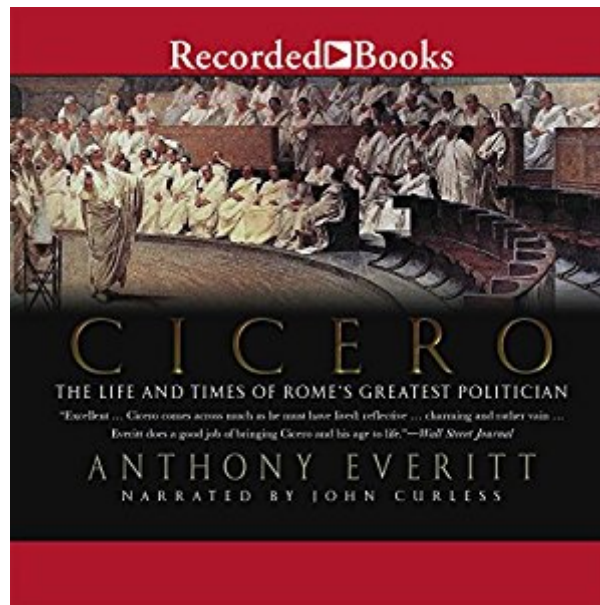


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Cicero: The Life And Times Of Rome's Greatest Politician



Synopsis

John Adams said of Cicero, "All ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher combined." Voltaire said of Cicero, "He taught us how to think." And yet Anthony Everitt's authoritative yet accessible work is the first one-volume biography of the Roman statesman in over 25 years. He squared off against Caesar and was friends with young Brutus. He advised the legendary Pompey on his somewhat botched transition from military hero to politician. He lambasted Mark Antony and was master of the smear campaign, as feared for his wit as he was for exposing his opponents' sexual peccadilloes. Brilliant, voluble, cranky, a genius of political manipulation but also a true patriot and idealist, Cicero was Rome's most feared politician, one of the greatest lawyers and statesmen of all times. Machiavelli, Queen Elizabeth, John Adams and Winston Churchill all studied his example. No man has loomed larger in the political history of mankind. In this dynamic and engaging biography, Anthony Everitt plunges us into the fascinating, scandal-ridden world of ancient Rome in its most glorious heyday. Accessible to us through his legendary speeches but also through an unrivaled collection of unguarded letters to his close friend Atticus, Cicero comes to life here as a witty and cunning political operator.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are many able and thoughtful reviews of this bestseller below. Rather than rehash the common themes -- namely that "Cicero" is well-written but a bit shallow (I happen to agree) -- I've decided to use this review to assess Everitt's work against the last popular biography on the great

Roman statesman and philosopher, Elizabeth Rawson's "Cicero: A Portrait," which is regarded by many Roman scholars as the finest ever written. With diligence and a little bit of luck I was able to obtain a copy of Rawson on the Internet. I decided to read the two books concurrently to discover why many learned readers hold her book in so much higher regard than Everitt's. Keeping with the spirit of a head-to-head competition, first let us consider the "tale of the tape." The paperback versions of both books are remarkably similar in structure, organization and length. That is, both are chronological narratives organized into seventeen chapters and just over 300 pages in length (it should be noted that the font and margins in Rawson are smaller, so "Portrait" is roughly 20% longer in terms of wordcount). Clearly, then, Everitt's relative weakness isn't excessive brevity or an unorthodox and ineffective approach to Cicero's life. Much to my surprise, these books turned out to be just as similar in content as they were in size. Rawson certainly does a more thorough job of analyzing Cicero's philosophical works and her book ends with an excellent but brief review of Cicero's legacy, but overall Everitt's prose is more lucid and he excels Rawson in his ability to capture the pulse of life in Republican Rome (his descriptions of the traditional Roman marriage ceremony and assembly voting procedures are especially noteworthy).

The dust jacket of Everitt's attractive biography quotes a perceptive English reviewer, who observes, "Of all the arts, that of politics has advanced least since the days of Greece and Rome." Upon closing the book, my overwhelming sense was that Franklin Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson and, yes, Bill Clinton would have done perfectly well in Julian Rome. The broad contours of the political game have, in the intervening two millennia, acquired several strips of veneer and a few layers of varnish, but they are immediately recognizable in this briskly paced work. Pompey's political ponderousness, Caesar's bright dexterity, and Cicero's conservative deliberateness all find ready parallels in this and every other age. Gain, glory, and fear are here the prime motivators--generalize to politics Thucydides' famous observation that men will go to war for any of these three reasons and you will have neatly summarized all political motive--and Everitt nicely sifts through the ample historical record to relate how the great men of the late Republic clambered for the pinnacle as the challenge of Julius Caesar loomed. For readers not particularly well versed in Roman history, Everitt does particularly well in quickly situating Cicero's life in the great events of his day, the context of an expanding empire, and the daily life of a Rome that had no city government as we would know it--little public security (private guards for the wealthy, nothing for the rest), sanitation, services, or urban administration. An accretion of checks and balances (so admired by our own founders) caused politics to deadlock, with each of the major protagonists

offering solutions that either restored, or to circumvented, the formal primacy of the Senate and Rome's great families.

It is not my practise to review books for which I have little taste. There are cases where I make exceptions, particularly where I notice that there is an overwhelming tsunami of opinion that tends in the opposite direction to my views. I feel such a situation requires some balance. Virtually every reviewer of this book has praised it to the skies as if it were the most important book to emerge on Cicero in recent memory. Let me at the outset state that the best recent biography of Cicero is NOT this one. It is Elizabeth Rawson's "Cicero: A Portrait". It is not as lavishly produced, but its pedigree and credentials are infinitely superior to Everitt's rather disappointing (though lengthy) effort. And it is every bit as readable - and in fact is more succinct and to the point. In fact this book is NOT the most important or best biography of our times. It is rather business-like and pedestrian. Serious students of the period and specialists should not reach for this book in the expectation of something ground-breaking. It is anything but that. It is a decent, well-written account (by a non-specialist) of one of the most famous and influential figures in all of history. The casual reader will enjoy it (as the other reviewers suggest) but they would profit more from an acquaintance with Rawson's book, which I have reviewed as well. Everitt's book is filled significant mistakes in the Latin. And Everitt has adopted a policy that is dangerous for the non-specialist - he ignores the modern writers and goes back to the "ancient-sources". As a result he is at their mercy. As Mary Beard has remarked, "the result, almost inevitably, is a patchwork of ancient texts, sewn together with a thread of common sense, guesswork and sheer fantasy".

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