



Selected Letters

Marcus Tullius Cicero , D.R. Shackleton Bailey (Translation)

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The greatest orator in Roman history, Marcus Tullius Cicero remained one of the republic's chief supporters throughout his life, guided by profound political beliefs that illuminated his correspondence with both close friends and powerful aristocrats. A chronicle of a crumbling civilization during the era when the republic disintegrated and was replaced by despotism, his Letters portray a world dominated by characters who have since acquired almost mythic status - including Pompey, Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, and Mark Antony.

Whether describing the vagaries of war, the collapse of Roman society, his beloved republic, or his own personal domestic dramas, all compellingly reflect the complex personality of an honourable and selfless man whose refusal to compromise ultimately cost him his life.

Selected Letters Details

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Emily says

The Cambridge edition edited by Shackleton Bailey is so so great. I've read excerpts from Cicero's correspondence before but reading so many letters back-to-back was really entertaining. Cicero's letters are much less formal in style than his speeches. Though, I got the distinct feeling that Cicero cannot quite help himself from the occasional, unnecessary rhetorical trick. Shackleton Bailey includes very few letters not written by Cicero and I could immediately tell the difference in writing style. The exchange between Metellus and Cicero is a particularly good example (Fam. 5.1-2).

I may be the exception because I neither love nor hate the Cicero that's been handed down to us in his writings, but I am indeed fascinated by him. Thus I really enjoyed the letters that exhibit more of his personality or relationship with family, friends, and associates. I was also drawn to the letters that discussed Roman theater/morality (e.g. Fam. 7.1). We have so little information about theater that these are usually brought up when the subject arises. It's nice to read them in their entirety and for their own sake.

Finally, the critical commentary is very useful. Since Shackleton Bailey's an expert on Cicero and in the correspondence in particular I felt like I was in good hands. The introduction on Cicero is mostly readable and the appendices are great compendia of basic information (e.g. Roman dating and appellation). Shackleton Bailey's expertise really shines in his commentary on word usage in Cicero. For instance, I learned that Cicero does not use "dudum with a present tense except in combination with iam or tam or quam. I always wonder a bit at the sanity of the classicists who compiled such statistics, but hey, good to know. The only potential downside to the commentary is the notes on the Greek. Cicero inserts Greek words and phrases almost every letter and sometimes Shackleton Bailey translates them outright and sometimes he only includes background information on the word(s). Thus access to the Middle-Liddell or Perseus' online Greek Dictionary will be necessary for students familiar but not masters of Greek.

I. says

"Nothing tends more to the reader's enjoyment than varieties of circumstance and vicissitudes of fortune."
Basically!

Judy says

For those who treasure glimpses into the minds and hearts of historical figures, and who enjoy filling out the record with greater insights into personality and character, letters such as these are a boon. It's a wonder to think that after two thousand years we can look in on the great statesman during his informal moments - though of course the business of office/court was never far from his mind (consequently several letters also provide interesting pathways into events of the time).

This selection is just a fraction of the corpus, which tallies at over 800 letters - an amazing resource! - but is an excellent starting point for Cicero's correspondence as a whole. Shackleton-Bailey's introductions and notes are concise and helpful, even though there are some gaps, and the translation highly readable. Highly recommended.

Jeanette says

supposed to be a wonderful read...recommended by alberto manguel

David Hunt says

Cicero was a man of quick wit, as evidenced by his speeches, of deep conviction, as evidenced by his essays, and, from the evidence of his letters at least, a good friend.

(This isn't the exact edition I read.)

Timothy Phin says

My review is NOT of Cicero, but of this particular edition. While I have no qualms with Professor Bailey's selection of letters, I do have some issues with the commentary itself. I'd selected this for my advanced, undergraduate course, and but in retrospect I'm not sure it was the best decision. The commentary was wide-ranging, and certainly showcases Professor Bailey's considerable knowledge of Cicero, but it was also unhelpful for undergraduates puzzling their way through the particular, and often confusing turns of Cicero's grammar and vocabulary in the letters. I appreciated several of Professor Bailey's insights, however, and so I was glad of the text myself. I just don't feel that it was the best fit for even sturdy, capable undergraduates in their second or third semester of advanced Latin.

Lauren Contreras-Loreto says

Although Cicero's insight comes through even in his personal letters, his excessive use of flattery for servants of the state makes this book rather dry reading. It is an interesting peek into the great senator and orator's mental life.

Ian Vloke-wurth says

A must read for everyone.

Lance says

Really surprised at how much I enjoyed these.

Laure says

Read or translated them in Latin. Cicero seemed very human and the grief he has over his daughters dead was very touching, he wrote some things that are very accurate today.

Jimmy Lu says

Triumph. Bravery. Disillusionment. Vanity. Righteousness. A desire to do his country good. A desire to prove his own worth. A desire for acknowledgement, from the world and from himself. Cicero the man was of many faces. For as much as the ancients insisted that a man's character remained fixed since birth, Cicero was always evolving. Justification. Rationalization. Excuses to friends and to himself. His letters afford us a front seat to the portrait of Cicero, the politician and the man, of his thoughts and motives, of his sense of honor and justice, and finally of his own place in history.

Silvio Curtis says

Read for class. The closest thing we'll get to an unedited look into the thought processes of a politician from the last chaotic years of the Roman Republic.

Zachary Rudolph says

"I absorb myself in literary work, writing or reading. Some of my visitors listen to me as a man of learning, because I know a little more than themselves. All the rest of the time is given to the claims of the body. As for my country, I have already mourned her longer and more deeply than any mother ever mourned her only son."
