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SUMMER BOOKS

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The roots of modern thought

Robert Temple

Scholars of Byzantium

by N. G. Wilson

Duckworth, £28.00; paperback, £12.50

ISBN 0 7156 17419/

Alexander of Aphrodisias on Fate

by R. W. Sharples

Duckworth, £24.00; paperback, £8.95

ISBN 0 7156 1739 7/

Despite the breadth of contemporary culture, there are still whole civilisations crying out for attention. Sometimes these can even be civilisations of which we are direct heirs. One such neglected ancestor of much that we hold dear has now found its champion. In *Scholars of Byzantium*, N. G. Wilson gives probably the only full guide to Who Was Who in those monastic and imperial libraries which preserved most of classical literature. Wilson writes in an accessible and easy manner which makes reading his book a pleasure, though it is not for readers unfamiliar with classical litera-

ture. If you don't know who Athenaeus was, then you won't be interested in how the Byzantine Eustathius made his epitome of the lost portions of his work.

We have less excuse for ignorance of Byzantine culture than we might think. The two greatest works of Byzantine literature are both readily available in paperback: Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, (Penguin, £4.50) and *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, (Penguin, £5.95). These historical works are compulsive reading.

Wilson gives a very full and satisfying account of Michael Psellus, as he does of the other two greatest Byzantine scholars, Photius and Eustathius. But wonderful as his accounts of leading figures are, it is the general information he has to offer which is often even more illuminating. For instance, he mentions in passing that at Constantinople (Byzantium) there were no educational facilities at all for learning languages other than Greek, so that only merchants trading abroad and children of foreign mothers would know another language. This helps explain why there was a total lack of knowledge of Latin in what was, after all, originally the Eastern Roman Empire. Most informative of his 'background briefings' is Wilson's account near the beginning of his book of that bizarre phenomenon, central to Byzantine culture, known as 'Atticism'. The Byzantines insisted on using, cen-

turies after it had become archaic, the pure unadulterated Attic Greek of the Athens of Plato and Aristotle. No one spoke it, so the only way to learn it was to preserve and study collections of set texts of that time. Hence the preservation of 'Golden Age of Greece' writings, – not for their interest but for their use in helping students learn the correct forms of writing style to qualify for positions in the civil service! For such absurdly pedestrian reasons are we today in possession of Euripides, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, Thucydides, etc.

If one reads Wilson (and, it must be said, if one *can* read Wilson, for one must at least know Aristophanes from Aristotle), a whole world opens up. Men who were just dry names come alive. We learn that John Tzetzes, who sounds like a tropical fly, was actually a very nasty and pompous fellow who happened to be half-Georgian, and that Anna Comnena from the confines of her monastery commissioned a series of lengthy commentaries on Aristotle. Wilson is attentive to the history of science, and mentions much of value relating to it, including Psellus's experiments with burning mirrors.

One of the most surprising things revealed by Wilson is that the greatest losses of classical literature at Constantinople were *not* suffered in 1453 when the city finally fell to the Turks and the Byzantine Empire ceased to be. The Turks have been given a bad name for centuries over this imaginary crime to learning. Wilson gives us the uncomfortable truth that it was an invasion from the West, not the East, which destroyed the libraries:

History books state that the Byzantine empire came to an end in 1453. The educated layman knows that the consolidation of Turkish power in Europe marks a turning point in political history. But if historians had been less exclusively concerned with politics they might have given equal prominence to the year 1204, when the Fourth Crusade lost sight of its objective and the Venetians with their allies captured and sacked the capital of the Eastern empire. . . . the destruction of libraries by the Turks has probably been exaggerated, since there are very few indications of the loss of Greek texts in 1453, whereas it is clear that after 1204 Byzantine scholars rarely if ever show direct acquaintance with literature that we cannot read today.

R. W. Sharples has rendered a splendid service in translating and commenting upon the treatise *On Fate* by the profound and important philosopher, Alexander of Aphrodisias (circa 200 AD), who has until now been entirely unknown to the public and shamefully ignored by scholars. Sharples' translation is superb, and his commentary and notes give us the reasons why we should be interested, and put the text into broad perspective. This remarkable treatise is the fullest discussion which survives from antiquity of the problem of deter-

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A BOWL OF CHERRIES

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minism versus free will. (Alexander is opposed to determinism.) It is extraordinary to read a text – hitherto ignored – nearly two thousand years old, which deals so fully and responsibly with matters of utmost concern in our own time. Modern philosophers should all have a knowledge of this treatise, which addresses those subjects with which they are themselves so largely concerned. The treatise is hard-hitting and soundly based upon the philosophy of Aristotle, which it carries forward and elaborates in a manner of which Aristotle himself would have been proud. A useful or perhaps even necessary companion volume is the earlier brilliant study by Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Duckworth, £8.95). Sorabji's book deals with Aristotle's own opposition to determinism, continued so passionately by Alexander of Aphrodisias. In these days when determinism is the official creed of most psychologists and the philosophy of a large section of the modern intelligentsia, the fact that it was considered and attacked in antiquity is none the less important for having been so recently made known. Sorabji and Sharples, in bringing forward their admirable contributions on this subject, have done a great service to modern thought by tackling its roots in ancient times.

'lacking in ambition to climb the ministerial ladder.'

This 'half-heartedness as a leader' had always been a weakness, perhaps because politics was a sport to him, his first love being philosophical enquiry. As a young man he read Philosophy and Moral Sciences at Cambridge, obtaining a second class degree – partly because he was writing his first book, *A Defence of Philosophical Doubt*.

He came of an intellectual, isolated, and inhospitable family. His father, a landowning MP, had died at 36; his mother had been a Cecil. Arthur was the third of eight children, several of whom were to distinguish themselves: Gerald in politics, Francis as an eminent embryologist, Eleanor as an academic. From this background he gained his conservative politics and his interest in science and religion.



Balfour: 'too much intellect'

Rising to a challenge

M. R. D. Foot

Safe Houses are Dangerous

by Helen Long

Kimber, £10.95

It is usual to talk of the distinction between principle and detail; as the great Lord Salisbury said, principles are settled by what you do about the details. This was painfully true in the running of escape lines across German-occupied Europe; as this life of an organising hero explains. George Rodocanachi, born in Liverpool of Greek parents in 1876, settled in Marseilles as a doctor – he specialised in treating children – and did not accept the brute facts of French defeat in 1940 or of Pétain's dictatorship. He kept up his normal, busy practice; went out of his way to help Jews, whom Pétain's regime did not treat tightly; and provided shelter for any escaping or evading allied service men who came his way. Scores of them hid in his flat, at different times; Albert Guérisse (called Pat O'Leary) on his way to Dachau and Airey Neave on his way back from Colditz among them. They all wore felt slippers, lest the patients in the doctor's waiting-room heard them moving about, or lest the neighbours in the flat below became aware of their presence; all kept clear of the windows, lest they were seen

Lacking the
common
touch