ON FARMING

De Agricultura

For
MAUREEN

CATO

ON FARMING

De Agricultura

A MODERN TRANSLATION
WITH COMMENTARY
BY

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Introduction

Cato's *On Farming* is the first surviving work of Latin prose, the oldest visible star in a great galaxy. It is first-hand evidence of farming, rural life and slavery in Italy 2,200 years ago, when Rome was almost ready to rule the Mediterranean. It allows us to penetrate the mind of a remarkable and original man, one whose long-term influence on his city, its empire and its literature was profound.

This is the first English translation of *On Farming* for over sixty years. The translation and footnotes go together: as explained later in this introduction, they are designed to make clear to the modern reader the structure of Cato's book and the way he expected it to be read.

Cato's Italy

In 200 BC Rome was not yet the unquestioned ruler of Italy. The last great challenge to Roman rule of the peninsula, the 'Social War', was still more than a century in the future. Yet in trade, in politics and in intellectual life Rome, once a city-state, was gradually, imperceptibly, becoming the dominant power and taking the role of a capital.

Italy remained fragmented both politically and linguistically. Latin was the native tongue of Latium (modern Lazio) including Rome itself, and was spreading inexorably. Oscan, Umbrian and other Italic languages, closely related to Latin, were spoken across most of the centre of the peninsula. Greek, Messapian, Sicel and Punic were among the languages of the south and of Sicily. Etruscan, Celtic, Ligurian and Venetic were the major languages of the north; Etruscan was now giving way to Latin with the political decline of the cities of Etruria. Migrations and varying political fortunes had carried several of these languages, notably Etruscan and Oscan, well beyond their native territories – yet within three centuries all of them, except Greek and Latin, would be extinct.

The ascendancy of Latin, even in Cato's time, is shown by the fact that it was becoming a language of literature. Among the writers of Latin in the second century BC, Cato actually has a rare distinction: he will have heard Latin spoken in his infancy, and it may have been his mother

tongue.[1] The comic playwright Plautus, the only author who wrote in Latin before Cato and whose works happen to survive, was Umbrian. So was the tragedian Accius. Caecilius was a Celt from northern Italy. Pacuvius and the narrative poet Ennius were Oscan speakers; Ennius will have learnt Latin as a third language, having been bilingual in Oscan and Greek (footnote 30 below). The comic playwright Terence is said to have been North African. If so, either a Berber language or Punic (the language of Carthage) was his mother tongue, and his second language may well have been Greek. They were, all of them, skilled linguists and stylists, but if any one of them can show us how the logic of native spoken Latin might be transformed directly into the logic of a written text, that one is Cato.

Cato's Life[2]

Marcus Porcius Cato was born in 234 BC in Tusculum, a self-governing town of Latium fifteen miles south of Rome. Its citizens, including Cato's father, were Roman citizens.

His father's living, however, was as a farmer in the mountainous Sabine country, well to the southeast. 'I spent all my boyhood in frugality, privation and hard work, reclaiming the Sabine rocks, digging and planting those flinty fields' (Cato, *Speeches* 128).

It was normal for Romans and other Italians to have two or three names. Marcus was his *praenomen* or forename, used by close family and friends. Porcius was his *nomen*, his wider family name. A third name or *cognomen* had generally originated as a nickname of some

(1) 'May have been' because we know nothing of Cato's mother, and we do not know whether it was by descent or otherwise that his father held Tusculan and Roman citizenship.

(2) The handiest sources for Cato's life are the Greek biography by Plutarch and the shorter sketch in Latin by Cornelius Nepos. Like Livy's history of Rome, these biographies were written long after the events, when the legend of Cato had had time to build. There is much of interest in Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, fictional dialogues in which a fictionalized Cato is the main figure. Cato was often talked of by other Roman writers: occasionally they quoted his own writings. The Greek *History* by Polybius, a statesman who met Cato at least once, must have discussed his career at some length, but it survives only in fragments for this period.

Astin, *Cato* (see bibliography) should be consulted for a detailed discussion of the evidence and for a judicious weighing-up of the interpretations that it will bear.

kind; his own *cognomen*, Cato, went back in the family at least to his great-grandfather Cato, who was 'more than once rewarded for bravery, and was reimbursed from public funds, five times successively, when warhorses of his were killed in battle' (Plutarch, *Cato* 1.1).

Cato embarked on a career in public life. For a Roman citizen this meant service as an army officer followed by competitive election to 'magistracies'. Each of these lasted for one year; some of them led to army command, some to civilian administration. This alternation of military and civil posts was normal for ambitious and wealthy Romans for some centuries afterwards. Rome's rapid expansion from country town to imperial metropolis certainly had something to do with the fact that, for Romans, military success was a necessary part of a political career.

'I first enlisted at seventeen, when Hannibal was having his run of luck, setting Italy on fire', said Cato (*Speeches*, 187–8). The friendship and patronage of L. Valerius Flaccus, roughly Cato's age and the son of a consul, helped him to the rank of military tribune under Q. Fabius Maximus in 214.

After some years of fighting, Cato was elected quaestor in 204, again under Flaccus' patronage. This was the first rung on the ladder of electoral politics. His biographer adds: 'The Romans had a special term, *New Men*, for people who rose in politics without any family precedent. This was what they called Cato. He liked to say that in terms of office and power he was New, but in terms of his family's bravery and prowess he was extremely Old' (Plutarch, *Cato* 1.2).[3] As quaestor he served under P. Cornelius Scipio 'Africanus', who was then gathering forces in Sicily for the invasion of Africa that would end the long war against Hannibal. Scipio enjoyed the Greek culture and fine living of Syracuse. Cato did not, and thought them bad for Roman soldiers.

As a politician, Cato could now wield patronage himself. His powers as a speaker were employed on behalf of people in nearby villages and towns who wished to use him as an advocate, in the ever-increasing number of disputes in which 'judgment was to take place at Rome' (to quote Cato, ***149***).[4] He will have begun to prosper.

(3) The orator Cicero, over a century later, was another New Man (*novus homo*) of Roman politics.
(4) References in this style are to the chapters of Cato *On Farming*.

His next elected office, in 199, was as one of the two aediles, an office that traditionally carried civil responsibilities in Rome itself. That year Cato and his colleague found excuses to organize more Games than usual – not an unpopular move.

In 198 he was elected praetor, and spent the year as governor of Sardinia – a year during which his chief distinction, according to later reports, was an almost showy refusal to spend public money unnecessarily.

In 195 he and his friend Flaccus were elected consuls. This was the climax of many Roman political careers. Cato's task as consul was to command the Roman army in the northeastern half of the vast new territory of Spain, which had been captured from the Carthaginians a few years before but was almost continually in revolt. Within the limit of the single campaigning season, from a 'very difficult and unfavourable starting point' as Cato himself said (*Speeches* 19), he ran an effective campaign, training, disciplining and stretching his troops, confronting and defeating rebels. He even rescued a junior colleague, the praetor P. Manlius, from threatened annihilation in southwestern Spain beyond Cato's own province.

He seemed so successful that he was voted the honour of celebrating a Triumph on his return to Rome. The booty he had won made up a bonus of a pound of silver to every legionary. The Senate concluded that his army could safely be disbanded. Whereupon Spain broke out in revolt once more – but this was a problem for his successor in Spain, Scipio Africanus.

And so in the course of his career Cato had served the expanding Roman state successively in Sicily and north Africa, in Sardinia and in Spain. He also served with distinction in Greece in 191 and 189. But his real fame came – and still comes – from what he did and said in Rome. From the outset of his political career, he was the conviction politician of the day. He knew Roman behaviour, Roman morality, the Roman way. From this standpoint he attacked a succession of victims for embezzlement and other illegal acts while abroad, and generally succeeded in convicting them or at any rate in discrediting them. They included M'. Acilius Glabrio, his commander in 191, another New Man; the great Scipio Africanus, Cato's commander in Sicily and Africa, and his

brother L. Cornelius Scipio; and Q. Minucius Thermus, one of those who followed Cato in Spain. By 184 he had a well-deserved reputation for stubborn righteousness and fiery oratory. It must have been clear to his former superiors that he was likely to be anything but loyal to them. It was equally clear to Cato that he had a higher loyalty: to Rome, its laws and its ancient morality.

Every five years Rome elected two censors. These held office for a year and their task was to review the lists of the Senate, the *Equites* 'knights' and the citizen body in general, expelling those who were either unworthy of the rank or too poor to meet their obligations. The censorship was sometimes looked on as an honourable sinecure, but in 184 a climate had been created, with Cato's help, in which Romans wanted better behaviour from their aristocrats. In 184 there was fierce competition for the censorship. All other candidates, except Flaccus, ran what we might call 'negative' campaigns, directed against Cato personally. Cato and Flaccus were elected.

Their famous censorship of 184/3 aroused political feuds that 'occupied Cato for the rest of his life' (Livy 39.44.9). They demoted several senators and knights, for reasons including personal morals. Victims included M. Fulvius Nobilior, whom Cato had served in 189, and L. Quinctius Flamininus, brother of one of Rome's greatest generals. Cato concerned himself freely with issues of morality and private expenditure, speaking out *On Clothes and Vehicles* and *On Statues and Pictures*. The censors imposed penalties for encroachment on public land and misuse of the public water supply. They extended Rome's sewer network to serve the Aventine hill, at great cost.

Cato, it is reliably said, disapproved of humour when censorial business was in hand. L. Nasica was asked formally at registration, 'Answer to your mind. Have you a wife?' He replied, 'Yes, but not to my mind!' and was immediately demoted.[5]

After his censorship Cato held no more elected offices, but his involvement in Roman politics was uninterrupted. As senator, advocate, prosecutor, he continued to target misbehaviour by generals on campaign and by governors in overseas provinces. His oratorical skills were used in long-running disputes with old adversaries and their relatives as well as in defending, or rewriting, his own past acts.

(5) Based on Cicero, *The Orator* 2.260; Gellius 4.20.4–5.

Rome's involvement in the eastern Mediterranean meanwhile grew and grew. Cato found himself the patron or advocate of Greek delegations who had come to press a case in Rome. As a self-proclaimed traditional Roman, a self-proclaimed distruster of Greeks, he might have found this position uncomfortable, but it did not leave him at a loss for words. He was asked in 150 if he would help to get a thousand state hostages released and sent home to Greece. When the debate in the Senate had dragged on for a while, Cato rose and said, 'As if we had nothing to do, we sit all day deciding whether some old Greeks should be buried by our undertakers or by Achaean ones.' Like many of Cato's throwaway remarks, this intervention was well-judged; the vote, when it came, was for releasing the 'old Greeks', who had had a seventeen years' enforced holiday in Rome. Among them was the future historian Polybius.[6]

Cato's last major contribution to Roman public affairs was to urge war against Carthage, Rome's great rival. The 'Third Punic War', as it is now known, was eventually declared in Cato's lifetime. It ended, after his death, with the complete destruction of Carthage. As Cato had so insistently repeated, *Carthago delenda est*, 'Carthage must be razed.' Its destroyer would be P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus, brother of Cato's daughter-in-law Tertia. 'He alone has a mind,' said the aged Cato about Aemilianus, 'the rest are darting shadows' (Polybius 36 fragment 8.7).[7]

Cato had married Licinia, 'noble but not rich', about the time of his consulship. He was said to have joked 'that his wife never put her arms round him except when there was a thunderstorm: he was a happy man when Jove thundered' (Plutarch, *Cato* 17.7). He was also said to be a good husband and a thoughtful and painstaking father.

His first son, Marcus Cato later called 'Licinianus', was born around 192. Cato took personal charge of his son's education, and himself wrote out a history of Rome 'in big letters' to teach Marcus to read. Marcus fought honourably in Greece in 168 under the eminent L. Aemilius

(6) Based on Plutarch, *Cato* 9, whose source may be Polybius' history. The story continues: 'A few days later … Polybius and the others wanted to return to the Senate to ask that the hostages be guaranteed reinstatement in the positions that they had held in Greece before their exile. They asked Cato's advice. He smiled, and said that Polybius would be like Odysseus wanting to go back into the Cyclops' cave because he had forgotten his felt cap and his belt.'
(7) Cato was quoting Homer, *Odyssey* 10.495.

Paullus. He married Tertia, his commander's daughter, in the 160s and died just after being elected praetor in the late 150s.

Licinia, too, died relatively young. At the age of about 80, still vigorous, Cato married a much younger woman, Salonia. She was the daughter of one of his secretaries, so it is on balance likely that she was not of Roman descent. He had a son by Salonia, also called Marcus and known to later historians as 'Cato Salonius' or 'Salonianus'.[8] Cato died in 149.

His Writings and Opinions

On Farming is the only work by Cato that survives to modern times, but later Romans were able to read numerous other writings by him. Their quotations of Cato make up a collection of fragments from which we can learn something of his lost work.[9] The fragments are full of personal opinions forcefully stated. Classicists like their classical authors to be logical and consistent, and the fragments have been much mulled over in order to demonstrate logic and consistency in Cato.

About a hundred and fifty of Cato's speeches[10] were known to Cicero, a century after his time. We no longer know even the titles of all of these. It seems clear that Cato began as early as 202 to write out and retain versions of the speeches that he had actually delivered 'In the Senate' or 'To the People': the first that we can date was *On the Improper Election of the Aediles*, delivered in 202. Several speeches from the year in which he was Consul, a self-justificatory retrospect *On his Consulship*, and numerous speeches as Censor, are among the ones from which fragments are known. It is not clear whether he himself allowed others to read and copy the texts (i.e. whether he 'published' them), or whether this first happened after his death.

(8) Our main source of information on Cato's home life and sex life is Plutarch's *Cato*: see chapter 24 on his second marriage. Plutarch's stories are sometimes based on Cato's own writings. When they are not, their reliability is hard to judge.
(9) The best texts to use, for a reader who is not confined to English, are Chassignet's edition of the *Origines*, with a French translation; Malcovati's *Oratorum Romanorum fragmenta*, in Latin only, for the speeches; and the complete collection of fragments with a German translation by Schönberger. Details of these three are given in the bibliography on p. 235. Older editions by H. Jordan (Leipzig, 1860) and by H.W.G. Peter (*Historicorum Romanorum reliquiae* vol. 1, 2nd ed., Leipzig, 1914) are still cited.
(10) Astin, *Cato*, especially pp. 131–156.