divide families and wreck friendships*[[3]](#footnote-3). Alan Cameron said T*ry telling a Byzantine that anything was more important than chariot racing![[4]](#footnote-4)*

There are countless other references. With that in mind, one would expect to find in **Roman Passions** an entire chapter or more dedicated to sports.

I have indicated in the past that historians have deemed sports unworthy of scholarly studies. I do not think that is the case this time. My guess is that in order to talk about sports the author had to learn about it given how widespread this pastime was in both the Western and Eastern Empires. Instead of doing that, he chose to ignore it.

The book covers a period that spans approximately 150 years, from the end of the 1st century B.C.E. to the beginning of the 2nd century C.E. This is the best-documented time of Roman history. By focusing on this very limited timeframe, the author avoided exploring the evolution of the customs he describes.

**B**ased on this and on the neglect of sports mentioned earlier my assessment of **Roman Passions** can be summarized by a single word: lazy.

I doubt that a reader who has even a limited knowledge of the Roman civilization will not learn anything new from it.

True, my expectations were high; blame it on the title. True, ignoring sports gave me an ax to grind. Let us cast that aside: I cannot recommend **Roman Passions** because of its impoverished vocabulary and pedestrian prose.

To the reader interested in the topic of Roman erotica done in a non-provocative way and in instructive and thoughtful manner, I recommend **Roman Sex** by John R. Clark[[5]](#footnote-5).

If you own **Roman Passions** and **The Roman Way,** place themside by side. Read a random page from each. Note that **The Roman Way** was written ¾ of a century before **Roman Passions.** Compare the prose and you will have the evidence of the decline of the Western civilization.

1. Published by Continuum Books, copyright 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Copyright by W.W.Norton & Company, Inc., 1932 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F.R. Cowell, **Life in Ancient Rome**, A Perigee Book by G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1961 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Cameron, **Circus Factions - Blues and Greens in Rome and Byzantium**, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John R. Clark, **Roman Sex, 100 BC - AD 250**, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)