
A Literary And Historical Treasure

Cicero's letters to his brother, Quintus, allow us an intimate glimpse of their world. Vividly informative too is Cicero's correspondence with Brutus dating from the spring of 43 B.C., which conveys the drama of the period following the assassination of Julius Caesar. These are now made available in a new Loeb Classical Library edition. Shackleton Bailey also provides in this volume a new text and translation of two invective speeches purportedly delivered in the Senate; these are probably anonymous ancient schoolbook exercises but have long been linked with the works of Sallust and Cicero. The Letter to Octavian, ostensibly by Cicero but probably dating from the third or fourth century A.D., is included as well. Here too is the Handbook of Electioneering, a guide said to be written by Quintus to his brother, an interesting treatise on Roman elections.

My Personal Review:
Marcus Tullio Cicero (106-43 B.C.) was a man of well-to-do equestrian origins from outside of Rome who quickly earned his reputation as a lawyer with his eloquent oratory. A moderate conservative, he was a close friend of Pompey The Great whose politics he often agreed with. By the time these letters had been written Cicero had already been elected to the highest office of Consul and had saved Rome from the domestic insurrection of Catiline. It is said that one of Cicero's freedmen kept and published these letters after Cicero's execution by Marc Antony's men in 43 B.C. The letters came to be widely copied during the Imperial period and, that copies were eventually discovered by Petrach in the 14th Century. The Loeb library is unique in that its classical texts are printed in both the original Latin text and English side by side. The translations are
The first sets of letters are between Cicero and his 5 year younger brother Quintus. The value of these letters is that Cicero had never intended to publish these letters and their candidness offer the modern reader a unique window into the past. For example, Quintus was assigned to govern Asia Minor and Cicero, as his older brother, gives him friendly advice as well as news of his family in Italy. The paternalism from one brother to another in these letters is humorous and so timelessly human, "In your province, however, there are a great many who are deceitful and unstable, and trained by a long course of servitude to show an excess of sycophancy." It is these kind of documents that bring history to life; their candidness allows to understand them in a context that is more human.

I find the letters between Brutus and Cicero the most fascinating to read. The letters were written in 43 B.C. when Cicero was in Rome and Brutus in Greece. Both would die before the year had ended. Cicero wanted to find a way to legitimize Brutus' assassination of Caesar without deligitimizing his inheritor, Octavian. To obtain support from Rome, Cicero insisted that Brutus come to show his face in Rome and earn the respect he covets. Uncomfortable with leaving his control of the wealthy provinces Asia Minor and Greece in jeopardy to Marc Antony's army, Brutus asked that Cicero obtain more support and money from Rome first. To make matters worse, Cicero foolishly sought to enhance Brutus' position by achieving a compromise with Octavian. He as foolish because he failed to see that Octavian would obviously never compromise anything that would illegitimize his inheritance and title from his adoptive father, Caesar, no matter how much they both hated Marc Antony: Octavian' pretenses at being interested in Cicero's suggestions were simply attempts at buying time to position himself politically with Caesar's legacy which he inherited: a legacy that would, 23 years later, make him the undisputed master of Rome as its first Emperor, Augustus. Both Brutus and Cicero paid dearly for their miscalculations: Brutus would take his life at Phillipi fighting Marc Antony while Cicero's was taken by Marc Antony's bidding and Octavian's approval. Quintus, Cicero's brother, would also be executed along with his family. The tension of this dilemma is certainly felt in reading these letters. Suddenly, the vision of Brutus as a man whose name would become synonymous with savagery disappears as one can also see a man struggling with his conscience; between a sincere sense of republican duty against the agents of tyranny and the painful reality known all too well by Sulla that to convince Romans to act on your cause you must come to Rome and tell them so.

The Book Of Electioneering and the Letter To Octavian are widely believed to be of later periods and "forgeries." I use forgery as a loose term as it was typical for rhetorical scholars from Imperial Rome onwards to prepare mock speeches or arguments in a similar sense to Plato's 'Dialogues' with...
Socrates. The Book Of Electioneering is illogical because Quintus is giving Cicero, his older brother who had already been Consul, advice on how to run for office. Not only would such advice have been frowned upon, its hard to conceive why Quintus would even write such a text knowing it to be culturally unacceptable. The Letters from Octavian suffer more on historical inaccuracies in the text that indicate the writers lived in a time when the Republic was a fading memory. Overall, the rhetorical styles in these letters are cruder and reflect more of what would be found in the Imperial period as opposed to the Late Republic.

This is a great book to read and own as it is truly a precious window into the past of over 2000 years ago. The urbanity expressed in these letters brings a more human element to history that is rare to find. I strongly recommend this book to any one who enjoys exploring the human past.

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