

Book Reviews



BRITISH ROMANTIC LITERATURE AND THE EMERGING MODERN GREEK NATION. By Alexander Grammatikos. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. x + 221. ISBN 978-3-319-90439-9. £59.99 (£47.99 as e-book).

This book breaks new ground as the first to focus on the ways in which British Romantic writers, during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, engaged with Greece and Greeks primarily as part of their own, *modern* world. Most studies of Romantic Hellenism, for understandable reasons, place the emphasis on the reception of classical antiquity. David Roessel, in his classic study *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination* (2002), covered a much wider canvas. Now Alexander Grammatikos has homed in on a small group of texts, some of them very well known, others barely known at all, even to specialists, but all of them dating from the crucial decades when the foundations were being laid for the Greek nation-state that exists today.

After an introductory chapter that sets the scene, Chapter 2 pairs two novels, *Woman: Or Ida of Athens* (1809) by Sydney Owenson, and *Anastasius* by Thomas Hope. Although Hope's novel was published (anonymously) as late as 1819, there is no good reason to doubt its author's claim, in the title, that it had been *Written at the Close of the Eighteenth Century*. A different kind of pairing, in the next chapter, brings together Canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) with Hobhouse's non-fictional *Journey through Albania*, published the following year. Hobhouse's travel book draws on experiences shared while he and Byron had travelled together in 1809 and 1810, while the 'Notes' published with *CHP* II make extensive use of Byron's later solo investigations while living in Athens during the following winter. In both these chapters, the perspective on the Greek world belongs squarely to a historical moment when the possibility of a Greek uprising against Ottoman Turkish rule was generally considered unlikely – not least by these two.

The second half of the book brings us into the decade of the 1820s. Now, British writers were having to come to terms with what they knew about the reality of the Greek Revolution which began in 1821 and would lead to recognition of Greece as an independent state in 1830. Perhaps the most successful of the book's five chapters is the long Chapter 4, which juxtaposes Shelley's *Hellas* (1822) with the novel by Catherine Grace Godwin, *Reine Canziani*, and the narrative poem by Felicia Hemans, 'The Bride of the Greek Isle', which both appeared in 1825. All of these were written and published at a time when the future course of events in Greece could not have been predicted. The final chapter performs the same service for Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), juxtaposed with the novel of the previous year by Tertius Kendrick, *The*

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Travellers. A brief Conclusion brings the discussion of British literary attitudes in the early nineteenth century up to date by linking them to the financial and social ‘crisis’ experienced by Greece between 2010 and 2018, and to renewed controversy, in our own time, about the country’s place within the European Union and the broader culture of Europe.

There is much to admire here. What comes through most strongly are the nuances, not excluding self-contradictions, in the attitudes, perceptions and sometimes prejudices revealed by close reading of the chosen texts. Imaginative, Romantic-inspired Brits were at once excited and bemused by the stories they read or heard about ‘the descendants of that nation to which they owe their civilisation’ (as Shelley called the insurgent Greeks in the preface to *Hellas*, written in 1821). Most had no direct experience of the lands that were then loosely referred to as ‘Greece’. Of the authors considered here, only Hope, Byron and Hobhouse had travelled in the Ottoman Empire, Kendrick seemingly only in the British-ruled Ionian islands. Whether they were armchair philhellenes, returned travellers, or not philhellenes at all, each of them was roused to address, imaginatively, the question of what it might be like to live as a Greek in the modern world – and how they themselves, writing within the British Romantic tradition, might connect that experience to their own and their readers’ expectations.

Grammatikos is good on the variety and disparities among his chosen group. But of all the authors he deals with, Byron (in his ‘Notes’ to *CHP* II) and Hobhouse were the only ones who set out explicitly to inform the British public about the actual condition of the modern Greeks, and also to shape public attitudes at home. I was less convinced that a comparable ‘message’ necessarily exists, to be extracted from works of poetry or fiction – particularly in the case of authors who clearly had very little first-hand knowledge to begin with. It would have helped greatly to be told more, and more systematically, about the kind of access that the lesser-known authors could have had to such knowledge. Even in the case of the Shelleys, it would have been worth looking more closely at their acquaintance with Mavrokordatos and other Greek exiles in 1820 and 1821, while living in Pisa. It must surely, for instance, have been from the confidences that she enjoyed with Mavrokordatos that Mary Shelley understood that for educated Greeks at that time, the true capital of the Greek world was not Athens but the Ottoman capital and seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, namely Constantinople. This was noted only in passing by Byron and completely passed over by Mary’s husband, Percy, but is central to *The Last Man*.

Grammatikos is right to lay emphasis on attempts by westerners who engaged with Greece to ‘westernise’ the people they came into contact with, and the difficulty they encountered in coming to terms with an ‘exotic’ east. However, his reliance on the discourses of ‘Orientalism’ and of post-colonial critiques of British (or European) expansion abroad sometimes introduces an element of anachronism and blunts what could have been a more nuanced reading of words and attitudes inevitably embedded in the early nineteenth century. The pirates who brutally interrupt the idyll in Hemans’ poem, set in a partly idealised, partly ancient, Chios, are not an ‘Orientalist trope’, but a standard plot motif in the ancient Greek novel. *Daphnis and Chloe*, set in nearby Lesbos, was the best-known of these in the nineteenth century and surely underlies some, at least, of what Hemans is doing in ‘The Bride of the Greek Isle’. And I doubt whether Mary Shelley’s plague-stricken Constantinople represents an awful warning against British imperial adventures, so much as against the lure of a Hellenic ideal that had already dragged both her husband and Byron (respectively Adrian and Raymond in the novel) to their early deaths, and whose projected fulfilment in the future brings death to the entire human race.

Similarly, in Chapter 4 the juxtaposition of the female chorus in *Hellas* with fictional

heroines who more or less personify a victimised ‘Greece’ yields excellent insights. But I am not convinced that the drama ends as negatively as Grammatikos believes, with the female speakers ‘bereft of solutions about Greece’s future’. Does not the final chorus put into effect the triumph of ‘thought’ over the ‘mutability’ of history, that is enacted in the central scene (not discussed here) between Mahmoud and Ahasuerus? The drama ends with rejection of *political* solutions, agreed. But Shelley’s ‘brighter Hellas’ does not have to be read as a re-enactment. Even ‘classical’ Greece was flawed, these lines suggest, and is to be imaginatively swept away, along with all the rest of the ‘past’, in these closing lines.

Overall, though, this is an informative and thought-provoking book that deserves to be on the shelf of everyone with an interest in Romantic Hellenism.

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THE WICKED LORD BYRON: A NOVEL. By Richard Deakin. London: Achilles Books, 2018. Pp. 350. ISBN 978-1-912572-00-7. £15.00.

It is April 1824. In the dank, marshy town of Missolonghi in Greece, and with the Greek rebellion against Ottoman rule escalating in the surrounding countryside, Lord Byron lies dying from a combination of fever and excessive bleeding by over-zealous physicians. In the poet’s very final moments, however, his spirit separates from his still conscious body, and begins a sardonic review of a life that was certainly eventful, if perhaps not always ‘well lived’ in the conventional sense of that phrase. Together the two poles of Byron’s personality – meant loosely to correspond to the stylish but cynical dandy (Spirit) and the more empathetic, suffering ordinary man (Body) – revisit the key scenes and episodes which shaped the poet’s life and through which his destiny unfolded. Not least, they meditate on the core friendships and relationships in Byron’s life: with his mother and half-sister Augusta, with his wife Annabella (and innumerable other lovers, both male and female), and with friends such as John Cam Hobhouse, Scrope Davies and later Shelley.

This scenario – an inventive variation on the ‘his-life-flashed-before-him’ trope – is the starting premise of Richard Deakin’s energetic and often entertaining retelling of Byron’s life. The principal narrator, as we move more or less chronologically through Byron’s biography, is the cynical Spirit, for whom Deakin has fashioned quite a compelling, plausible voice, replete with upper-class Regency idioms: this is an effective vehicle especially for the more ribald or bawdy aspects of Byron’s life, and there are some memorable scenes here of drunkenness and youthful high jinks. It is less successful, however, at capturing Byron the poet, who must surely have sometimes had his mind on higher things and who was certainly capable of articulating himself with sensitivity and lyricism. This is of course a common problem with fictions and films about writers, artists and similar figures: while their biographies can be easily sketched in terms of major events, it is well-nigh impossible to adequately convey the creative processes, and the complex intersection of craft and distinctive vision, that underpin their core claim to fame. *The Wicked Lord Byron* undoubtedly struggles in this regard, and the early Byron, the poet of *Childe Harold* I and II, to my mind comes across here as a bit of a boor. However, Deakin does make a valiant attempt to vary his narrator’s register through some skilful interweaving of passages from Byron’s own letters and journals, and in the latter stages of the novel especially, a richer, more complex portrait of the protagonist begins to emerge. In these sections

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