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TACITUS ON BRITAIN AND GERMANY

A TRANSLATION OF
THE 'AGRICOLA' AND THE 'GERMANIA'
BY H. MATTINGLY

PENGUIN BOOKS

1960

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INTRODUCTION

THE *Agricola* of Tacitus, the biography of the most famous governor of Roman Britain, is part of our national story, and as such has a direct claim on our interest. The *Germania*, a detailed account of a great people that had already begun to be a European problem in the first century of our era, should still have a message for us in the twentieth. The story of the hero and the story of strange countries that were combined in Homer's *Odyssey* have now, at a later stage of literature, come to receive separate treatment.

It is to the modern British reader, then, that this version is offered. As he is probably unfamiliar with much detail that is necessary for the full understanding of the story, it will be well to say something about the author and his works and the conditions of the age in which he wrote. The early parts of the introduction will be better understood when the whole of it has been read.

The general reader may like to be warned that sections xi-xiv of this Introduction are less immediately necessary to the understanding of the text than sections i-x, and that the Notes on Manuscripts and passages of the text and the Bibliography are specially intended for classical students.

1. *Tacitus*

P. Cornelius Tacitus was born in a country-town of Narbonensis about A.D. 55 and died about A.D. 120. The

son of a Roman knight, he himself rose to be a senator and passed through a normal senatorial career. He was consul in A.D. 97 and governor of Asia in A.D. 112-113. He was an intimate friend of Pliny the Younger. Both were successful orators, both distinguished men of letters. Pliny was proud to be regarded as a pupil of Tacitus and to be bracketed with him in popular repute. He addressed to him a number of his published letters—two of them giving a detailed account of the eruption of Vesuvius for the use of Tacitus in his *Histories*. Of the private life of Tacitus we know very little indeed. He married the daughter of Agricola in A.D. 77, but he never mentions her name.

The first literary works of Tacitus, the *Agricola* and *Germania*, came out in A.D. 97-98. The *Dialogus de Oratoribus* followed c. A.D. 102. Then came the major historical works, the *Histories* (c. 104-112), covering the years 68-96, and the *Annals* (c. 112-120), taking up the story at the death of Augustus in 14 and carrying it to the death of Nero in 68. Both works have come down to us incomplete. Tacitus tells us that he had reserved for his old age the account of the happier age that followed the death of Domitian in 96. But it was never written. Did death overtake him, or had he lost the zest to write?

Tacitus was one of those Italians of the sound old stock who brought to the service of the Empire a loyalty and a devotion that recall the best days of the Republic. It was the destiny of Rome to rule the world, the destiny of the

high-born Roman to share in that great task; and Rome now meant not the city only, but Italy as well. We may think of Tacitus as something like an officer of the Indian army and an Indian Civil Servant rolled into one. He has a passionate belief in the 'career' as the one thing in life that matters.

The 'career' depended on the 'New Order' of the Empire, and men like Tacitus continued to pursue it under emperors good or bad. Tacitus himself had experience of tyrants like Nero and Domitian and of constitutional emperors like Vespasian, Nerva and Trajan. He reflected much on his experience, and ended with the sad conclusion that one must not expect too much. Autocracy and freedom could not finally be reconciled. The fact was that imperial tyranny pressed hardest on the senators. The tyrant forced the Senate to co-operate in his tyranny, and men like Tacitus, constrained to vote against their consciences in condemnation of their own friends, burst out into violent denunciations, once the tyrant was safely buried. This was natural enough, but it leads Tacitus to judge the Empire somewhat ungenerously. After all, it did confer on the world the great blessings of peace and order, and to Tacitus and men like him it opened up all that made life worth living.

Tacitus as a historian has several obvious defects. He is often amazingly careless about geography and military history. He is not deeply interested in the 'man in the street'. He is not always just, as, for example, when he

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The *Agricola* has exercised a steady attraction on generation after generation of readers. The subject—the early history of our own island—has a strong natural appeal. The style never loiters, often sparkles, is never dull. Deep in the heart of the book lies an ideal that commands admiration—belief in Rome, in Roman destiny and in the Roman ways and standards of life. There is a note of tragedy in the thought that this ideal has to live in an unfriendly world, forbidden to reach perfection by the very conditions that enable it to live at all. And throughout, a touch of warmth is added by the true affection that Tacitus bore his father-in-law.

IV. *Tacitus's account of Britain*

Britain was already fairly well known to the Romans by the time that Tacitus began to write. Even before 200 B.C. Pytheas of Marseilles had visited the island; he published some precious details about it, but was only called a liar for his pains. Caesar, Strabo, Pomponius Mela and others had added their quota to the account. Tacitus had the obvious advantage of close relationship to one who knew Britain as no Roman had ever known it before. But it is hard to take him quite seriously when he claims to have put research on a new basis, with solid fact to replace guess-work. He might possibly have done so had he taken more trouble.

Tacitus still holds the false belief that Britain was much nearer Spain than it actually is, and that Ireland lay between

Soft primitivism vs hard primitivism X

TACITUS'S ACCOUNT OF BRITAIN

them. He accepts a false view of the shape of Britain. Certainly he could now for the first time state positively that Britain was an island—Agricola's admiral had confirmed the fact; but it had been the guess long before. It is hard again to understand how he can speak of the Orkneys as 'hitherto unknown'; 'unexplored' might be the truer word. Tacitus omits some details found in Caesar about the customs of the Britons—e.g., their partiality for geese and their collective marriages—without troubling to correct them, if they needed correction. He never mentions the Druids, never says a word about the native British coinage, though it can hardly have been obsolete by his time. He has good accounts of the climate and of the deep inland penetrations of the sea in the North. But, though he frequently mentions estuaries, he never gives any detail that would enable us to identify one. He sends Agricola on expedition after expedition without once mentioning his base. He does not mention by name any of the chief Roman towns, such as London, Verulam or York. Writing for the special purpose of biography, he clearly omits much that must have figured in his *Histories*. But the achievements of Agricola, thrown on to so uncertain a background, begin to become blurred themselves. Tacitus writes as if any province, any provincials, any army, any enemy might serve equally well to illustrate his hero's virtues. Modern taste demands more precision.

v. *Britain before Agricola*

Modern archaeologists can tell us a little about the culture of Britain in the later Iron Age, but detailed knowledge only begins with Julius Caesar. That great conqueror, during his victories in Gaul, became aware of an unconquered Britain on his flank and decided to reduce it. His two expeditions—one in 55 B.C. a mere reconnaissance in force, the second in 54 B.C. a serious attempt at conquest—only won limited success. Had we any account but Caesar's own we should probably mark the second expedition as a failure. Britain, nominally subject to tribute, remained in fact independent. Augustus for a short time played with the idea of conquering Britain, but soon abandoned it for more serious projects. So our island remained free. But intercourse between Britain and Gaul was active and Roman influence steadily grew. Cunobelinus (Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*) for the whole of his long reign was a friend of Rome. Caligula in A.D. 39 gave a welcome to an exiled British prince and toyed with the idea of an invasion. But it was actually left to Claudius in A.D. 43 to carry out the enterprise. His motive is not certain. Britain was hardly dangerous to Rome and, if great mineral wealth was hoped from it, there was certainly disappointment.

The conquest was carried out without a hitch by Aulus Plautius. Claudius himself spent some days with his victorious army and was saluted as 'Imperator'. The South-East of Britain and Vectis (Isle of Wight) were

quickly overrun. The next Governor, Ostorius Scapula (A.D. 47-52), conquered the Silures in South Wales, drove away the patriot leader, Caratacus, son of Cunobelinus, and enforced his surrender, when he fled North to the Brigantes in Yorkshire. By A.D. 49 the Romans had probably reached the Trent, Severn and Dee and were masters of Lincoln, Wroxeter and Chester. Colchester now became a colony.

Under Didius Gallus (A.D. 52-57) and Veranius (A.D. 57-58) there was no serious advance. Suetonius Paulinus (A.D. 59-61) ventured out incautiously from Chester on the capture of Anglesey, but was completely surprised by a general rising in his rear. It was led by Boudicca (Boadicea), Queen of the Iceni, who had bitter private wrongs to avenge. The rebels swept all before them and overran London, Colchester and Verulam. The cause of Rome looked desperate. But Paulinus, hastening back, brought the enemy to battle somewhere in the Midlands and retrieved everything by a single decisive victory. Paulinus was too merciless to the guilty, and the revolt dragged on. The government of Nero, therefore, showed true wisdom in replacing Paulinus by the gentler Petronius Turpilianus. He and his successors, Trebellius Maximus and Vettius Bolanus, ruled mildly during the years A.D. 61-71. The province as a whole was at peace, but the armies were mutinous.

Petillius Cerealis, one of Vespasian's ablest generals, displayed great vigour and made serious progress with the

conquest of the Brigantes in Yorkshire (A.D. 71-74). Undaunted by his great reputation, his successor, Julius Frontinus (A.D. 74-77), broke the resistance of the Silures in South Wales, and probably advanced north as far as York.

VI. Agricola's Governorship

It was in A.D. 77, rather than the following year, that Agricola succeeded Frontinus in Britain. His appointment followed immediately on his consulship, and, if he was Consul from about April to June, there was time for him to be in Britain by late summer.

The seven campaigns of Agricola may be summed up as follows:

- (1) A.D. 77. Defeat of the Ordovices. Conquest of Anglesey. The twentieth legion stationed at Chester (?).
- (2) A.D. 78. Advance in the North along the western coast by a road driven from Chester to Carlisle. Garrisons placed between Solway Firth and Tyne.
- (3) A.D. 79. Advance northwards by Eastern route from York, via Corbridge, to Tanaus—probably not the Tay, possibly the Tweed or Scotch Tyne.
- (4) A.D. 80. Advance to Clyde and Forth and establishment of forts between them (Camelon, Bar Hill, etc.).
- (5) A.D. 81. Advance along West coast from Chester to Solway Firth and Dumfries. Posts established

along the coast facing Ireland. Invasion of Ireland possibly planned, certainly not executed.

- (6) A.D. 82. Advance into Caledonia. The fleet reaches Fife. The Caledonians attack forts west of the Tay and try to storm the camp of the ninth legion. Agricola establishes new forts—Ardoch, Inch-tuthil, etc. A cohort of the Usipi mutinies and sails round Britain.
- (7) A.D. 83. Agricola shatters the army of the Caledonian league at the Grampian Hills (Mons Graupius) in Perthshire—perhaps near Delvine.

In the next year, A.D. 84, Agricola was recalled.

Readers will observe how much geographical detail has to be added to make the account of Tacitus intelligible.

VII. Britain after Agricola

Tacitus tells us that Britain was 'completely conquered and then allowed to slip'. He evidently means that a permanent conquest of the whole island was now possible, but that the chance was missed. But that does not mean that all Agricola's gains were abandoned. Some of his forts may have still been held early in the reign of Trajan. Late in that reign a serious revolt broke out among the Brigantes, in the course of which the ninth legion disappeared from history. Hadrian drew his famous wall from Newcastle to Carlisle, and Antoninus Pius added his from Clyde to Forth along the line of Agricola's forts.

After that the island enjoyed a long peace. Septimius Severus (A.D. 208-211) renewed Agricola's attempt to conquer Caledonia, but the north of the island continued to be essentially free.

VIII. *The Army of Britain*

Britain was conquered by four legions—II Augusta, IX Hispana, XIV Gemina Martia and XX Valeria Victrix. There was also present a detachment of Legio VII Augusta, and the whole force, including auxiliaries, must have amounted to some forty thousand men.

Of these legions there were still in Britain under Agricola:

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- Legio II Augusta at Caerleon,
 - Legio IX Hispana at York,
 - Legio XX Valeria Victrix at Chester.

The fourth legion, II Adjutrix, at Chester (?), had replaced the Legio XIV in A.D. 70.

Among the auxiliary troops of Britain we can identify four cohorts of Batavi and two of Tungri that fought at Mons Graupius, a cohort of the Usipi that deserted and sailed round Britain, and, perhaps, at least one cohort of Britons. Tacitus does not mention the name of a single one of Agricola's justly famous forts. Quite a number, however, have been identified after careful excavation. A very useful account will be found in Anderson's introduction to the *Agricola*.

The legion II Adjutrix left Britain soon after Agricola's

About A.D. 115 the ninth legion*, as we have seen, was destroyed, and was replaced at York by Legio VI Victrix.

IX. *Germania, the Book*

Tacitus's essay 'On the Origin and Geography of Germany' was long ago hailed as a 'golden book'. It is certainly the best of its kind in antiquity, perhaps in any age. The genius of the author has stamped it with a character of its own; but, none the less, it follows a model that had gradually been developed over many centuries.

Here as always it is to Greece that one must look first. Hecataeus of Miletus, Herodotus, the great medical writer Hippocrates, and Aristotle himself had found time for the study of peoples. Coming to Roman times, we find Posidonius of Rhodes (c. 135-51 B.C.) devoting to Germany the thirtieth of his fifty-two books of histories.

First among the Roman authors comes Julius Caesar, who allotted a few invaluable chapters of his *Gallic War* to the German peoples. Livy gave up the one hundred and fourth book of his histories to an account of Germany. He must have been able to draw on fresh sources of information, opened up by the campaigns of Augustus's generals in Germany. Strabo wrote of Germany in his seventh book; but he is thought to have been little known or studied in the West of the Empire. Pliny the Elder carried his *German Wars* down to about the death of

* 'It is now seriously questioned whether the ninth legion was destroyed as early as this.' (E. B. Birley.)

heard the bravest of you exclaim; "When shall we find the enemy? When shall we come to grips?" Well, here they come, dislodged from their lairs. The field lies open, as you so bravely desired it. An easy path awaits you if you win, but a hard and uphill one if you lose. The miles of hard marching behind you, the woods you have threaded, the estuaries you have crossed—all redound to your credit and honour, while you keep your eyes to the front; but, if once you retreat, present assets become deadly liabilities. We have not the exact local knowledge that our enemy has, we have not his abundant supplies; but we have our hands and our swords in them, and, with that, we have all that matters. For myself, I made up my mind long ago that no army and no general can safely turn their back. It follows, then, that a death of honour is better than a life of shame, and safety and renown are to be sought in the same field; and, if we must perish, it would be no mean glory to fall where land and nature end.

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'If you were confronted by strange nations and an unfamiliar army, I would quote the example of other armies to encourage you. That is not the case; you need only recall your own battle-honours, only question your own eyes. These are the men who last year took advantage of night-time to attack a single legion, only to be broken by your battle-cry. These are the Britons with the longest

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legs—the only reason they have survived so long. When we used to plunge into the woods and thickets, all the brave beasts charged straight at us, the timid and passive slunk away at the mere sound of our tread. It is just the same now. The flower of Britain has fallen long since; what is left is a pack of spiritless cravens. You have indeed got them at last; but you have caught them—they never meant to stand. It is only extreme danger and deadly fear that have rooted them to this spot, where you may gain a great and memorable victory. Have done with campaigning, crown fifty years with one day of splendour, convince Rome that, if wars have dragged on or been permitted to revive, her soldiers were not to blame!

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Even while Agricola was still speaking the troops showed visible signs of their keenness, and a wild burst of enthusiasm greeted the end of his speech. Without delay they flew to arms. The troops were mad for action and ready to rush into it, but Agricola marshalled them with care. The auxiliary infantry, 8,000 in number, made a strong centre, while 3,000 cavalry were thrown out on the flanks. The legions were stationed in front of the camp wall; victory would be vastly more glorious if it cost no Roman blood, whilst, in case of repulse, the legions could restore the day. The British army was stationed on higher ground in a manner calculated to impress and intimidate

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its enemy. Its van was on the level ground, but the other ranks rose, as it were in tiers, up the gentle slope. The space between the two armies was taken up by the charioteers, clattering on in their wild career. At this point, Agricola, fearing that the enemy with their great superiority in numbers might fall simultaneously on his front and flanks, opened out his ranks. The line now looked dangerously thin, and many urged him to bring up the legions. But he was always an optimist and throve on adversity. He sent away his horse and took up his position on foot in front of the colours.

The fighting began with exchanges of missiles, and the Britons showed both courage and skill in parrying our shots with their great swords or catching them on their little shields, while they themselves rained volleys on us. At last Agricola called upon the four cohorts of the Batavi and the two of the Tungri to close and fight it out at the sword's point. The manoeuvre was familiar to those old soldiers, but most inconvenient to the enemy with their small shields and unwieldy swords—swords without a thrusting point, and therefore unsuited to the clash of arms in close fighting. The Batavi began to rain blow after blow, push with the bosses of their shields and stab at their enemies in their face. They routed the enemy on the plain and pushed on uphill. This provoked the rest of our

cohorts to drive in hard and butcher the enemy as they met him. Many Britons were left behind half dead or even unwounded, owing to the very speed of our victory. Our cavalry squadrons, meanwhile, had routed the war chariots, and now plunged into the infantry battle. Their first onslaught was terrifying, but the solid ranks of the enemy and the roughness of the ground soon brought them to a standstill. The battle now looked anything but favourable to us, with our infantry precariously perched on the slope and jostled by the flanks of the horses. And often a stray chariot, its horses panic-stricken without a driver, came plunging in on flank or front.

The Britons on the hill-tops had so far taken no part in the action, and had had leisure to note the smallness of our numbers with contempt. They now began to make a slow descent and envelop our victorious rear. But Agricola had anticipated just such a move, and threw in their path four squadrons of cavalry, which he was keeping in hand for emergencies. He thus broke and scattered them in a rout as severe as their assault had been gallant. The tactics of the Britons now recoiled on themselves. Our squadrons, obedient to orders, rode round from the front and fell on the enemy in the rear. The spectacle that followed over the open country was awe-inspiring and grim. Our men followed hard, took prisoners and then

killed them, as new enemies appeared. On the enemy's side each man now followed his bent. Some bands, though armed, fled before inferior numbers, some men, though unarmed, insisted on charging to their deaths. Arms, bodies, severed limbs lay all around and the earth reeked of blood; and the vanquished now and then found their fury and their courage again. Indeed, when they reached the woods, they rallied and profited by their local knowledge to ambush the first rash pursuers. Our excess of confidence might even have led to no inconsiderable disaster. But Agricola was everywhere at once. He ordered the cohorts to rally, discard their equipment and ring the woods like hunters. Where the woods were denser, dismounted cavalry went in to scour them; where they thinned out, the cavalry did the work. But the Britons, when they saw our ranks steady and firm and the pursuit beginning again, simply turned and ran. They no longer kept any formation or any touch with one another, but deliberately broke into small groups to reach their far and trackless retreats. Only night and exhaustion ended the pursuit. Of the enemy some 10,000 fell, on our side 360, among whom was Aulus Atticus, the prefect of a cohort, who in his young enthusiasm was carried by the charge of his horse deep into the ranks of the enemy.

Night brought our men the satisfactions of victory and booty. The Britons wandered all over the countryside, men and women together wailing, carrying off their wounded and calling out to the survivors. They would leave their homes and in fury set fire to them, and choose lairs, only to abandon them at once. Sometimes they would try to concert plans, then break off conference. Sometimes the sight of their dear ones broke their hearts, more often it goaded them to fury. Some, it was afterwards found, laid violent hands on their wives and children in a kind of pity. The next day revealed the quality of the victory more distinctly. A grim silence reigned on every hand, the hills were deserted, only here and there was smoke seen rising from chimneys in the distance, and our scouts found no one to encounter them. When they had been sent out in all directions and had made sure that everything pointed to indiscriminate flight and that the enemy was not massing at any point, Agricola led his army into the territory of the Boresti. Summer was almost over, and it was impossible for operations to be extended over a wider area. There Agricola took hostages and ordered his admiral to coast round Britain. The forces allotted were sufficient, and the terror of Rome had gone before him. Agricola himself, marching slowly in order to inspire terror in fresh nations by his very lack of hurry, placed his infantry and cavalry in winter-quarters. At the

same time, the fleet, sped by favouring winds and fame, took up its quarters in the harbour of Trucculum from which it had set out to coast all the neighbouring stretch of Britain and to which it now returned.

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The news of these events, although reported by Agricola in his dispatches in the most exact and modest terms, was received by Domitian with the smile on his face that so often masked a secret disquiet. He was bitterly aware of the ridicule that had greeted his sham triumph over Germany, when he had bought up slaves to have their dress and hair made up to look like prisoners of war. But now came a genuine victory on the grand scale. The enemy dead were reckoned by thousands. The popular enthusiasm was immense. There was nothing Domitian need fear so much as to have the name of a subject exalted above that of his prince. He had only wasted time in silencing forensic eloquence and all that was distinguished in the civil career, if another man were to snatch his military glory. Talents in other directions could at a pinch be ignored; but the quality of a good general should be the monopoly of the emperor. Such were the anxieties that vexed him and over which he brooded till he was tired—a sure sign in him of deadly purpose; finally, he decided to store up his hatred for the present and wait for the first burst of popular applause and

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the enthusiasm of the army to die down. Agricola, you see, was still in possession of Britain.

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Domitian therefore gave instructions that the external distinctions of triumph, the honour of a splendid statue and all the other substitutes for the triumph itself should be voted to Agricola in the Senate, coupled with a most flattering address; further, the impression was to be conveyed that the province of Syria, then vacant through the death of Atilius Rufus, the ex-consul, and always reserved for men of mark, was intended for Agricola. It was very commonly believed that one of the freedmen in Domitian's closest confidence was sent with dispatches offering Agricola Syria, but with instructions to deliver them only if he were still in Britain. The freedman, it is said, met Agricola's ship in the Channel and, without even seeking an interview, returned to Domitian. The story may be true, or it may be a fiction; at least it suits Domitian's character. Agricola, meanwhile, had handed over a province peaceful and secure to his successor. In order not to signalize his arrival in Rome by the publicity of a crowded welcome, he avoided the attentions of his friends and entered the city by night. By night, too, he went, in accordance with instructions, to the palace. He was welcomed with a perfunctory kiss and then dismissed, without a word of conversation, to join the crowd of courtiers.

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