Gibson, R., Morello, R.


We live in an age of proliferating Handbooks and Companions, Encyclopedias, Introductions and the like, on an astonishing range of classical subjects, including of course authors, texts, and genres. Quality, nature, and purpose vary widely; there is much overlap and fierce competition; intended audiences range from curious beginners to advanced scholars. Inevitably these are large multi-authored volumes, where the focus and value of the individual essays may or may not be under the control of the editors. One consults them with a sense of deep gratitude and frustration.

Gibson and Morello’s volume offers a wonderful alternative model: there is nothing quite like it. It is indeed an Introduction, with something to offer to both the absolute beginner and the advanced Plinian, and to all stages of familiarity between. The main text is structured into eight interlocking chapters, which are carefully balanced in different ways and laced with repeated references backward and forward. Let us start with a catalog of the book’s virtues.

Dense and complex, the text is yet a distinct unity. It comes to us from two distinguished Latinists who have thought and written about Pliny for fifteen years. They have hosted conferences on him and relevant subjects, and the impressive list of scholars whom they thank for their help is a veritable Who’s Who of Plinian, not to say Silver Latin, studies. Yet this is very much the product of two minds working in tandem, and they indeed offer no clue in the Introduction as to who is responsible for which part. That information they reveal only in the last chapter of the work (p. 236), but even then they are reticent and rather confusing, for a purpose which has probably dawned on the reader by then. Re-examining the preceding text—which is precisely what they want us to do—it is hard to find any stylistic tics to distinguish one author from the other.

Within this unity there is a remarkable diversity, an admirable catholicity of interests and methods. The authors’ own (similar) tastes are clear, but they are open to every approach. Letters are read and reread individually, and as grouped by subject, by treatment, by correspondent, and as part of larger chains, even constructions, within and between books, backwards and forwards. Intratexts within the correspondence are examined closely, sometimes word by word, sometimes through echoes and approaches. Intertexts are laid out and evaluated, especially with the works of the usual suspects, Cicero and Seneca, Ovid and Martial. Major themes are introduced and then elaborated and refined as we learn what made Pliny tick, what was urgently important for
him to state and restate. And over the eight chapters we gain a deepening appreciation of the complexity and sophistication of his text, its self-aware definition of itself, its “steely self-confidence”.

What particularly enriches their reading of the Letters is their willingness to engage with historical approaches, both recognizing their validity and attempting to integrate them into their literary reading. They are accordingly sensitive to the sociology of courtroom and salon, of great men and ‘less successful friends’, of intimacy and restraint, of age and youth, of war and peace. They are familiar with the physical evidence: the major inscriptions along with the most authoritative interpretations; the latest archaeological information about the villas at Laurentum (not quite identified) and Tifernum Tiberinum; the landscape around Lake Como. And they seek to blend the physical into their readings of the Plinian texts, always stimulating if not always convincing the reader.

At the same time they are fully aware of the value of basic Realien to readers looking for quick orientation and to their own larger enterprise. One appendix has a timeline in three columns which list political events, events in Pliny’s life, and events in his ‘circle’: these are accurate and up-to-date, running from c. AD 58 through to 117. Another appendix offers a catalog of books One through Nine, letter by letter, with addressees and a one-sentence summary of the contents of each. And a third presents “bibliographical help” on some 31 “popular topics in the Letters”, from “Addressees, family and friends of Pliny”, through “Otium (leisure) and Pliny”, down to “Women in Pliny (incl. Calpurnia)”. Here a selection of letter numbers is offered for each topic, followed by bibliographic suggestions to “Start with”, “Further items”, and “See also” (which refers the reader to related topics).

Indeed another great virtue of the book is its concern for the reader. The authors repeatedly stress the value of rereading the collection, of approaching the letters in different contexts and concatenations, of treating key themes with different methods. Pliny’s Letters, as they assert early on, are not a mosaic but a kaleidoscope. Hence there is much reference to earlier and later discussions within their own text. Each chapter begins with a summary of its course and its intentions, and each is divided into titled sections to guide the reader (unfortunately not included in the table of Contents). Dotted disarmingly here and there are assessments of the strength or weakness of their own arguments or conclusions. And most attractive are the generous appreciations of valuable work by other scholars—Marchesi, Hoffer, Henderson come to mind, but also Sherwin-White, Syme, and others, all cited in the Index. The evaluations are always positive, and the authors always add something original of their own. One soon realizes that in Reading Pliny’s Letters, dense, layered, complex, its authors are offering us a self-consciously Plinian work.