

# Translating the Letters of Marsilio Ficino

by Arthur Farndell

***With the publication of the 10th volume of *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* this year, the task of providing an English translation of the twelve books of Ficino's letters, originally published in Latin during his lifetime, is moving towards completion.***

## ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

The impulse came some 45 years ago, when Leon MacLaren, founder of the School of Economic Science in London, realised the value of having Ficino's letters available in English. A group of students in the School was then formed to undertake this project.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARSILIO FICINO (1433-99)

During his life-time, and for a century or so after his death, Ficino was widely recognised in Europe as a man of considerable intellectual and spiritual stature, a man who not only revived the teachings of Plato by translating the Platonic corpus into Latin but also showed their relevance to his contemporaries by appending his own inspired commentary to each dialogue. Ficino's own reputation was resurrected in the 20th century by the unremitting efforts of Professor Paul Oskar Kristeller, ably continued by Professor Michael J. B. Allen.

Ficino is regarded by many as standing at the fountainhead of the Florentine Renaissance, whence he exerted an undoubted influence upon artists and architects, philosophers and musicians, prelates and members of the public. His correspondents included figures from royal households and the highest clerical echelons, outstanding academics, three generations of the Medici family, and those whom he counted simply as his friends (Vol. 10 contains an intriguing list of his friends). To all he wrote unflinchingly what was appropriate and uplifting, basing his words on ancient teachings and the words of Scripture. It is the universality of his letters, however, which holds the greatest appeal: so that

it is not unknown for a reader to exclaim, "But he's not writing to *Lorenzo* – he's writing to *me!*"

## DEVELOPMENT

The first volume was published in 1975, but when the translators came to consider the second book they were somewhat daunted to find that it was very different from the first: instead of containing numerous short letters of a relatively straightforward nature, this work consisted of a mere nine items, which, though presented in epistolary form, bore a closer resemblance to short treatises on philosophical and theological matters. As the later books were much nearer in style and content to the first, it was decided to proceed with these and leave the more difficult second book till the end of the project.

Volume 2 (Ficino's book 3) appeared in 1978, but subsequent publications occurred at irregular intervals, the ninth appearing in 2012. The first eight were under the inspiring editorship of Clement Salaman, who now plays a consultative role.

## PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

From the start, the translators adopted the principle of working in groups. Individual translators have their own assignments, but it is when the work is considered by a group that refinement and completion takes place. Over the years groups have been set up in the UK, the USA, and Australia, all co-ordinated from London, where a revision group oversees and polishes the group translations.

A further fundamental principle relates to hearing, and in practice this means hearing and re-hearing the


Latin text and then adopting the same procedure with the English. Hearing the two languages within a group context is found to produce refinements in the translation which would not seem possible otherwise. This practice resonates with Ficino's words in letter 7 of Volume 1:

*"But the soul receives the sweetest harmonies and numbers through the ears, and by these is reminded and aroused to the divine music which may be heard by the more subtle and penetrating sense of mind."*

## RECEPTION OF THE LETTERS

Publication of the first volume was greeted with favourable reviews in the national press and specialist journals. Subsequent reviews have appeared mainly in specialist periodicals, but evidence of their popularity with the general reader comes from enquiries the publisher receives asking when the next volume will appear.

## THE FUTURE

Although no hard-and-fast promises can be made, it is hoped that the remaining two volumes will be published within the next four or five years. 



## Bookshelf

THE LETTERS OF MARSILIO FICINO: VOL. 10, EDITED BY ARTHUR FARNDSELL  
published by Shephard-Walwyn, Hardback (176 pages). Volumes 1-9 are also available.

