

BOOK REVIEWS

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, The Elgin Marbles: Should they be Returned to Greece? (with chapters by Robert Browning and Graham Binns). Chatto and Windus, London, 1987. 137pp (31 figs. and 2 appendices). £12.50 (Hard) ISBN 0-7011-3163-2.

Reviewed by Anthony Snodgrass

The issue of the Elgin Marbles provides a wonderful test for the liberal principles of British Hellenists. In one way it even recalls that other, much grosser test to which they were subjected twenty years ago -- the advent of the Colonels' regime in Greece. Then, only a few (if influential) voices were raised in defence of the Colonels by people who should have known better. This time, the mesh of the net is finer, and it has caught many more and bigger fish.

It is exasperation with the Greek character and temperament which links the two cases -- shown most obviously, in this issue, in the reactions to the style of Melina Mercouri's presentation of the case for the return of the Marbles. In 1967, this was much more crudely expressed, with scurrilities about "a semi-westernised people", "precarious grip on democracy", "given to internecine brutality", "need to be shown the business end of a bayonet every now and then". To look back further still, when another debate on the Marbles broke out in the columns of the London magazine The Nineteenth Century, in 1891, the Editor, a Mr James Knowles, entered the lists himself with another gibe that is now being heard again, when he referred to "the mixed little

population which now lives upon the ruins of ancient Greece".

Greece is not only a 'developing' country; it is also one with no political or economic hold over Britain worth mentioning. As a test of the importance of this fact, one has only to imagine what the outcome would have been if, say, the French government rather than the Greek were claiming the Marbles back. Another and better test is to read of the fascinating episode, narrated on pp. 75-78 of Christopher Hitchens' book with hitherto secret memoranda quoted for the first time, which took place early in 1941, at a critical moment in World War II.

With the Nazi forces in control of most of Europe, the goalposts were suddenly moved in respect of Greece. Now, instead of being swarthy, unreliable Levantines, the Greeks were, with the British, "the only two democracies still resisting the imposition of Hitler's New Order". What was the right gesture for the crisis? It was actually a Conservative Member who tabled a question in the House of Commons, asking whether the Marbles might be restored to Greece after the war, as a recognition of her "magnificent stand for civilisation". What makes the episode fascinating is not the response of the Government (it refused), but those of the Foreign Office and the British Museum, which had meantime been consulted. The Foreign Office forwarded a statement of the arguments for and against, with a covering letter stating that "Everything points to a decision in principle to return the Elgin Marbles...". Equally remarkably,

the British Museum concluded that the Greeks' case was sound and defensible, and could only counter with the feeble plea that Greek pride might be offended if the return were offered "as a favour rather than a right".

If this is not enough, then other and older skeletons tumble out of their cupboards in this book. There is a disarming admission, after the event, by Lord Elgin himself. In 1811 he had to defend himself against London gossip, to the effect that he had got the Marbles by unduly insinuating himself with the Turks, and partly as free gifts. On the contrary, he said: "The Porte (the Ottoman Government) denied that the persons who had sold those Marbles to me had any right to dispose of them" (p. 52). So arguments based on Elgin's legal title to the Marbles are refuted out of his own mouth. The whole sequence of steps in the journey from the Acropolis to Bloomsbury is here shown in such damaging light that one wonders whether the retentionists will ever again direct our attention to it. There is destruction both accidental ("down came the fine masses of Pentelican marble" [p. 30]; "Not being well-sawn...it parted in two" [p. 46]) and deliberate ("it is necessary to saw it in two" [p. 46]). There is Elgin's original plan to furnish his house at Broomhall in Fife with the Marbles (p. 43), and the revelation that he was partly constrained to sell them to the Government through having used them as security on a bad debt of £18,000 which he had incurred, quite separately, to the same government (p. 57).

What has come over us in the 1980s? (For unquestionably the present debate reveals more about the British than the Greeks). In a nutshell, we have gone back to Mr James Knowles and The Nineteenth Century. Knowles followed through the "logic" of returning the Marbles: "till England, denuded of every possession which God and her forefathers gave her, shall stand up naked...the laughing-stock of the whole world" (p. 69). He listed these 'possessions', from Gibraltar to Ireland, and thus acknowledged the blatant dependence of cultural imperialism on political imperialism. Perhaps the climax of Hitchens' book is the television interview with the Director of the British Museum in June, 1986. "To rip the Elgin Marbles from the walls of the British Museum is a much greater disaster than the threat of blowing up the Parthenon...It's nationalism and it's cultural danger....If you start to destroy great intellectual institutions, you are culturally fascist". Nationalism does indeed lie behind the claim for the return of the Marbles: but so does it behind their retention. We may not be able to hold on to our Empire any longer, but by jingo we can hold on to its cultural fruits. Such sentiments make a sitting target for an articulate journalist of the Left like Christopher Hitchens. But his readers too may be able to recognise that hollow tone which comes from those who have lost, not the battle -- while the Thatcher government lasts, that seems as remote as ever -- but the argument.

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