

Marcus Porcius Cato the Younger:  
Some Episodes from His Life

by: R.L. Porter

Of Marcus Porcius Cato, descendent of the famous Cato the Censor, Cicero once said that he thought he was living in the ideal Republic of Plato while, in fact, he strove amid the sewer-rats of Romulus. P. Mackendrick (The Roman Mind at Work, pp. 43,44) describes Cato from a bust of him found in Morocco as having an "inbred, thin-lipped, unsmiling, overfine face, with a tremendous beak of a Roman nose, and an air of hauteur." Cato was an avid Stoic, combining philosophical principles with old fashioned Roman ways. Stern, stubborn and self-righteous, he was, in modern political terms, an almost fanatical upholder of the far right, an arch conservative.

63 B.C.: Cato, while only a back-bencher in the Senate, was responsible for swinging the senate away from a merciful treatment of some pathetic rebels led by Catiline. As a result of Cato's unyielding oratory, the rebellious Roman aristocrats were put to death by the consul Cicero - without trial.

59 B.C.: Julius Caesar, as one of the consuls of the year, and now in a triumviral partnership with Pompey and Crassus, introduced a land bill which all conservatives hated just on the general principle that all land bills were wicked and against the interests of the upper class. As Caesar was putting the motion before the assembly, three tribunes, the opposing consul, Bibulus, and the zealous Cato charged in to stop the proceedings. The tribunes were howled down and driven off, poor Bibulus had his fascēs, his rods and axes, broken to bits and a bucket of human waste dumped on his consular head, and Cato was picked up and pitched bodily out of the assembly area. Such things do not lead to a willingness to compromise in the future.

50-46 B.C.: In 50 B.C. an attempt was made to avoid a civil war between Caesar and the republic by way of a compromise. Three hundred and seventy Senators voted in favour, only 22 die-hards against. The decree, though passed, was vetoed by a tribune. We may be sure that Cato, though unnamed, was prominent among those adamant two dozen men who helped precipitate a conflict which eventually destroyed the republic. Naturally when war came Cato fought competently, but not successfully, against the Caesareans. Commanding the north African town of Utica in 46 B.C. as quarter-master general, he learned that the main republican army under Scipio had been defeated at Thapsus. Put under seige he saw that there was no way out. In the evening he read Plato's Phaedo on the immortality of the soul, went to bed, and slept like a babe. In the morning he committed "hari kiri" by plunging his sword into his abdomen and pulling his innards out with his own hands - no wine and slit wrists in a hot, scented bath for this martyr. Caesar said of him, "O Cato, I envy you your death; you denied me the chance to spare your life." For the next century of the early empire, Cato stood, a strong, inflexible symbol of unbendable republicanism.