

## A timeless tale of Greek heroes

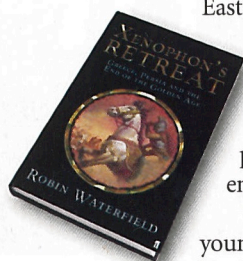
**BETTANY HUGHES** enjoys a lively account of a heroic escape

### **XENOPHON'S RETREAT**

by **Robin Waterfield**

Faber, 240pp, £17.99

**BBC History Book Club £15.29**



**T**HE EAST bank of the River Euphrates is a silent witness. As Robin Waterfield reminds us this earth is riddled with “historical debris” awaiting investigation. In 401 BC, two Persian brothers met here to fight it out for possession of the Middle and Near East. Soon the youngest, Cyrus, was dead and his force of Greek mercenaries doomed to a living hell. The Ten Thousand Greeks (in fact 12,900 hoplites and peltasts) were marooned within enemy territory. Real *Boy's Own* stuff.

The adventure ends as it should, a young general-scholar Xenophon leads his Greek boys “home” to the relative safety of the Black Sea – and fires military history with an eye-witness account: *Anabasis*. Waterfield deals not just with the heroics but the bloody business of

war: the booty, the gore, the peddling of “battle-lit” for profit and propaganda. *Xenophon's Retreat* demonstrates that taste for war stories is still keen.

Waterfield retraces Xenophon's steps through Iraq, Kurdistan and Turkey. We hear in detail of a landscape scoured by that dread Persian invention the scythed chariot; where slaves wore face-masks so their breath did not offend kings. An accomplished translator, the author understands the original text sufficiently to read between the lines.

Sprightly writing is tripped by the odd anachronism (we hear of Spartan “hippies”); but after all, this is a timeless story as well as a vivid tale of its times. As Waterfield rightly concludes we are still mishandling the east/west stereotype. Xenophon's expeditions “may be no more than tributaries, but their waters are still present in the stormy sea on which the world is tossed today”. **H**

**Bettany Hughes** is author of *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (Jonathan Cape, 2005)