

Some Talk Of Alexander

Mr. Samuel Johnson had some nerve: 'Great abilities are not requisite for an Historian...Imagination is not required in any high degree.' I beg to differ. Imagination is essential, as is craftsmanship – skills which Mr. Raphael has in spades. This sympathetic historia (a Greek word; the combination of observation, enquiry, analysis and myth) spins together 3,500 years of Greek-ness. The subtitle 'A Journey Through Space And Time In The Greek World' is not overblown marketing puff – it demonstrates the author's subtle understanding of the Greek experience: here the Eastern Mediterranean landscape looms large and time is anything but linear - for the Greeks 'the future' was a Frankenstein of the gods; it was in the ever-present-past that life's roadmap could be traced. In one typical Raphael-paragraph a description of a 7th-century BC vase bleeds into a discursus on suppliant gestures in Islam and Roman erotica, finishing with the killer line: 'As for beards, Saddam Hussein's repeated caressing of the one he grew in hiding was said to indicate he had been betrayed.'

Raphael venerates Greece and revels in its dynamism and tenacity. His command of myth ('muthoi' were not just stories, but 'things that were spoken', vital points of information) is singular, his command of English, delightful. But I have to lay my cards on the table and say that I think readers will either love or hate this book. Raphael dismissed his editor for suggesting amendments as pedestrian as themed chapter headings. Instead we have 336 pages of vigorous word association: the freefall experience is both liberating and mesmeric. Still, an editor would have had his uses. Anecdotes are occasionally repeated and Raphael's clarity and erudition can be shadowed by rogue, glib observations: 'Rationalizers claim that it is because, to the gullible, sailing ships appear to fly that we have the story that Daedalus "flew" from Crete. Modern island travel is by "Flying Dolphin" hydrofoil.'

But overall the lack of inhibition exhilarates. All writing is a form of auto-biography, and rather than pretending it isn't (chiselling a tablet of stone which derives from personal prejudice is, to my mind, duplicitous) the author welcomes the reader into his world. Raphael enjoyed a glittering career in film and theatre and empathises, with the dramatic nature of Greek life. This was an epoch where lives were 'played out'. Pretence is endemic to the human condition and the book recognises that drama can give us as sharp a picture of a society as can hard data.

This work is also, un-self consciously, a history of the mid-20th century - a period when a classical education was so solid that a general public did still talk of Alexander, Hercules, Hector and Lysander. A time too when the author could transport his considerable learning to a remote and primitive Mediterranean landscape: Raphael lived in the Cyclades in the 1960s, sleeping on mud floors and mastering the idiosyncrasies of the village well.

But Greece is no longer this raw; and like the landscape, scholarship has developed. Raphael tells us that he draws his references from the volumes in his own library. A few more visits to the stacks could have been useful – and I only make that seemingly barbed comment because many readers should cocoon themselves in this charismatic book: it jars that a smattering of facts are outdated.

There are though, manifold silken threads to knit the odd hurt. Like the agile confection of a funnel-web spider, this book tempts its visitors in to something beautiful and strange. Raphael's deft, inspiring construction would have given the weaving wonder from the Age of Heroes, Arachne, a damn good run for her money.