The Hellenic Society Prometheas

Newsletter 28

January 2004

The Hellenic Society Prometheas wishes all of you a Happy and Prosperous New Year 2004.

Mark Your Calendar

Greek Letters Day: January 30 at St. George

On Friday, January 30, 2004 at St. George Greek Orthodox Church, Bethesda, MD, at 8:00 pm, the Hellenic Society Prometheas will celebrate Greek Letters Day. Professor Alexander Kitroeff of Haverford College, PA will speak on the Olympic movement and the role of Greece in the establishment of modern Olympic Games. Professor Kitroeff is a modern historian and author of "*Wrestling With the Ancients: Modern Greek Identity & the Olympics*". Reception and the traditional cutting of the Society's vassilopita will follow this event.

El Greco at the NY Met up to January 11, 2004

Works of El Creco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos born in Crete in 1541) from all over the world have been brought together at the New York Mtropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibit opened in November and will be open until January 11, 2004.

Prometheas Dance (25th Anniversary Masquerade Ball), February 7, 2004

By popular demand, Prometheas will celebrate APOKRIES and its 25th Anniversary with a traditional dinner/masquerade ball at the Double Tree hotel in Rockville, MD on Saturday, Feb. 7, 2004. Music will be provided by Achilleas Band and Discotheque Internationale. This promises to be a memorable event. Mark your calendar; don't miss it!! More details to follow!

Interesting Web Sites

Modern Greek Poetry:
http://genesis.ee.auth.gr/dimakis/Texnopaignion/1/texnopaignion1.htm

Books

Classics: Three new books take fresh measure of our ancient forebears.

Reviewed by Tracy Lee Simmons

Sunday, December 14, 2003

While I was on the road recently, shilling for a book of my own on the virtues of the classical languages when used, as they once were in Europe and America, as a foundation for sound schooling and intellectual strength, someone innocently piped up after my talk with a simple question. "What do you think of 'Gladiator'?" A generation ago, I suppose that "Spartacus" or "Ben-Hur" would have sparked the same interest. By now, I've become accustomed to this kind of question. But it's an honest one, and it shows more clearly than anything else can that the residue left on the popular culture by movies contains some of the few traces of classical knowledge to be found these days.

Yet our predicament may not be as bad as all that. Things classical are now undergoing a new vogue, one that extends commercially to the book trade as the Greeks and Romans exercise a new fascination on the reading public. Socrates and Cicero sell. New translations of old standard works become bestsellers. Ignorance of what all educated people used to know as a matter of course, especially about the classical cultures from which we arose, no longer seems as fetching as it once did. Books reminding us where we came from, which once would have seemed superfluous to those who have attended decent schools, now provide an accessible and stylish form of up-market remediation.

Wandering Greeks

Few authors have offered better survey courses to the culturally famished than Thomas Cahill, whose breezily erudite How the Irish Saved Civilization, The Gifts of the Jews, and Desire of the Everlasting Hills have done more than any other contemporary books to bring the ancient past alive for the general reader. Now he adds ***Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*** (Nan A. Talese, $27.50), which sets out to explore and explain the pivotal place of classical Greece in the history of the West.

Cahill sets up a large canvas and paints his picture with primary colors.

He's keen to show the master strokes of the Hellenic genius, so he inevitably concentrates less on the exotic singularity of the Greeks, those historical accidents that separate us from them in custom or thought, than on the continuities, those links between us and them that make us honorary Greeks -- or them honorary moderns.

He also examines those major types of the human spirit (along with their exemplars in Greek history and literature) that endure and even define what it is to be human to begin with: the poet, the philosopher, the warrior, the artist, the wanderer and -- lest we get too romantic -- the politician. Cahill writes that the Greeks supremely mastered all the pursuits identified with these types -- practicing some with nobility and others with crude violence. In so doing they erected, for better and worse, the standards of action, thought and expression by which we live today. To study the Greeks is to claim a legacy.

Cahill assumes his readers possess scant knowledge of classical history or literature and arranges each chapter like a chatty lecture, complete with introductory readings from original sources as springboards for expounding the ideas and ideals they portray. We even find a pronunciation glossary for the Greek cast of characters and, for those who could never read the signs over fraternity and sorority houses, the Greek alphabet with transliterations. He makes complex things simple without rendering them simplistic.

The Old Changing Way

Norman Cantor's ***Antiquity: The Civilization of the Ancient World*** (HarperCollins, $24.95) serves much the same purpose, though it's more a survey of ancient history than of classical thought and culture. With somewhat alarming brevity, Cantor divides the book into two parts, beginning with the great narrative that makes up the ancient timeline and then explaining the discrete achievements of the Egyptians, Jews, Greeks and Romans. He then wraps up the narrative with a look at how Christianity transformed the classical heritage. (Cahill also treats the Judeo-Christian encounter with the pagan inheritance.) Both Cahill and Cantor have written books for the general, intelligent reader with an earnest (if also somewhat light) desire to find out just what all the classical fuss is about.

Gods and Monsters

Not so Mary Lefkowitz, author of ***Greek Gods, Human Lives*** (Yale Univ., $30). Lefkowitz is a super-competent, sometimes controversial and always engaging professional classicist. While the general reader can read the book with profit, too, it might make for some tough going. This fascinating

study isn't merely introductory, though it is, Lefkowitz tells us, an "overview" of divine activity in Greek and Roman literature. In fact, it's a brief in which she argues that modern readers, with our modern presumptions, have for too long treated Greek mythology as little but a charming set of stories and, in doing so, have discounted the serious role of the gods as supernatural beings holding cunning or arbitrary sway over human life. For it is the gods, Lefkowitz believes, who hand us the keys to unlocking the mysteries of the Greek mind and spirit.

Her subject is daunting, so Lefkowitz, buttressing her points with illustrations from Greek art, constructs her argument by case studies, ranging from the general -- chapters on the gods as depicted in TheIliad and The Odyssey -- to the more prickly gods of the Athenian drama of the 5th century B.C., through Hellenistic poetry and on to the gods of the Romans, who pretty much inherited their divinities. Throughout she tries, with consummate skill, to answer the question stumping many a devotee of classical study over the centuries, and one that justifies the entire book: "Why should mortals worship gods who offer them so few benefits?" Like Cahill and Cantor, Lefkowitz assumes minimal knowledge, but she demands more commitment in this tightly argued book. To use words the Greeks would have appreciated, this book isn't the same sort of propaedeutic as Cahill's, but it does serve as a prophylactic against popular -- and sometimes scholarly -- misunderstanding.

Indeed, all three books represent an effort to rediscover our ancient ancestors, to trace our roots. But once we discern those roots, we must come to terms with our distant relatives and acknowledge that they rarely match our clean, whitewashed images of them staring at us from guidebooks and air-brushed histories. They may be great, they might have built the world we know, but they're not always savory. That may be the most helpful discovery we could make. We need not protect them. Both they and their achievements can withstand all the mud we can sling at them.

Tracy Lee Simmons is the author of ***"Climbing Parnassus: A New Apologia for Greek and Latin"*** and director of the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College.

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