



Malta
Classics
Association

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2015

*Journal of the
Malta Classics Association*

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Malta Classics Association,
The Department of Classics and Archaeology,
Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,
University of Malta, Msida
classicsmalta.org@gmail.com

www.classicsmalta.org

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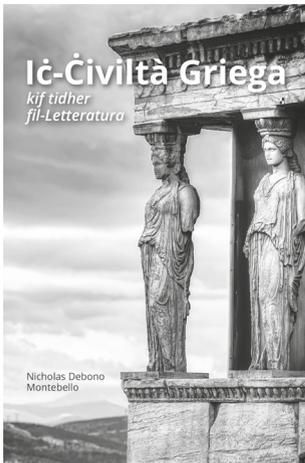
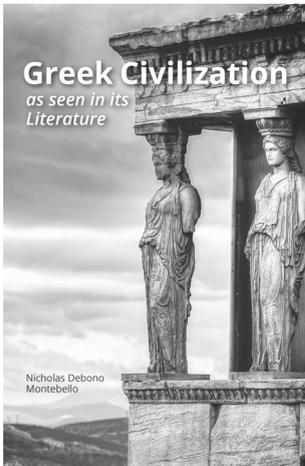
Greek Civilization as seen in its Literature, Iċ-Civilta Griega kif tidher fil-Letteratura

by Nicholas Debono Montebello

Malta Classics Association: 2015. pp. 48.

English version ISBN 978-99957-857-2-0;

Maltese version ISBN 978-99957-847-1-3.



It has become fashionable to raise an eyebrow at the contention that the ancient Greeks were an exceptional civilization. Yet, we all agree that to them we owe our notions of democracy, of logic, of drama, of history ... and much more, and that at a certain point in time, it was their penchant for enquiry that enabled the level of civilization in the Mediterranean to be raised to an unprecedented level.

Nicholas Debono Montebello clearly does not take his stand with the cynics. Lecturer in Classics at the University of Malta up to his retirement in 1995, I, as one of his students in the memorable eighties (the study of the Humanities had just been re-instated at the University after a long and painful absence) remember with affection his beautiful, free and fluent rendering of, for example, Plato's monologue in the *Apology*, or Homer's pithy verses in the *Iliad*. It was not just admiration for his confident handling of the supple and beautiful Classical Greek language. The feeling in the room was of actually being a spectator *in the presence of Socrates* as he

delivered his dramatic message . . . and would anyone dare to say this was not unbeatable?

“How you, O Athenians, have been affected by my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that they almost made me forget who I was - so persuasively did they speak; and yet they have hardly uttered a word of truth.”

Our classes with Rev. Debono Montebello, never devoid of humour, were more of an adventure or exploration together, than a process of delivery of some portion of knowledge.

In the face of the contemporary anti-colonialist and anti-racist protesters at the sublimation of Greece’s golden hour in the history of Man, Rev. Debono Montebello attempts the daunting task of compressing 1000 years of Greek civilization/literature into less than 50 pages and demonstrating within this fascinating account that the Greek achievement, starting from Homer and ending with Greek writers under the Roman Empire like Plotinus, is indeed about Man – in every age and of every race . . . He also makes a solid case for the natural consequence of this - that classical studies (even if it is in translation) should be taught to all, irrespective of class or creed, because *all* should and could recognize themselves in some aspect of classical literature – be it epic, lyric poetry, drama or comedy.

The writer dwells lovingly on the names of Odysseus, Agamemnon, Antigone, Medea . . . these are not just part of the Greek story. He is personally inspired by the myth of Troy, and the tragedy of Antigone touches him intimately. When was the tension between blind obedience to tyrannical law and natural morality not of immediate concern? And which human being can afford to ignore Socrates’ injunction to discern truth from opinion and knowledge from sophistry? And has political satire of unscrupulous leaders ever lost its edge since Aristophanes couched his brutal complaints in the well-known grotesque forms of Old Comedy?

The world-view of the Greeks, “as seen in its Literature” is indeed enthralling, and no age or culture should really have to sacrifice the exploration of this world in its schools and colleges to the so-called functional or technical subjects. This modest little book which

purports to be aimed at secondary school and Sixth Form students has such a purpose. I am very encouraged to read what Edith Hall has said in this context (*Introducing the Ancient Greeks*, April 2015) - that the whole purpose of education in a democracy is after all to make sure that liberty is upheld and defended, and for this, we have nothing more effective than the classics:

To stay free also requires comparison of constitutions, utopian thinking, fearlessness about innovation, critical, lateral and relativist thinking, advanced epistemological skills in source criticism and the ability to argue cogently. All these skills can be learned from their succinct, entertaining, original formulations and applications in the works of the Greeks.

This is why the initiative by the Malta Classics Association is so commendable. The book is available in both an English and a Maltese version.

Maria Zammit