



The Hellenic Society Prometheas

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On Wednesday, October 20th, at St. George Greek Orthodox Church, Bethesda, MD, Prometheas in cooperation with the Press and Communications Office of the Greek Embassy presented editor Thanasis Maskaleris on **“Preserving the Greek Heritage/The Role of Literature”** with a special tribute to Nikos Kazantzakis. Mr. Maskaleris is the Kazantzakis Chair Research Professor emeritus of classics, comparative literature, and creative writing, and the director emeritus of the Center for Modern Greek Studies at San Francisco State University. About 55 people attended this mid-week event and enjoyed selected readings from the newly published Anthology of Modern Greek Poetry, edited by Thanasis Maskaleris and Nanos Valaoritis.

On Friday, October 29, 2004, at St. George Greek Orthodox Church, Bethesda, MD Prometheas presented an evening on **“Reflections on the Athens 2004 Olympics”**. At the beginning of the panel discussion and in order to set the tone of the event, a video presentation of the opening and closing ceremonies was presented. Next, Professor Alexander Kitroeff, who was the main speaker and panel moderator, presented the participants and offered his reflections and comments of the Athens Olympics. The panel participants were: Achilles Paparsenos, director of the Press and Communications Office of the Greek Embassy, Alketas Panagoulis, who worked as Venue manager of the Olympic Football Tournament, Sophia Adamantiades, FBI Intelligence Analyst, Olympics Deployment, and Dr. Basil Economopoulos, Steve Raptakis, and Stavros Manolakos, volunteers. The large audience of more that 130 people enjoyed listening to the experiences of the Olympic Games participants and to the inspiring reflections of Professor Kitroeff. A lively and engaging discussion ensued and three more Olympic volunteers attending the event added their own comments and experiences to the proceeding of this memorable event.

Mark Your Calendar

Friday, November 19, 2004, 8:00 p.m. Greek movie at St. Katherine’s Church, at Falls Church, VA. Three Athenian families leave town for the feast of Dekaptentavgoustos (Ascension of the Virgin Mary). At the same time a young burglar breaks into their apartments... In Greek with no subtitles. Tickets \$5, students: free.

Book Review

Sunday, October 17, 2004 (Page BW06; washingtonpost.com)

BIRDS WITHOUT WINGS •

By Louis de Bernières
Knopf. 554 pp. \$25.95

Reviewed by Nicholas Gage

Ever since the invasion of Troy, convulsions in the eastern Mediterranean -- from the Persian wars to Alexander's conquests to the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 -- have provided the raw material for epic tales of struggle and sacrifice. In the 20th century, the upheaval that continued that tradition and promised to produce more than one great literary work was the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Turkish nationalism under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Here you had it all: hedonism and decay as the old order crumbled; persecution and genocide as Turkish extremists sought to drive out and destroy millions of Christians in their midst; invasion and occupation as Greek forces, spurred on by their European allies, occupied Smyrna and pushed deep into Anatolia; reversal and resurgence as Kemal revived the battered Turks and drove the invaders back to the sea; betrayal and slaughter as the Europeans abandoned the Christians to the fury of their attackers; and loss and sacrifice as 1.5 million Christians were forced to abandon their ancestral homelands in Anatolia for Greece.

For almost a century, many writers, from Franz Werfel (*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*) to Elia Kazan (*The Anatolian*), have tried to use this intensely dramatic material to create a literary work worthy of the historical events.

It was natural that Louis de Bernières, a master storyteller who knows the eastern Mediterranean well and achieved his greatest success with a novel set in the region, *Corelli's Mandolin*, should turn to this subject to try to produce an epic novel that would do the turbulent era justice.

His new book, *Birds Without Wings*, to which he has devoted a decade of his writing life, does not quite achieve that goal, but it is a fascinating, evocative work written on a grand scale not much seen today. Despite its flaws, it is as rich and compelling as any novel written about the Anatolian upheaval.

Birds Without Wings and *Corelli's Mandolin* share the same theme -- a peaceful, sun-drenched community shattered by the horrors of war. They also share one character, Drosoula Drapanitikos, the refugee from Anatolia who runs the local taverna in the earlier novel and is the mother of the rebel leader, Mandras.

Birds takes Drosoula back to her youth and her ancestral home, Eskibahçe, a town on the Lycian coast known as Paleoperiboli (Old Orchard) in Byzantine times. In this seaside Eden, Christians and Muslims live convivially together, sharing holidays, customs and superstitions and even intermarrying. Although Drosoula has her own tragic story to tell, she serves primarily as the vehicle for recounting the main romance in the novel, the love affair of her childhood friend, the beautiful Christian girl Philothei, and the Muslim goatherd Ibrahim.

Drosoula is only one of many narrators in this mosaic of a novel, and Philothei's doomed love affair is only one of several interconnected stories.

There is Rustem Bey, the rich landlord, proud of his Circassian mistress but tortured by his love for the unfaithful wife he tried to have stoned to death; the ascetic Greek schoolteacher Leonidas, who spends his nights fomenting plots and writing messages to irredentist groups; the potter Iskander and his son, Karatavuk, who winds up on the Turkish defense line at Gallipoli and witnesses the crushing defeat of Allied forces.

But while there are several brilliant set pieces -- the battle of Gallipoli, the expulsion of Christians from their ancestral homes -- as well as enough major characters and story lines to fill three novels, *Birds Without Wings* does not hang together well enough to be the master work the author intended. For one thing, there are so many characters and interconnected story lines that confusion and repetition are the inevitable byproducts. For another, many of the major characters are so endearing, so knowing, so full of folk wisdom that they are simply not believable. It is hard to accept, for example, that an illiterate potter, thoughtful as he might be, would come up with such an insight as "Destiny caresses the few, but molests the many, and finally every sheep will hang by its foot on the butcher's hook." To add to the confusion, de Bernières scatters throughout the book

22 chapters on the life and career of Kemal Atatürk, the military leader who forged the modern Turkish nation, that have little connection to the other stories he recounts and produce a portrait that verges on hagiography. As a result, the mosaic he has created does not emerge as the grand vision it could have been with tighter editing and a less diffuse narrative.

Nevertheless, in his compassionate portrayal of simple people struggling against sweeping historical forces and his vivid descriptions of the cruelties of war, de Bernières has reached heights that few modern novelists ever attempt. While *Birds Without Wings* can be confusing and meandering at times, it offers a thrilling ride through a whirlwind of history that changed forever a pivotal part of our world.

Nicholas Gage is the author of "Eleni," "A Place for Us" and "Greek Fire."

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Recommended Books and Records

- *Το Ελληνικό Έθνος – Γενεση και διαμορφωση του νεου ελληνισμου*, Νικου Γ. Σβορωνου (Εκδοτικός Οίκος: Πολις). Ένα ανεκδοτο κειμενο του μεγαλου Ελληνα ιστορικου, σαραντα χρονια μετα τη γραφη του. [First in sales in October in Greece]
- *Ancient Greek Athletics*, by Stephen G. Miller (Yale Press, April 2004)
- *Wrestling with the Ancients: Modern Greek Identity and the Olympics*, by Alexander Kritoeff (Greekworks.com, February 2004)
- *Climbing Olumpus: What you can learn from Greek myth and wisdom* by Stephen Bertman (Sourcebooks.com, 2003)

- *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America*, by Marilyn Rouvelas (Nea Attiki Press)
- An a record: *Greece: A musical odyssey* from Putumayo. Musicologist Jacob Edgar sought to present a collection that connects the ancient and modern Greek worlds. Two of the most influential signers, Dalaras and Glykeria, are featured along with Melina Kana, Anastasia Moutsatsou, Elly Paspala, Pantelis Thalassinis, the Group Apenanti with Melina Aslanidou, Costas Makedonas, Gerasimos Papazoglou, etc.