

In the Mountains of Greece

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H.D.F. Kitto is a classicist, a professor of Ancient Greek, and in particular an aficionado of classical Greek drama. He is on vacation in Greece. For a classicist one is struck with how little interest he shows in classical Greece and its remains, but he is after on on vacation, and still a young man, cavorting with his wife (consistently referred to as The Kyria¹) around the Greek countryside, hiring guides with mules, walking along, occasionally taking the train or the boat.

Greece in the early thirties is a very different country from what it is now. At the time there was a huge difference between the modernity of Athens and the backwardness of the countryside. There were very few tourists. In fact Kitto and his wife encounter none outside Athens, and wherever they go they attract the attention of the locals. I guess a similar experience today would need an excursion to faraway places in India. Many villages are unconnected to roads, and the railway system is spotty. Water is to be had from small springs, yielding mere trickles of water, and requiring expert guides to discover. The pleasure of the visit is entirely due to the primitive conditions, sleeping out by campfires (once the fire gets out of bounds and they have to struggle for an hour to contain it), eating at simple restaurants, and when not in the bush, sleeping at impossibly cheap lodgings in small villages. To that is of course added more conventional activities such as hiking up mountains at dawn and admiring views. The small pleasures of the day are lingered upon, such as drinking wine² or enjoying a cigarette. Of old Greece remains there are not much mention. The temple at Bassae during a moonlit night is of course one of the high-points of the journey, and the author admits that the simple remains of Sparta touches him deeper than Acropolis. The very modesty of the remainder, that Sparta once existed and was not just a fictional invention, strikes an unexpected chord and the author feels the presence of the past literally penetrating through the soles of his boots. I can well understand the phenomenon. More is left to the imagination, when you are encountered with fragments, than when you are overwhelmed with a mass, of data, crowding in on your attention, exhausting its patience and capacity for digestion.

Kitto knows Greek of course, but only Ancient Greek. The disparity between the two languages should of course be significant beyond the point of comprehensibility. Naturally he must have been motivated to learn some Modern Greek as well, but it is clear from the narrative that his command of the modern tongue is very tenuous, that he can express some simple things, but when spoken quickly he can only catch isolated words and guess at the gist. Hence whenever a guide knows some English, however faltering, that becomes the preferred language of communication.

¹ 'Kyrie' is the polite form with which you address a man, and 'Kyria' the female equivalent.

² The author is not adverse to beer either. In particular he treasures an ice-cold Fix, but that is only to be had in towns with good road connections to the outside world.

As already indicated, the experience must have been a picturesque one, with many a scenery as out of the Old Testament. Young women carrying huge burdens on their heads, while necessarily adopting a regal gait. Shepherds herding sheep and goats (cows are a rarity). Some photographs are included in the book, but surprisingly blend and uninteresting. Surely there must have been a much wider supply, even if many of the best were indeed lost at a photo-store in Megalopolis.

The book has been highly praised, but seldom read, I have read. Is it such a great book after all? The style is up-beat, as you expect from intrepid young Englishmen looking around the world, not to say sophomoric at times, the author still being a young man in his mid-thirties. The usual vicissitudes of travel are touched upon with the bemused attention that successful resolutions of scrapes invite. There are some factual information, but never more than as not to threaten the light touch. The straightjacket of strict chronology is eased occasionally, and there are some fine description of nature, evoking a mountainous landscape with deep forests and olive grooves, almost arcadic. But mostly the reward of the book is that it gives a few glimpses of the past, a vanished Greece, still untouched by mass-tourism and not yet affected by modern life. True travel does not only mean a change of scenery, but also to some extent a travel in time, which most often means a return to the past. The past is an idyllic place to visit as long as you do not have to get stuck there. The lives of others strike you as piquant as long as you do not have to share them.

The book ends by a boat trip to the island of Thera. The remnants of that huge volcanic eruption that wiped out the Micenean civilization during the Bronze age. A strange place, the authors muses, to be on a small island and yet so far from the sea. The flat roofs and the brilliantly white facades, make up such a striking contrast to the deep blue of the sky and the black lava roads. Although barren the island manages to be fertile and do quite well by exporting second rate cement.

The book comes with a map, an essential feature of any travel book, and in addition to a somewhat mere selection of photos, an index, which is always commendable. A curiosity, and it is unlikely that it would have been published today unless the author had been a celebrity. In the thirties there were of course also celebrities as now, but academics enjoyed some status as well.

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