

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

A Modern Greek Drama: Imagining Andros in Lockdown

David Wills

Independent Researcher, UK

DavidWills@Newlandsgirls.co.uk

A fortnight with my wife on a different Greek island each year can hardly be described as Work. Yet amongst the pleasures of sea and sunbeds, the over-indulgence on food and wine, there is inevitably time for reflection on past publications and potential future projects. This is particularly so for a scholar whose primary output, from PhD through a fifteen-year academic career, has been British travellers' responses to, and writing about, Greece. Just a week before this summer's planned departure, whilst working on a future book chapter concerning travel of the 1920s and 30s, I entirely coincidentally came across some extremely negative views about the very destination for which we were bound – Andros.

In his book *East of Athens* (1939), it is evident that Eric Gifford very much favours some islands but takes against others, sometimes with an instant loathing. He is so enamoured of Mykonos, for example, that he and his wife scour the main town in search of a house to rent for a number of months, though eventually without success (Gifford 1939: 187). Andros, however, is unprepossessing from first sighting, presenting a 'barren, inhospitable coast, with cliffs and jagged rocks, where the green waves lashed themselves to white' (205). Docking is unpleasant, having to leap into a small boat for the transfer to dry land, and transport to the main town is in short supply, necessitating a mile-long walk with luggage (206). He immediately 'so much disliked the atmosphere of Andros', that he considers getting straight back onto the same ferry they had arrived on (208). The houses built by wealthy shipowners 'almost surpassed the monstrosities of the Riviera villa-builders' (207). Climbing the steps into town, 'from all sides these horrors leered at us', before Gifford is eventually almost relieved to reach the 'drab ordinariness of the shop-lined main street' (207). Greatly discouraged by

what they have seen, Gifford and his wife elect to leave on the scheduled boat the very next day, but this departs from Batsi, the port on the other side of the island, and their journey across by 'six-seater' is eventful. The car takes ages to start, some locals give them misinformation to con them out of their seats, there is the ordeal of hairpin bends on a partly-finished road, and the ferry finally turns up four hours late (212ff).

The only authority I *deliberately* consulted prior to visiting Andros was Nigel McGilchrist, indefatigable producer of guidebooks about every Greek island east of Athens. Meticulous on cultural information, doggedly tracking down every archaeological site and ruined fortification, he is invariably less forthcoming about the practicalities of tourism such as desirable hotels and convenient bus routes. Although it is now out of date by some ten years, I was reassured to discover that his guidebook to Andros (the only detailed one available in English) praises the 'clean line and spacious dignity of the neoclassical buildings' (McGilchrist 2010: 15) of the main town, which Gifford had so thoroughly denigrated. Less promisingly, the settlement of Batsi, where my wife and I were to stay for two weeks, was recorded in just two terse sentences by McGilchrist, as he devoted his attention and word count to more historic locations elsewhere. True, he called it a 'pleasant town', but also more dismissively 'Andros's principal tourist centre' (31). Far from being taken aback by Gifford's 1930s negativity about the main Andros town, and McGilchrist's more recent characterisation of our resort as bland and touristy, I hoped that my 2020 visit might provide a powerful illustration of a concept central to the contemporary study of travel writing: that representations of places and people are not 'objective', but are shaped by the prejudices and backgrounds of their authors.

It is well over twenty years since travel writing was put on the academic map through the foundation of long-running journals and university research centres. Yet even today, there are established scholars and respectable publishers who continue to simplistically mine contemporaneous travellers' views for information about the appearance and culture of Greece in previous centuries. In a recent anthology, for example, Michael Carroll, himself the writer of a fine travel book (Carroll 1965), notes the 'gloomy' impression the marshy and desolate mainland town of Missolonghi made upon Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor in his 1966 *Roumeli* (Carroll 2017: 153-4). But Carroll neglects to mention that personal history, as well as modern aesthetics, contributed to this representation: for Leigh Fermor, a celebrated philhellene who spent years embedded with the partisans in Nazi-occupied Crete, the location of the demise of Lord Byron whilst on a mission to free Greece from the Turkish yoke must have resonated greatly.

At the same time, however, I would not deny that actually walking the landscape is essential for understanding its representation. To better connect with the personalities and experiences of their literary heroes (as well as to further their own publishing careers), modern travel writers have frequently resorted to tramping in the footsteps of their predecessors, texts in hand. Nick Hunt, to take just one example, recently emulated the 1930s walk across Continental Europe from the Netherlands to Istanbul which had led Patrick Leigh Fermor to write the seminal volumes *A Time of Gifts* (1977), *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), and, later, *The Broken Road* (2013). In doing so, Hunt came across locations which were 'like being

inside his brain, a museum of his fascinations' (Hunt 2014: 59; see Wills 2016). Despite my interest lying in the various *representations* of places and people, rather than the 'reality', I have also come to understand the importance of visiting for myself. In late 2004, in the aftermath of international excitement at Greece's unexpectedly successful hosting of the Olympic Games, I crisscrossed central Athens as part of a project to evaluate the extent to which travellers' views of the Greek capital were evolving. Greatly impressed with the newly pedestrian-friendly and artistically vibrant city, my personal experience proved essential for understanding why the negative post-war narrative of smog, traffic, crime, and ugly modernisation, was being swept away at the beginning of the new millennium (Wills 2006). This moment of 'false optimism' proved to be brief, however: the practical as well as symbolic consequences of the 2009 Greek financial crisis led to the portrayal of Athens reverting to a 'beloved dirtopia' (Nikolaidou and Poupou 2014: 89).

This year, I approached my annual Greek trip with trepidation as well as anticipation. Stories were emerging in the media about the consequences of attempting 'normal' travel in the midst of a pandemic. With random testing for Covid-19 a condition of entry to Greece, one British couple were reportedly four days into their Corfu holiday before a 'Positive' result not merely ended their own enjoyment but was also judged to have jeopardised the health and wellbeing of those with whom they had come into contact on the plane and at their hotel (Godfrey 2020). I agonised about how we would cope in this scenario: the anxiety of waiting in the confines of our hotel for our test result, the frustration should a full fourteen days of isolation then be decreed, the indignity of being bundled back on our scheduled return flight. Treated no doubt with firm sympathy, and assured of any medical assistance which might prove necessary, we would have been left with daytime views of a distant sea in which we could not bathe, and the sound of evening strollers on a lively promenade who we were not permitted to join. *But, to our relief, none of this imagined lockdown (non) travel actually transpired.* Both fortified and sapped by a fortnight of voluntary isolation prior to travelling, and the last-minute added reassurance of a negative Covid test in the UK, we were *not* detained upon arrival in Greece.

Thus, in spite of my fears and reservations about travelling, I was this year able to place into context earlier representations of Andros by walking in the footsteps of Gifford and McGilchrist. One could argue that a whiff remains in Andros town of the pretension which Gifford had alleged. The shipowners' houses – always 'shipowners' houses', not 'fishermen's huts' – have been renovated and gentrified for a new century. The shops on that same bustling street which Gifford described in the 1930s now almost apologetically display 'I ♥ Andros' t-shirts outside their doors as enticements to tourists, but the products inside, jewellery and antiques, hint at an aspiration to sophistication. Overall, however, the town has undergone such a pleasing, tourist-orientated transformation, that no vestige of Gifford's negativity about its appearance or the attitudes of its residents can be sustained in the present.

And with his focus on no-doubt important antiquities elsewhere on the island, to my mind McGilchrist was guilty of overlooking the history written into the fabric of the port of Batsi. Move your gaze beyond the shop-front, and a building's upper floor displays the date of 1877. Venture into the back streets, and the pre-industrial infrastructure remains intact:

drains and fountains still channel the vital freshwater streams which even in summer run down from the hills to the coast. Wrest your attention from the sea, and the headland is guarded by a reminder of the longevity of war in these parts, a memorial which records casualties dating from 1912 all the way through to 1950. However, I am also forced to concede that these features of Batsi would, in truth, be of modest interest in normal times. My excitement is exaggerated by my anticipation and relief at being able to travel during an extraordinary summer. After our imagined Greek lockdown, and our months of genuine restrictions to life in the UK, we are elated with our freedom to sightsee, to interact with strangers, and to browse for purchases. In 2020, even more so than ever before, our travel experiences are shaped as much by what we've left behind – social distancing, face coverings, home schooling – as by what we actually see in front of us.

Works Cited

- Carroll, M. (1965) *Gates of the Wind*. London: John Murray.
- Carroll, M. (2017) *Greece: A Literary Guide for Travellers*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Gifford, E. (1939) *East of Athens*. London: The Travel Book Club.
- Godfrey, K. (2020) 'Tui Late: Tui tourists forced to quarantine in Greece after testing positive for coronavirus on arrival.' *The Sun*, 14 August 2020. [Online] [Accessed 29 August 2020] <https://www.the-sun.com/lifestyle/travel/1309933/tui-family-quarantine-corfu-greece-coronavirus-atlantica>
- Hunt, N. (2014) *Walking the Woods and the Water: In Patrick Leigh Fermor's Footsteps from the Hook of Holland to the Golden Horn*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- McGilchrist, N. (2010) *Northern Cyclades: Andros, Tinos, Syros*. London: Genius Loci Publications.
- Nikolaidou, A. and Poupou, A. (2014) 'Dirtopia and its Urban Subcultures.' In Poupou, A., Nikolaidou, A. and Sifaki, R. (eds) *World Film Locations: Athens*. Bristol: Intellect, pp. 88-89.
- Wills, D. (2006) 'Ancient Sites, Modern Eyesores? The Transformation of the City of Athens in English-Language Accounts (1945-2005).' *Kambos: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek*, 14, pp. 103-127.
- Wills, D. (2016) 'Walking to Write: Following Patrick Leigh Fermor Across Europe.' *Journeys: the International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing*, 17(1), pp. 116-123.