

Book Reviews

Thanos Veremis and Mark Dragoumis, *Historical Dictionary of Greece*, New Jersey, Scarecrow Press, 1995, pp. 258.

Books on modern Greece written by non-Greeks tend to be lyrical about the landscape and the climate, awe-stricken about ancient monuments, puzzled and dismissive of, or sympathetic and condescending about modern Greeks. Books by Greeks tend to be grandiloquent, apologetic and sometimes turgid (Greek prose translates badly into English). This one is informative, has no obvious axe to grind but the material is presented in a fragmentary form. There is also the adjective "Historical" (Dictionary of Greece) which may raise eyebrows. Are Callas and Onassis historical figures, are entries on fauna and flora, on geography, on environment, matters of historical interest?

With the exception of the extensive Introduction, the maps, a chronology, a first rate bibliography and a series of informative tables and appendixes, this innovative book is in dictionary form. The entries that range from Art and Music, to Palamas, Papandreou and Monasticism, in other words the absence of narrative structure and apparent lack of guiding principle, make this the first post-modern account of Modern Greece.

On the other hand the language is free of bombast or cant, a trifle irreverent, even humorous at times. Entries are exciting and probing but, at times, non-comprehensive. One would like to read more but one is stopped in one's tracks just as it begins to get interesting.

There is little doubt that the authors offer some thrilling exposes. Consider the following excerpt from the entry on Cavafy: "He is, in essence, a man of many cultures. The pace and reflective temper of his mind were of the orient. His education was accidental. His self-restraint was English. He discovered poetry in a coffee shop, in a back yard and, in an office... Through his poems, totally devoid of metaphor, he conveys a sense of rise and decay of all cultures not just that of beloved Alexandria. The voice is dry, the idiom precise, the music subdued".

Although at first inconspicuous, the approach grows on the reader until the Dictionary is drained in a single reading.

A reference work in form, in essence, it offers a refreshing and effective method of reading current history. Hopefully it will be the first of many others to follow.