



Cicero

*On a Life
Well Spent*



Preface by
Benjamin Franklin

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Introduction

Marcus Tullius Cicero was born in 106 B.C. E. and murdered in 43 B.C. E. By the standard of the day, he was an old man when he died. And yet his accomplishments, both as a person of ideas and a man of action, were never hindered by his advancing years. As he affirms again and again in this work, thought and deed transcend the physical.

The Cicero of ancient Rome was a formidable politician, a successful lawyer, a powerful orator whose speeches to the Roman Senate would resound for centuries, and above all, a principled statesman. *Moralis*, a word he coined, was the forerunner of our *moral*; his Verrine Orations were a blistering attack on political corruption. Although he was a friend of Julius Caesar's, he refused to join political forces with him. His intractable allegiance to a republican form of government and an abhorrence of dictatorships would literally be the death of him: Mark Antony had him killed for it.

But while he may have been reviled in his time by his political adversaries, Cicero has been revered through the ages



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as one of the greatest writers of antiquity. He had a gift for making the philosophical works of the Greeks accessible in his own language, and it is Cicero's Latin that has endured. He wrote poetry as an adolescent, volumes of letters throughout his life and *De Oratore* at the age of fifty-one.

But he really hit his stride as a writer when he reached his sixties.

That is when he produced his masterpiece on statecraft, *On the Republic*, advocating a constitution that combined elements of a monarchy, an oligarchy and a democracy. He also wrote a four-volume treatise on philosophical method, a five-volume "conversation" on the pursuit of happiness, the three-volume *Nature of the Gods*, as well as *Foretelling the Future*, *On Supreme Good and Evil*, *Destiny*, *Duties* and the work presented here, *De Senectute*: on aging.



In the 1700s the young American colonies were embracing the classical teachings of ancient Rome and Greece in what the scholar Meyer Reinhold called their quest for "useful knowledge." It was the Age of Enlightenment, when the importance of the individual and the concepts of happiness and freedom were shaping intellectuals' thought. (*Beatitudo*, another word that Cicero coined, is what we know as *happiness*.) So it was fitting that Cicero appealed to a group that was determined to install a republican



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form of government—the likes of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and a Philadelphia printer named Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin (1706-1790), very much a man who embraced useful knowledge, had established himself as a printer in 1728 and started publishing his *Poor Richard's Almanack* four years later. In 1744 the thirty-eight-year-old Franklin printed a translation of Cicero's *De Senectute*, titling it M.T. CICERO'S *CATO MAJOR* OR HIS DISCOURSE OF OLD-AGE. It gave him much pleasure to publish this work; as the biographer Stacy Schiff observed, Cicero's overarching message of a life well lived would find its way into Franklin's own writings and pronouncements. And Franklin would certainly wear his own mantle of old age with relish.

James Logan (1674-1751), a fellow Philadelphian who was considered one of the most scholarly men in America, translated the work for Franklin's edition and provided copious explanatory footnotes. Franklin pronounced it the "first translation of a classic in this Western World"; it was in all probability the first printed in America.

Logan had been William Penn's secretary and had held important government posts in Pennsylvania. A man of science, letters and great wealth, he amassed a collection of books that totaled close to three thousand volumes. In 1731, when Franklin founded his subscription library, the Library Company of Philadelphia, he turned to Logan for advice on



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which books he should carry. Franklin and Logan remained friends and admirers of one another for years.

And Cicero, however indirectly, became a guiding force in shaping the United States of America. Deeply embedded in the foundation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are the tenets of republicanism that Cicero cherished and the three-branch system of government he championed.

John Adams was one of the founding fathers who revered the ancient's political wisdom, as David McCullough described in his biography of the second president: Adams read *De Senectute* again and again throughout his long and well-spent life. No doubt he found truth and solace in Cicero's observation that "a life employed in the pursuit of useful knowledge, in honourable actions and the practice of virtue" yielded "an unspeakable comfort to the soul."



Perhaps each age takes from Cicero what it values most. In the eighteenth century, his views on the merits of a republican form of government resonated strongly with the people shaping America's democracy. In the twenty-first century, his views on aging serve as enlightenment that age need not diminish a person's capacity for learning and doing. And so for this edition, a reprise of Franklin's 1744 landmark publication, we selected the title *On a Life Well Spent*.



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We also elected to relocate Logan's one hundred and two footnotes to the back, as endnotes, where they can delight the interested reader. And while we have retained the spelling and punctuation of Franklin's original, we have set it in a modern font—minus the elongated *s*, and with apologies to the Philadelphia printer. Both these measures succeed, we hope, in making Cicero and his ageless wisdom more accessible to our age.

