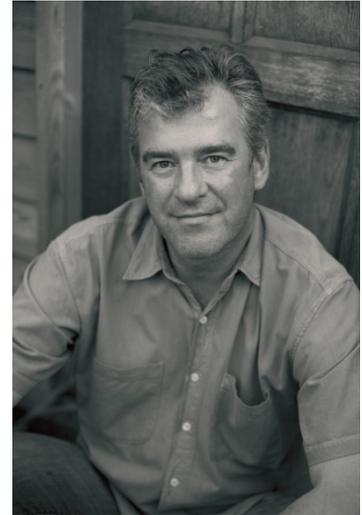


Robert Fabbri on finding Vespasian

Vespasian crept up on me slowly as – eight or so years ago – I was looking around for a subject to base a series of books upon. I had been inspired by the sleeve notes on Simon Scarrow’s first book, *Under the Eagle*; it said: he (Simon) decided to write the book that he wanted to read. Having never thought of writing before in those terms, the phrase stuck in my head and the desire to “try to do a Scarrow” grew over the next couple of years. Simon’s books take two fictional characters and weave them into history, so, not wanting to follow the same route, I decided to look for an historical character.



My favourite historical eras are Alexander the Great and the wars of the Successor States and the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of Imperial Rome. It’s the scale of these times that always impresses me; no endeavour is too large to be discounted as impossible. I only have to look at Caesar bridging the Rhine in ten days, or his siege-works at Alesia facing in against the town and out against the relieving army; or at Alexander’s siege of Tyre, to see examples of massive feats of engineering. To just think about the logistics involved in those endeavours or the Roman invasion of Britain or Alexander’s crossing of the Hellespont makes me reel with a surfeit of arithmetic as I try and calculate roughly how much food and fodder was required to keep every man and beast fed for just one day.

So it was into these grand periods that I delved to find a hero that could sustain at least a trilogy. I had three criteria: a varied and exciting life, an interesting family and set of acquaintances, and a sense of humour. Just thinking about all the usual suspects I realised that so many have been covered by excellent authors. Colleen McCullough’s *Masters of Rome* series is, to my mind, the final word on Marius, Sulla, Caesar, Anthony and Octavian; that series and Margaret Georges’ *The Memoires of Cleopatra* pretty much cover that particular queen and her relationship with the last three of those great men. Rome’s story is then taken up by one of the masters of Historical Fiction, Robert Graves, in *I Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, and further punctuated by Allan Massie’s series on the Emperors – no room for me there then. Mary Renault’s matchless *Fire from Heaven* and *The Persian Boy* – favourites from my youth – told Alexander’s story in a way that I think cannot be beaten – although I look forward to reading Christian Cameron’s *The God of War*. So that left the Successors or a more obscure Roman.

In my younger days I had always been aware of Vespasian because of the three main things that he’s remembered for: the Coliseum, his part in the invasion of Britain and, of course, taxing urine – hence a urinal being called a Vespasiano in Italy or a Vespasienne in France; however, I did not really know much more than that about him. But then through reading Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus and Cassius Dio I became more acquainted with this New Man who, despite his background, managed to scrape his way to the top of the Roman heap and I realised the blindingly obvious: to do that he had to survive the reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero, a feat at which many Romans from greater families failed dismally. If I

told Vespasian's story it would be to the backdrop of these eccentric, to say the least, reigns. Further research, which included reading and re-reading Barbara Levick's excellent biography *Vespasian*, convinced me that I had found a character whose life could sustain not just a trilogy but a series of seven books.

Here was a man who had served almost everywhere in the empire: he had been a military tribune in Thrace at around the time of the Thracian revolt; he then became one of the *vigintivirii* – the twenty junior magistrates – in Rome, possibly in charge of executions at the time of Sejanus' downfall. After that he served as a quaestor in the combined province of Crete and Cyrene – modern day Libya; he then went back to Rome and served first as the aedile for roads and then as a praetor during Caligula's reign when he distinguished himself with a very sycophantic speech in the Senate thanking the emperor for inviting him to dinner – an excellent clue as to how he survived Caligula's reign. Under Claudius he served as the Legate for the Second Augusta Legion in the invasion of Britain for four years and is credited by Suetonius as the subjugator of two tribes, fighting thirty battles and capturing twenty hill-forts as well as conquering the Isle of Wight! He returned to Rome in time for the downfall of Messalina and the rise of Agrippina the Younger and was made consul for the last two months of AD 51.

And then he goes quiet for twelve years, having probably fallen foul of Agrippina, until he becomes the governor of Africa in AD 63, after her death. The following year he joined Nero's progress around Greece, falling asleep in one of the artistic emperor's many interminable recitals. Eventually he was forgiven and in AD 66 was put in charge of suppressing the Jewish revolt where he remained until AD 69, the Year of the Four Emperors, when he emerged as the final victor and Emperor of Rome.

So his life certainly fulfilled the first criterion I had set; what of his family and acquaintances? His mother, Vespasia Polla, is the person whom we have to thank for pushing Vespasian on his path to the purple; without her he would have probably remained on his family estate farming mules for the army all his life. According to Suetonius he was less than keen in following his brother, Sabinus, up the *cursus honorum*, the career path in Rome, causing his mother to refer to him sarcastically as "his brother's client", which seemed to do the trick.

In Rome he somehow, probably through his uncle, Vespasius Pollo, got the patronage of a most formidable woman, Antonia Minor, daughter of Mark Antony, sister-in-law to Tiberius, mother to Claudius and grandmother to Caligula. I could see that her connections in the highest strata of Roman society would make her a perfect engine for the political intrigue sections of the books and what is Roman Historical Fiction without intrigue?

Through Antonia, Vespasian met the love of his life, Caenis. She was Antonia's slave and secretary and was reputed to have a photographic memory – or whatever the expression would have been in those days. Even once she was freed on Antonia's death, Caenis and Vespasian could never marry because of a law forbidding the union of senators and freedwomen; however, she must have stuck by him because after the death of his wife, before he became emperor, Caenis stayed with him for the rest of her days.

This fact would give me ample scope for a love affair that could never be fully realised and heart-breaking sacrifices that the two of them – but mainly Caenis – would have to make. And then, of course, there was his wife, Flavia Domitilla; how would she fit into this? We do not know much about her other than she was the mistress of a wealthy businessman from Africa before Vespasian married her in around AD 38. What were her motivations to make her enter into a marriage and bear three children to a man who had already found his lifetime’s partner? For me it was perfect and it sealed the second of the criteria.

As to the final criterion, a sense of humour, I need only point to Vespasian’s dying words: in those days of deified emperors he departed life saying, “I think I’m turning into a god”.

Robert Fabbri is the author of the Vespasian series, books I-IV are available now. Robert is writing Book V, *Masters of Rome*, in the shadow of Stonehenge...

