



## **The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City**

*Stephen Dando-Collins*

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On the night of 7/19/64, a fire began beneath the stands of Rome's great stadium, the Circus Maximus. For more than a week the fire spread, engulfing most of the city, nearly burning it to the ground. With its capital in ruins, Rome's powerful empire teetered on the edge of collapse as Nero struggled desperately to save his empire & his skin. In *The Great Fire of Rome*, Dando-Collins takes readers thru the streets of ancient Rome, where unrest simmers, & into the imperial palace, where political intrigue seethes, relating a pot-boiler story filled with fascinating historical characters who'll determine the course of an empire. It's an unforgettable human drama that brings ancient Rome & the momentous events of 64 AD scorchingly to life.

## **The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City Details**

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Author : Stephen Dando-Collins

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**Stephen Dando-Collins**

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## **From Reader Review The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City for online ebook**

### **Margaret Sankey says**

Although the fire itself occupies a single chapter, this is the lead up and aftermath, with sidelights on the daily bureaucratic work of the Water Commissioner, aqueduct pilfering, persecution of Isis cult members, the origins of St. Paul's Roman citizenship, Nero's artistic pretensions and Australian studies of why fire moves more quickly uphill. Ending with a half-hearted "reappraisal" of Nero as maybe not such a bad guy, which seems tacked on unnecessarily.

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### **Martti says**

Not much about the fire, but more about imperator Nero - an emperor who liked to play lyra and other arts, but Roman nobles despised him for acting and performing, because acting was a lower class work. It was kind of a hectic book not titled all that well, but I liked how well it illustrated how the Emperor was not all-powerful and there was a large high-class who all intrigued with each other like crazy. Also it's good to read a professional analysis written in popular scientific manner for a broad audience.

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### **Jane says**

Very interesting book, but author's main theses were highly speculative: author assigning blame for starting the Great Fire of Rome [July 19, 64 AD and lasting several days], and author's feeling that although Nero did behave badly on occasion [an understatement], he was, on the whole, not a bad fellow, and unjustly denigrated.

A very readable book, author did rely heavily on the primary sources, but sometimes I wondered if he took them out of context or used them selectively and twisted them to fit his theories. The Fire per se was covered only in a couple of chapters. The biography of Nero and the political situation after the Great Fire were educational. There was much on the Piso Plot [a finally aborted coup d'état] and the bloody putsch afterwards. Finally, Nero's demise was described in great detail.

Fire was started most probably by accident in a shop beneath Circus Maximus and most probably not the fault of any large group. [Mrs. O'Leary's cow, well, the bovine's ancestor, anyone?:)] Greedy slumlords often burned down their own apartment blocks, not for insurance money [no such thing in those days], rebuilt on the ruins and charged exorbitant rental rates on their new property. A fire would engulf Rome every generation or so; the latest had occurred in 36 AD also near Circus Maximus, so Rome was overdue for another. The author feels followers of Isis were singled out for the blame, not Christians; he feels a Christian copyist changed wording from 'followers of Isis' to 'Christians'. Nero, who had worshipped Isis felt deserted by her when his baby daughter died and so he turned completely against the goddess.

Much ink was spilled on Nero as lyre player, singer and charioteer. [He supported the Green Faction.] Of course, he never entered a contest he ever lost; he even won one when his chariot overturned in the middle of the race. I learned about the background and complete duties of the various paramilitary groups patrolling

Rome and the fire-fighting capability [not much] of the *vigiles*. At least they could warn people to get out of the buildings. I didn't realize Nero wanted to change the names of April [Neroneus], May [Claudius], June [Germanicus]. I didn't know about Nero's disaster relief efforts after the Fire and his visionary building project of the Corinth Canal, started but abandoned after his death. The canal project was finally completed in the 1890s. After the Fire, Nero instituted a building code of sorts, so I wouldn't call the man evil incarnate. Fascinating and thought-provoking reading but much was theoretical and was author's reconstruction of events.

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### **Jenny Brown says**

Like other reviewers I found Dando-Collins' speculation that later Christian copyists had interpolated "Christians" into the earlier records where Nero's persecution of the Cult of Isis had been described. But my problem with so much in this book was that the references which are very slim and refer only to classical authors, most often Tacitus, don't give me much insight into where the author came up with the almost novel-like details he describes.

So while I found this a compelling read, I'm not certain how much I can trust it.

I also wondered why Dando-Collins brushes off, almost as if they weren't important, Nero's unsavory sex life and his murder of his mother, wife and ex-wife.

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### **Rena Sherwood says**

It's amazing we still don't have some sort of memorial day for the victims of The Great Fire of Rome. It was the 9/11 of its day. There even were conspiracies about who started it. And yet somehow it just doesn't matter to modern day people. The devastation makes the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* look like a pleasure cruise (well -- um -- anyway--) Today people learn about the Great Fire of Rome and think

but keep in mind that in the future, people will look back on 9/11 and think

Although everyone loves a good train wreck -- or city-destroying inferno in this case -- that's not the real amazing part of the story. The fact is that Rome survived and is still (more or less) around today.

And although at times this book seems to be written by a Nero apologist (okay, maybe he did not set the fire or fiddle while it burned), reading of Nero's death never fails to make me happy. Let's be perfectly clear -- Nero was an asshole, even if he did become a volunteer fireman while Rome burned.

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### **Al Berry says**

Speculation History at its worst... Dando conjures ideas out of thin air with zero evidence, for instance he suggests that following the fire it was not Christians but followers of the cult of Isis who were persecuted... with zero evidence or a single other commentator claiming such, simply stating that Nero had previously been a follower and then left so he would have more animus against the followers of Isis than Christians... this is merely an example of the type of speculative history that Dando engages in. He can write well though and is engaging , which keeps it a 2 star as opposed to a 1.

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### **Colin says**

Read via inter-library loan.

Like Dando-Collins' other works on Roman history, this is a wonderfully readable history of Nero's reign, focused especially on the Great Fire and its aftermath. Dando-Collins gives a fairly unbiased view of Nero (which seems remarkably sympathetic, but only in contrast to the usual, completely negative view). I caught at least one slip-up (where the Second Triumvirate is referred to as the First) - and his theory that the references in Tacitus referring to Nero's persecution of "Christians" is actually a later, Christian re-tooling of passages originally referring to persecution of followers of Isis is brilliantly articulated and convincing, though I'd like to know more about the scholarly consensus on such a theory (if any).

Definitely worth reading, and one I hope to acquire for myself eventually.

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### **Mike says**

I didn't like the way this book began; I felt like I was just thrown into a historical, or hysterical debate involving many historians and their differing views. But eventually the story began and I enjoyed knowing something of this time in history. The three main sections are the fire, the attempted assassination, and the eventual fall of Nero. This book isn't for fun; I'd only recommend it to history buffs.

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### **Meaghan says**

This is a pretty good account of the decline and fall of Nero; unfortunately, it is NOT really about the Great Fire of Rome. I think the fire is covered in only about two chapters before the author moves on to Nero's stunted singing (!) career and the assassination plots against him. One might call this a revisionist biography, as Dando-Collins argues that Nero wasn't that bad a guy, or at least no worse than any of the other Roman emperors.

Dando-Collins makes the argument that Nero did NOT persecute Christians after the Great Fire. He believes some long-ago chronicler substituted "Christians" for "followers of Isis." I am intrigued by this idea, but I don't like it how Dando-Collins just took his theory and ran with it, treating it as fact for the rest of the book.

I don't mean to sound overly critical. I did enjoy the book. I just think there are some aspects of it that are wide open to debate.

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### **Jeff Lanter says**

This is quite a good book and an exciting read. Notably, it is also one of the more affordable books on Nero so that is a plus too. Dando-Collins provides a sort of biography and retelling of the later years of Nero's life and rule. Despite the somewhat sweeping title, there is much more to the downfall of Nero than just the Great Fire and of course, the city persevered for many years after. I've heard some criticize some of Dando-Collins theories/deductions and while I'm not fit to judge the accuracy or likelihood of these ideas, there does seem to be some sense in them. Ultimately, for me, Nero was a tragic figure. He was highly insecure, controlled by his mother, advisor, and later, Praetorian Prefect, Nero was constantly manipulated and frequently not to his own benefit. Perhaps the saddest part is that acting, chariot racing, and singing were all heavily looked down upon as lower class activities and yet, these were the things Nero loved and wanted to do the most. Ultimately, his love of these things really hurt his long term viability as emperor and led to the revolts and his downfall. As I read this book, I always felt a mixture of emotions and thoughts about Nero. If you like this kind of complexity in the books you read, I can't recommend this one highly enough.

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### **Justin Tapp says**

The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City

Dando-Collins aims to fill what he sees as a void of historical compilations of the Great fire of Rome in A.D. 64 and its consequences for Emperor Nero. The book is not greatly detailed, it focuses pretty narrowly on a four-year period.

Despite the record of two non-Christian historians (Tacitus, Suetonius) that Nero persecuted Christians, Dando-Collins maintains that it was likely not Christians who were blamed and persecuted for the fire of Rome, but rather members of the cult of Isis. Burning them in effigy would have added insult to the cult. There is evidence that the cult was suppressed in the years following the fire, even though Dando-Collins writes that Nero had a fascination with the cult and all things Egyptian. While there were Christians in Rome, they were not numerous enough to be blamed widely for events. D-C seems to accept Christian tradition in regards to some aspects of the lives of the Apostles Peter and Paul persecution, but rejects others. Christians could have been treated harshly by Romans for many reasons, as recorded in Luke's Book of Acts, but the biggest persecution was likely after the revolt of the Jews in Palestine in 66 A.D., when Nero reportedly banned Jews from Rome and likely executed those in custody.

The narrative begins in January, 64 A.D. There is some attention given to its geography, how fires were traditionally fought, and how commerce was conducted. There is much information on the politics of the time, including all of the infidelities and corruption of Rome's senators and other officials. The descriptions of Rome make it helpful in order to see what the early Christians would have seen. However, there is not much information given from the perspective of commoners or travelers, though I do not know how much of that type of material survives.

Nero was not exactly "fiddling" while Rome burned, but he was on tour competing in American Idol-like singing competitions-- which he always won. While he was swift to return to the city, dole out aid, and made good, modern plans for the rebuilding of the city, he was always rumored to have been the fire's cause.

Nero liked to compete in chariot races, dress like a gladiator, and competed in the games of 67 A.D., which disgusted the upper-class who looked down on entertainment professions as vulgar and definitely a disgrace for an emperor. Nero was also a bisexual adulterer, thieving, lying murderer. His many exploits eventually led those around him to conspire against him in 65 A.D., but the plot fell apart due to a lack of nerve. The conspirators were then all arrested and put to death. (If you've seen the movie *Gladiator* you can get a visual sense of how plots against crazy emperors were stamped out by those who had much to gain by remaining loyal). In 68 A.D., several regions decided to revolt against Nero's policies and conspiracy overtook Nero's Praetorians and he was finished.

The author shifts perspective to give the views of Flavius Josephus, who was a Pharisee who traveled to Rome in 64 to negotiate the release of several priests and Pharisees who, like Paul, had appealed to Ceasar and were sent by Felix to make their case. (D-C reports that Agrippa had granted citizenship to various Pharisees such that they could make this appeal.) He likely knew Paul, or knew of him. The author does not take Paul at Luke's word that Paul was "born a citizen" of Rome, although it is possible that all citizens of Tarsus were granted citizenship at some point.

Nero was raising an army for a great eastern expedition when he rescheduled various games, which likely would have included public executions of state prisoners by wild animals. This is helpful as it gives an indication of what Paul might have been expecting when he wrote 2 Timothy from prison. After the Jewish revolt of 66 A.D., as recorded by Josephus, Nero likely ordered the execution of all Jews in Roman custody; this likely included Peter and Paul-- tradition says Peter was executed first (he'd have been crucified as a punishment befitting a non-citizen) and Paul several months later (likely beheaded). The re-scheduling of

Dando-Collins defends Nero as a "visionary," and no more cruel than any other Ceasar or even modern-day rulers who support capital punishment. That is a little rich, but I think the author is basically just trying to push back against commonly repeated myths about Nero.

Critics of the book point out that Dando-Collins makes some major mistakes in his research and his citations, as well as takes liberty with Latin translations of quotes-- including Nero's last words. He also tends to take disputed hypotheses and run with them as facts to fit his narrative, which I find common among modern writers of history.

In all, I give this book 3.5 stars out of 5. I learned a lot of useful information from it. It could have included more detail and an explanation of how history of Rome prior to 64-68 A.D. set precedents for how the fire was dealt with, and how all of Nero's actions set precedents for the later Roman Empire.

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## **Erik Graff says**

Stephen Dando-Collins' *The Great Fire of Rome* is, as the subtitle suggests, more about Nero (37-68) and his fall than it is about the fire of 64. Yet it is not quite a biography, the coverage of the emperor's life being focused on the last five years of his reign and this focus being concentrated on factors, such as the fire, which may help to explain his overthrow and death in 68.

The weakness of the argument is the author's selective reliance on the written sources, these being almost exclusively Seneca (d. 65), Josephus (37-ca. 100), Plutarch (b. ca. 46), Tacitus (56-117), Pliny the Younger (b. 61), Suetonius (b. ca. 69) and Cassius Dio (b. ca. 155). Some, obviously, are quite late. All are questionable. Indeed, as is barely indicated by the text and then only in the last chapter, Nero's story has been

transmitted to us by and through his enemies.

That Nero had enemies is unquestionable. Much of the story woven from these sources by the author is one of conspiracies, real or imagined, and their consequences. If for no other reason, Nero made enemies by prosecuting some members of the senatorial order and by intimidating most of the rest.

For the sake of his thesis linking the fire to the fall, Dando-Collins suggests that the belief that the emperor had something to do with the devastation of Rome was significant in leading to his downfall. This was, in his opinion, probably not the case, despite the claims of some later historians. So, too, for some other slanders. He did not, for instance, watch the conflagration, singing of the fall of Troy while accompanying himself on the lyre. He was, in fact, doing this at about the same time at a competition in Antium.

As regards the aftermath of the fire, the author has much positive to say about the care given the refugees and the subsequent reconstruction efforts insofar as they were under imperial direction. As regards culpability and punishment, here the author again suspects retrospective slander. It was the followers of Isis who were blamed and punished, not the Christians. The sources for the myth that Nero initiated the prosecution of the Church were later monkish copyists altering original texts. This, of course, is a suspect hypothesis, a deep questioning of the sources only very rarely displayed as regards other ancient claims.

And that, in the end, is the fundamental flaw of this book. Dando-Collins tells a good, plausible story. He might even be said to have assembled the sources in such a way as to provide the framework for an engaging novel. He did not, however, succeed in composing a compelling history.

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### **Joe says**

Great introduction to Nero. I'm not sure why people are criticising the author's reliance on relatively contemporary documents - sure they're biased, but if you acknowledge this, they're the closest you'll get to the realest picture.

Although some of his hypotheses are questionable, he does wonders in illuminating the fact that a lot of ancient Roman documents are medieval copies, in which Christian thoughts have been added - see the addition of Apostle Paul for example.

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### **Jolanda says**

*The Great Fire of Rome* was an okay read. I've had better, but I've most certainly had worse. I started this book with no expectations at all, thinking it would probably be awful. After the introduction I was actually surprised, in a good way. The introduction read like one of many scientific monologues I've read over the past year as a part of my Ancient History course. I wish the rest of the book would have been more like the introduction. I was actually quite confused when I started with the actual story. The introduction had felt like a historian was explaining his latest theory and while some parts of it were a bit outrageous and sounded like mere speculation, other aspects of the theory were genuinely interesting and made me want to look into this matter more (Like the part about Christian copyists changing the content of certain passages to add Christian faith in Ancient Greek and Roman writings, based on the fact that while Tacitus refers to Christians in his Annals, but the actual word Christianity hadn't been invented until much later and Tacitus would have been more likely to refer to Christians as being Jewish sect-members. Now that was genuinely interesting and I'm going to ask my professors if there's any truth in this phenomenon as soon as classes start again in

September. ).

Anyway, the actual book was really more of a biography of Nero, it has little to do with the actual fire of Rome. There's little to no theorizing about certain facts, the things ancient historians have written about this episode in history are repeated and added to a very lively description of life in ancient Rome, full with details that 2000 years later you can't possibly be certain about, but nonetheless are things that -under the circumstances- might very well have happened. ( and,to be honest, this is being done in much the same way ancient authors would have tried to spice up their own account of history. Ancient Historiography course was very enlightening on that aspect of Roman and Greek works of history ). Anyway, that bothered me, the introduction set the bar quite high and all of a sudden I was reading about a random day in the life of \*name random prefect/praeator/consul\*. What is this writer trying to write? Scientific theory and an accurate account of what might have happened during Nero's reign, or a semi-historical story packed with details we can't possibly know ascertain 2000 years afterwards.

Anyway, it was an okay read, it has made me want to look into this period in time myself, so that's a good thing.

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### **Skye says**

I'm glad I "read" this book. Well, I listened to it on audiobook, which has a horrrrrrible narrator who was so bad that at times I thought it was recorded by a computer because it was so emotionless and poorly pronounced.

I learned a lot from this, and found it pretty well researched. I liked that the primary sources were included a lot. Unfortunately, there were a few weaknesses-- at the end, the author suddenly switches gears to say that Nero might have been a fine guy. Which I agree with, but maybe that could have been a thread throughout instead of an awkward conclusion.

Also, it wasn't really a book about the fire! It was about Nero. A biography of Nero, with a few chapters on the fire. So since I didn't know much about Nero anyways, that was fine-- but if I already knew about him I would have found it repetitive.

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