

Life of Gnaeus Julius Agricola, by Cornelius Tacitus—Part II, Chapters 15-20 (c. 98 AD)

Boadicea's (Boudica's) Rebellion, Sack of Londinium, and Defeat by Agricola (60-61 AD)

15. For the Britons, relieved from present dread by the absence of the governor, began to hold conferences, in which they painted the miseries of servitude, compared their several injuries, and inflamed each other with such representations as these: “That the only effects of their patience were more grievous impositions upon a people who submitted with such facility. 2 Formerly they had one king respectively; now two were set over them, **the lieutenant and the procurator, the former of whom vented his rage upon their life's blood, the latter upon their properties;**⁸ the union or discord⁹ of these governors was equally fatal to those whom they ruled, while the officers of the one, and the centurions of the other, joined in oppressing them by all kinds of violence and contumely; so that nothing was exempted from their avarice, nothing from their lust. 3 **In battle it was the bravest who took spoils; but those whom *they* suffered to seize their houses, force away their children, and exact levies, were, for the most part, the cowardly and effeminate;** as if the only lesson of suffering of which they were ignorant was how to die for their country. Yet how inconsiderable would the number of invaders appear did the Britons but compute their own forces! From considerations like these, Germany had thrown off the yoke,¹⁰ though a river¹¹ and not the ocean was its barrier. The welfare of their country, their wives, and their parents called *them* to arms, while avarice and luxury alone incited their enemies; who would withdraw as even the deified Julius had done, if the present race of Britons would emulate the valor of their ancestors, and not be dismayed at the event of the first or second engagement. Superior spirit and perseverance were always the share of the wretched; 5 **and the gods themselves now seemed to compassionate the Britons, by ordaining the absence of the general,** and the detention of his army in another island. The most difficult point, assembling for the purpose of deliberation, was already accomplished; and there was always more danger from the discovery of designs like these, than from their execution.”

16. Instigated by such suggestions, they unanimously rose in arms, led by Boadicea,¹² a woman of royal descent, (for **they make no distinction between the sexes in succession to the throne,**) and attacking the soldiers dispersed through the garrisons, stormed the fortified posts, and invaded the colony¹³ itself, **as the seat of slavery.** They omitted no species of cruelty with which rage and victory could inspire barbarians; 2 and had not **Paullinus,** on being acquainted with the commotion of the province, marched speedily to its relief, Britain would have been lost. The fortune of a single battle, however, reduced it to its former subjection; though many still remained in arms, whom the consciousness of revolt, and particular dread of the governor, had driven to despair. Paullinus, although otherwise exemplary in his administration, having pursued too rigorous measures, as one who was revenging his own personal injury also, 3 **Petronius Turpilianus**¹⁴ was sent in his stead, as a person **more inclined to lenity,** and one who, being unacquainted with the enemy's delinquency, could more easily accept their penitence. After having restored things to their former quiet state, he delivered the command to Trebellius Maximus.¹⁵ **Trebellius, indolent, and inexperienced** in military affairs, maintained the tranquillity of the province by popular manners; for even the barbarians had now learned to pardon under the seductive influence of vices; and the intervention of the civil wars afforded a legitimate excuse for his inactivity. **Sedition however infected the soldiers,** who, instead of their usual military services, were rioting in idleness. Trebellius, after escaping the fury of his army by flight and concealment, dishonored and abased, regained a precarious authority; and a kind of tacit compact took place, of **safety to the general, and licentiousness to the army.** This mutiny was not attended

with bloodshed. 5 Vettius Bolanus,¹⁶ succeeding during the continuance of the civil wars, was unable to introduce discipline into Britain. The same inaction toward the enemy, and the same indolence in the camp, continued; except that Bolanus, unblemished in his character, and not obnoxious by any crime, in some measure substituted affection in the place of authority.

17. At length, when Vespasian received the possession of Britain together with the rest of the world, the great commanders and well-appointed armies which were sent over abated the confidence of the enemy; and Petilius Cerealis struck terror by an attack upon the Brigantes,¹⁷ who are reputed to compose the most populous state in the whole province. Many battles were fought, some of them attended with much bloodshed; and the greater part of the Brigantes were either brought into subjection, or involved in the ravages of war. The conduct and reputation of Cerealis was so brilliant that they might have eclipsed the splendor of a successor; yet Julius Frontinus,¹⁸ a truly great man, supported the arduous competition, as far as circumstances would permit.¹⁹ He subdued the strong and warlike nation of the Silures,²⁰ in which expedition, besides the valor of the enemy, he had the difficulties of the country to struggle with.

18. Such was the state of Britain, and such had been the vicissitudes of warfare, when Agricola arrived in the middle of summer,²¹ at a time when the Roman soldiers, supposing the expeditions of the year were concluded, were thinking of enjoying themselves without care, and the natives, of seizing the opportunity thus afforded them. Not long before the arrival, the Ordovices²² had cut off almost an entire corps of cavalry stationed on their frontiers; and the inhabitants of the province being thrown into a state of anxious suspense by this beginning, inasmuch as war was what they wished for, either approved of the example, or waited to discover the disposition of the new governor.²³ The season was now far advanced, the troops dispersed through the country, and possessed with the idea of being suffered to remain inactive during the rest of the year; circumstances which tended to retard and discourage any military enterprise; so that it was generally thought most advisable to be contented with defending the suspected posts: yet Agricola determined to march out and meet the approaching danger. For this purpose, he drew together the detachments from the legions,²⁴ and a small body of auxiliaries; and when he perceived that the Ordovices would not venture to descend into the plain, he led an advanced party in person to the attack, in order to inspire the rest of his troops with equal ardor. The result of the action was almost the total extirpation of the Ordovices; when Agricola, sensible that renown must be followed up and that the future events of the war would be determined by the first success, resolved to make an attempt upon the island Mona, from the occupation of which Paullinus had been summoned by the general rebellion of Britain, as before related.²⁵ The usual deficiency of an unforeseen expedition appearing in the want of transport vessels, the ability and resolution of the general were exerted to supply this defect. A select body of auxiliaries, disencumbered of their baggage, who were well acquainted with the fords, and accustomed, after the manner of their country, to direct their horses and manage their arms while swimming,²⁶ were ordered suddenly to plunge into the channel; by which movement, the enemy, who expected the arrival of a fleet, and a formidable invasion by sea, were struck with terror and astonishment, conceiving nothing arduous or insuperable to them, who thus advanced to the attack. They were therefore induced to sue for peace, and make a surrender of the island; an event which threw lustre on the name of Agricola, who, on the very entrance upon his province, had employed in toils and dangers that time which is usually devoted to ostentatious parade, and the compliments of office. 6 Nor was he tempted, in the pride of success, to term that an expedition or a victory, which was only bridling the vanquished; nor even to announce his success in laureate

dispatches.²⁷ But this concealment of his glory served to augment it; since men were led to entertain a high idea of the grandeur of his future views, when such important services were passed over in silence.

19. Well acquainted with the temper of the province, and taught by the experience of former governors how little proficiency had been made by arms, when success was followed by injuries, he next undertook to eradicate the causes of war. **And beginning with himself, and those next him, he first laid 81 restrictions upon his own household,** a task no less arduous to most governors than the administration of the province. He suffered no public business to pass through the hands of his slaves or freedmen. In admitting soldiers into regular service,²⁸ to attendance about his person, he was not influenced by private favor, or the recommendation or solicitation of the centurions, but considered the best men as likely to prove the most faithful. 3 He would know every thing; but was content to let some things pass unnoticed.²⁹ He could pardon small faults, and use severity to great ones; yet did not always punish, but was frequently satisfied with penitence. He chose rather to confer offices and employments upon such as would not offend, than to condemn those who had offended. 4 The augmentation³⁰ of tributes and contributions he mitigated by a just and equal assessment, abolishing those private exactions which were more grievous to be borne than the taxes themselves. For the inhabitants had been compelled in mockery to sit by their own locked-up granaries, to buy corn needlessly, and to sell it again at a stated price. Long and difficult journeys had also been imposed upon them; for the several districts, instead of being allowed to supply the nearest winter-quarters, were forced to carry their corn to remote and devious places; by which means, what was easy to be procured by all, was converted into an article of gain to a few.

20. By suppressing these abuses in the first year of his administration, he established a favorable idea of peace, which, through the negligence or oppression of his predecessors, had been no less dreaded than war. At the return of summer³¹ he assembled his army. On their march, he commended the regular and orderly, and restrained the stragglers; he marked out the encampments,³² and explored in person the estuaries and forests. At the same time he perpetually harassed the enemy by sudden incursions; and after sufficiently alarming them, by an interval of forbearance he held to their view the allurements of peace. By this management, many states, which till that time had asserted their independence, were now induced to lay aside their animosity, and to deliver hostages. These districts were surrounded with castles and forts, disposed with so much attention and judgment, that no part of Britain, hitherto new to the Roman arms, escaped unmolested.