

← BOOKS →

‘It Was Greek to Me’

The immortal character of Marcus Tullius Cicero was as an inspiration and guide to rediscovery of the Platonic Greek legacy for the leaders of the Renaissance, and for centuries later, to those of the American republic—John Adams, for example, wrote that “all ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher combined.”

That character was thrown into the mud by the later-Nineteenth century’s most famous historian of antiquity, Theodor Mommsen. Throughout his immensely influential four-volume *History of Rome*, Mommsen branded Cicero “a weakling.” The determinist axioms which guided Mommsen’s contempt for Cicero as a Classically self-educated Platonist intellectual, are not for discussion here. Suffice to say that the branding stuck; Cicero’s Renaissance reputation of 500 years was altered and partly eclipsed.

Anthony Everitt’s enthusiastic attempt to undo Mommsen’s slander, fails precisely at the “greatest politician” moniker of its title, however.

The fundamental character of Cicero—which Shakespeare understood, and Everitt does not—is that, far from “mastering” his age politically, Cicero *confronted* his “Caesarian” age both intellectually and politically, and lived the life of the mind of the Classical Greece which Rome had conquered and destroyed. He was the rarity that today’s political pundits perpetually search for, and repeatedly fabricate: the truly independent and honest “political outsider” to the Roman oligarchy of the bloody and disastrous final decades of the “Republic.”

The events of Cicero’s life—even as described by Mommsen, as well as by Plutarch, by Cicero himself in his *Orationes*, or by Everitt—show that he was completely apart from the spirit of his age. And they show that *thus, for that reason*, at the moments of greatest crisis

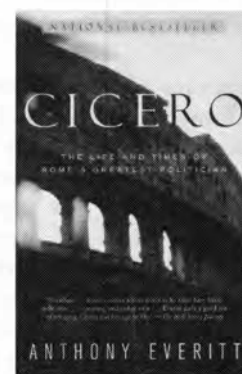
in the long and tragic death of the Republic, Cicero suddenly became Rome’s powerful leading figure and image of hope. This happened two times, 20 years apart.

At the time of the Cataline conspiracy which first attempted to establish the dictatorship of the oligarchical “money party,” Cicero almost single-handedly defeated the conspirators by superior political intelligence, without war or violence in the city. For this, general celebrations spontaneously acclaimed him “father of the fatherland,” an honor never given to any other Roman. The second instance was the final crisis following the assassination of Julius Caesar. Before, in between, and after those moments, Cicero remained an apparently powerless outsider, several times exiled, sometimes hunted, finally executed by Rome’s ruling, chaotic, brutally imperious oligarchy.

It is this character as a “powerful shadow” of Greek culture, stalking a doomed Rome, which is the Ciceronian presence Shakespeare brilliantly created—mostly “offstage”—with a true historian’s precision, in his *Julius Caesar*.

Searching for Archimedes

Everitt makes it his contrasting thesis that Cicero, as the republic’s “greatest politician,” was a kind of Roman Huey Long, finally undone only by Augustus Caesar. This mistake tends to hide the value of Everitt’s many perceptive observations on Roman history, and on Cicero’s role in key events. He opens his book with the second crisis: Cicero watches the assassination of Caesar from a Senate front bench; the killing done, Brutus and Cassius call out to him: “Cicero! Liberty!,” as if wishing to put their plot under his leadership. This error of intuition by Everitt characterizes the course of the book. It causes him to give merely occasional and incidental note to Cicero’s voluminous writings on Classical Greek philosophy; his attempt



Cicero:
The Life and Times of
Rome’s Greatest Politician
by Anthony Everitt
New York, Random House, 2001
364 pages, paperback, \$14.95

to revive Plato’s Socratic dialogue in books and in practice at his estate; such fascinating details as his having coined Latin philosophical terms such as *qualitas*, *moralis*, and *essentia* to express their Greek originals.

Everitt makes much of the fact that Cicero, during his year as governor of Sicily and years later in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey), “broke the mold” of gubernatorial looting, and even succeeded in stopping the looting of these provinces by Roman tax farmers—something like eliminating traffic jams in New York City’s rush hour. (In Asia, he exposed a looting scheme of the “incorruptible” aristocrat Brutus, otherwise his close friend.) But Everitt notes in just one long paragraph, a far more crucial sign of Cicero’s immortality: his own real mission, while governor of Sicily in 67 B.C., to rediscover the legacy of Archimedes, the great Greek scientist killed by Roman soldiers over a century earlier. Cicero devoted months to a successful quest for Archimedes’ grave, searching for the sphere-and-cylinder engraving he knew to be on the tombstone. He found two of Archimedes’ lost scientific instruments, and brought them back to Rome. And, he searched for Eratosthenes’ map of the Mediterranean region, later recom-

mending it to Julius Caesar. This was the real passion of the Roman governor Cicero.

Shakespeare's historical intuition was much more accurate, as Lyndon LaRouche shows incisively in his "Shakespeare As a Scholar" published in this issue of *Fidelio* [SEE page 4, this issue]. In *Julius Caesar*, the playwright builds a paradox around the doomed, "Romantic" conspiracy of Brutus *et al.* The conspirators all wish to know "what Cicero says"; they wish to have

Cicero's name and reputation for their coup; later, Brutus and Cassius are shaken to learn the triumvirs are executing Senators—"Cicero one!" (here is Shakespeare's "doom of Rome" that LaRouche points to). Yet, the tragic Brutus, Cicero's long-time friend, refuses to approach him. "He will never follow any thing that other men begin," Brutus warns: Cicero is guided by other axioms than the "noble Roman."

Shakespeare gives the metaphorical

sign pointing to the solution to this paradox of Cicero's powerful offstage presence, in the famous remark of the brutish Roman oligarch Casca, upon the speech of Cicero which Brutus and Cassius are demanding to be briefed on: "It was Greek to me." Shakespeare thus draws for the audience in a dramatic instant, an image of the ruinous alienation of Rome's "noblest" from the Greek Classical legacy, which was Cicero's life's passion.

—Paul Gallagher

The Immortal Talent Of Martin Luther King

Continued from page 3

today: Because of that victory, because of what happened with Louis XI of France, we had the first European state, in which the government was responsible for the general welfare of all of the people. The general welfare means exactly what it means in 1 Corinthians 13, when Paul writes of *agapē*, sometimes called "love," or "charity." It's that quality. It is not the law, it is not the rule-book, that counts. It's your love of humanity, that counts. That you must always live for your love of humanity. And therefore, government is not legitimate, except as government is efficiently committed to the general welfare, of not only *all* of the people, but also the improvement of the condition of life of their posterity.

And, for the first time, in France, with that state, the principle of constitutional law, that government can not treat some of the people as human cattle— It is not legitimate, it is not a nation, if it treats some of its people as human cattle; it must think of the general welfare of *all* of the people. It must be *captured* by a sense of responsibility to all of the people, *and* to their posterity.

Because we're all mortal. And to arouse in us the passions, while we're alive, which will impel us to do good, we have to have a sense that our life,

and the consuming of our life, the spending of our talent, is going to mean something for coming generations. The best people look for things, like Moses, that are going to happen, when he will no longer be around to enjoy them. It's this sense of immortality. It's why parents, in the best degree, sacrifice for their children. It's why children sacrifice for education, for *their* children, for opportunities for their children. You go through the pangs of suffering and shortage, but you have the sense that you're going someplace, that your life is going to mean something. That you can die with a smile on your face. You've conquered death. You've spent your talent wisely. Why life will mean something better for generations to come.

That was the principle! That principle inspired the man who became King Henry VII of England, to do the same thing against the evil Richard III, and establish England, at that time, as the second modern nation-state.

In a sense, that's what Martin was doing, the same kind of process.

The Hamlet Case

But, now, let's take the other side of the thing. Let's take the case of Hamlet. Hamlet says, that we have the opportunity to fight, to free ourselves from horrible conditions—but! But, what hap-

pens after we die? What happens beyond death? And, it is the *fear* of what happens beyond death, which makes people cowards!

And, that is our problem, in the United States, today! . . .

Martin was one of the rare people, in his time, who had a deep sense of what it is to be a human being. Who had a deep sense, of the lesson of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ. He was able to bring to politics—which he didn't go into to get in as politics, as such—he was a natural leader. The natural leader is one who comes not from the political process as such, but from the people. Martin *never* achieved political office. Yet, he was probably as important a figure of the United States as any modern President. He achieved that. His authority, as a leader, came from the people. He fought against the people, and with the people, to free them. He was a leader, in a true sense. His power as a political force, in the nation and in the world, came from his relationship to the people. . . .

And, that's the lesson, I believe, that has to be taught, has to be understood, if we're going to save this nation. We need to tap into that power. And, as I say, of all the images of recent political leaders of the United States, Martin, both as a national leader, and as a world leader—which he also was, in terms of his influence—is the best example of the kind of personality, who we must have, and must develop, to get us out of the horrible, frightening mess that threatens us, today.