



## **An Overview of Modern Literature on Pliny**

The tendency for academics to examine Pliny's letters for distinct themes or primarily for historical elements has meant that full-scale studies of Pliny, his life and his collection of letters have been rare. This may come down in part to the fact that Pliny was the subject of a monumental study by Sherwin-White, the fruit of nearly twenty years' labour – *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*, published in 1966. Three years later the full text with facing translation of Pliny's letters and his *Panegyricus* came out in two Loeb volumes, translated by Betty Radice. In the same year, Sherwin-White produced his *Fifty Letters of Pliny*, a book still in common use today in schools and universities.

The focus of Sherwin-White's two works, explicitly stated, was on the letters' use for those interested in the history of Rome and now there was an excellent translation of all ten books of letters which could easily be dipped into when required. Pliny himself, and his style, were largely overlooked, but there seemed little need for much further study after these works.

I am, of course, simplifying, but many years passed before significant work on Pliny resumed, particularly in the English-speaking world. There was, however, an edition of Book Ten (Pliny's letters to the emperor Trajan, including a few of the emperor's replies, when Pliny was governor in Bithynia-Pontus) in 1990 by Wynne Williams in the Aris and Phillips series, with text and facing translation with associated notes, but this stood alone.

Fortunately, the past twenty-five years or so have seen a reversal in this trend and a resurgence in Plinian studies. The author and his writings have been re-evaluated, his literary ability realised and analysed, and the complexities of the composition of his collection are starting to be appreciated.

In 2006 P.G. Walsh wrote a new translation with very helpful notes in the Oxford World's Classics series. Particular aspects of Pliny received studies, including the portrayal of women, the subject of J. M. Carlon's 2009 book and J.-A. Shelton's monograph four years later. 2012 saw the publication of *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: An Introduction* by Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello, a sweeping examination of the letters which included close



readings of those in Books 1 and 6, appraisals of letter cycles, advocated reading the letters and books in sequence and sought to firmly establish Pliny as an author deserving of study for his literary merit. The following year Chris Whitton wrote an extensive commentary on Book 2 in the Cambridge Green and Yellow series, highlighting the benefits of reading each letter in its context and meticulously probing Pliny's style.

Interest in Pliny had escalated rapidly, to such an extent that three biographies have been written in English in just the last six years. Rex Winsbury effectively puts Pliny on trial, evaluating his life and letters with a broadly chronological approach but focussing in on key events and topics. The focus is on the character of the man, as far as can be deduced. Among his enlightening conclusions he remarks:

“His letters personalise the values and dilemmas of the huge empire he served. They are his vehicle for a unique (among Romans) act of studied self-revelation. He enjoyed high office and its trappings – and the sound of his own voice...he was an honest man who took his responsibilities seriously, but saw his job as being to make the best of the system he was born in rather than step outside and offer a radical critique of it...He was anxious to be liked – too anxious, perhaps...”

Roy Gibson's *Man of High Empire: The Life of Pliny the Younger* and Daisy Dunn's *In the Shadow of Vesuvius: A Life of Pliny* came out within a year of one another. The latter charts Pliny's daily life through the seasons and considers him in relation to his uncle, Pliny the Elder. Gibson's book reflects on the process of writing a biography, especially of an ancient figure, and takes a geographical approach to his subject, making each chapter centre on a place of crucial importance to understanding Pliny, be it Comum, Rome or Umbria and the Laurentine Shore among others. He notes in his closing comments:

“A senatorial life in high empire is bound to be messy, compromised, and filled up to the brim with its own sense of entitlement. Yet it commands attention. Such is the life of Pliny the Younger.”

His book underscores how Pliny is not a one-dimensional figure, but that the different places in his life reflect differing sides to his individuality, while the final verdict is that Pliny



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“records and encapsulates so compellingly’ ancient society, and that the author has found joy in ‘the deliberate and artistic economy of his language, so unusual for Latin prose”.

The Commentary takes such recent studies and verdicts on Pliny – his life *and* his literary abilities – as its starting point. The selection of letters to be read in Latin and in English provide sufficient evidence for readers to draw their own conclusions, offering an introduction to and sample of his style, his interests and some personal relationships. The debt owed to the works mentioned above is profound and obvious to those familiar with them. Anyone wishing to learn more about any aspect of Pliny will almost certainly be able to find answers somewhere in one of them.