

# Philhellenism and after: Greece in E.F. Benson's life and work

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*To Professor Roderick Beaton, an ever-caring supervisor and mentor*

Edward Frederic ('Fred') Benson (1867-1940),\* the well-known English author, spent the greater part of the 1890s in Greece in various capacities. The aim of the present paper is to examine his relations with Greece: his activities during his stay, his literary output on Greece and its reception both in England and Greece, and the representation of Greece in the first three volumes of his autobiographical reminiscences *Our Family Affairs 1867-1896* (1920), *Mother* (1925) and *As We Were. A Victorian Peep-Show* (1930).<sup>1</sup>

Benson was by his own admission an 'uncontrollably prolific writer', whose books fall mainly into three groups: novel of social satire (either of manners or of university life), biographies,<sup>2</sup> and ghost stories. Today he is still read for the books of the first group, especially the series of novels *Dodo* and *Mapp and Lucia*.

He was a member of an extraordinary Victorian family. His father, Edward White Benson, was Archbishop of Canterbury (1883-1896); his mother, Mary Sidgwick, was proclaimed 'the cleverest woman in Europe' (*Our Family*, 169). His surviving siblings

\* I am grateful to Professor Georgia Gotsi for useful discussions, as also to Professor David Ricks for his detailed comments on this paper.

1 References to the following editions: E.F. Benson, *Our Family Affairs 1867-1896* (London 1920); *Mother* (London 1925); *As We Were. A Victorian Peep-show* (London 1930). The *idea* of Greece – and especially of 'Greek love' – in Benson's writing has been recently addressed by Simon Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family Indeed: Sex, Religion and the Bensons in Victorian England*, (Chicago 2016) 73-4, 206-10, but his relation to modern Greece specifically is surprisingly passed over.

2 Later in life, Benson produced *The Life of Alcibiades* (1928). The biography, based mainly on Thucydides and Plutarch, presents Alcibiades as the most representative figure of Athenian democracy and culture. Indicative of Benson's views at that time is the comparison of Pericles with Mussolini (100-1). In addition to the English reviews, the book was reviewed by T. K. Papatsonis in 1931, now in *Ο τετραπέρατος κόσμος* I (Athens 1966) 567-74.

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were Arthur Christopher, housemaster at Eton and later Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, poet, author of ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ and biographer; Robert Hugh, Catholic convert and novelist; and Margaret, Egyptologist and author of religious works.<sup>3</sup>

It was an unusual family marked by queerness (all the children were unmarried), psychological problems (most of them suffered from depression like their father), and graphomania.<sup>4</sup> This last embraced a compulsive desire to write memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies or biographical writings on other family members in which they struggled separately with the same body of material to interpret the baffling experiences that had been their shared life together. Their life-writing exhibits a complex process of the written self-fashioning of a prominent and troubled family that was ‘at once quintessentially Victorian and highly unconventional’.<sup>5</sup>

### Benson in Greece

Benson graduated from Cambridge, where he secured first classes in both parts of the classical tripos (1890 and 1891). He was admitted as a student at the British School at Athens (during the directorship of Ernest Gardner; the School had been founded as recently as 1886) holding four consecutive grants (1891-95) to work in Greece. He participated in excavations at Megalopolis (Thersilion: assembly hall) and Aegosthena (with R.C. Bosanquet, future assistant director of the BSA) and published the relative reports and surveys in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* as well as research on the cult of Asclepius.<sup>6</sup> Between 1894 and 1896 Benson alternated between Greece and Egypt, where he conducted excavation in Alexandria and drew the plan of the site with the co-operation of Hogarth<sup>7</sup> sponsored by the ‘Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies’. The search yielded poor results (D. G. Hogarth and E.F. Benson, *Report on Prospect of Research in Alexandria*). In addition, Benson accompanied his sister Margaret, who (having spent several months in Greece in 1893) was granted a government concession to excavate the temple of Mut in Karnak.

In 1896 he realized that he was the only one of his brothers who ‘had not settled down to any career’ much against his father’s wishes. But professional archaeology had been closed off to him because Cambridge ‘could not go on giving grants

3 See entries in the online *ODNB*: Sayoni Baru, ‘Benson, Edward Frederic’; Mark D. Chapman, ‘Benson, Edward White, Archbishop of Canterbury’; R. Hyan, ‘Benson, Arthur Christopher, poet and college head’; Jessica Martin, ‘Benson, Margaret, egyptologist and religious philosopher’; C.C. Martindale, revised by Robert Brown, ‘Benson, Robert Hugh, Roman Catholic priest and writer’.

4 Goldhill, *A Very Queer Family*, 117-20.

5 P.R. Deslandes’ review of Goldhill in *Victorian Studies*, 60.3 (Spring 2018) 477-9, and V. Sanders, ‘“House of Disquiet”: the Benson family auto/biographies’, in D. Amigoni (ed.), *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (London 2006) 214-31.

6 David W.J. Gill, ‘Sifting the soil of Greece: the early years of the British School at Athens’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement*, 111 (2011) 87, 303-4.

7 The future director of the School and assistant to Sir Arthur Evans’ excavation of Knossos.

indefinitely', nor did he earn a Fellowship there based on his archaeological publications, nor was he appointed Inspector or examiner in the Education Office, due to the stir caused by his scandalous novel *Dodo* (1893). His father died in October, upending the lives of the family (*Our Family*, 329-30).

Benson continued his travels in England, Egypt, Greece and Italy (Capri) where he shared a villa with John Ellingham Brooks, an acquaintance from the British School. In 1897, shortly after the end of the Greco-Turkish War, he settled for several months in Greece as Honorary Commissioner of the Grosvenor House Committee for the Greek Refugee Fund, presided over by the Duke of Westminster, and as correspondent for *The Times*. During the First World War Benson did 'propaganda work for the Foreign Office and Ministry of Information' in Turkey, Italy, and Poland (*Mother*, 302-3, 312-4).<sup>8</sup> From 1918 he lived in Lamb House, Rye (which had been the residence of Henry James) where he served as mayor (1934-37). In 1938 he was elected Honorary Fellow of Madgalene College Cambridge. He died of cancer in 1940.

When Benson arrived in Greece, he was not a typical scholar of the British School at Athens. He combined in his person the archaeologist, the Archbishop's son, and before long a famous writer in his own right. He had graduated from a Cambridge steeped in Hellenism, in the sense of a cultural and intellectual fascination with Greek antiquity; he was a man of society with access to British upper-class circles; and he was already the 'elegant famous novelist' who according to the Greek newspapers 'is avidly read wherever English is spoken'.<sup>9</sup>

This statement referred to the novel *Dodo. A detail of the day* (1893) which was revised and in part written in Athens ('Athens and Dodo', *Our Family*, 284). The book went into its twelfth printing in a year. It is considered at once a comedy of manners and a social study of the 'smart' society presided over by Dodo, an outsider to the traditional circles of polite society, (modelled on the character of Margot Tennant, later Margot Asquith, Countess of Oxford), a beautiful, charming, dreadfully clever but cold-hearted woman, incapable of empathizing with others. Dodo is surrounded by a group called the 'apostles' who meet in London and country to flirt and outdo each other in glib conversation.<sup>10</sup> 'The slight story is told with charming grace and considerable power whilst dialogue is a perpetual feast of epigram and paradox', what is called Dodo talk: 'the clever, irresponsible dialect, irradiated with ingeniously misapplied quotations and easy paradox'.<sup>11</sup> Responding in an interview to the question of how he reconciled archaeology with the modern novel, Benson argued that 'it is the best way of working to have two occupations, and then

8 R. Clogg, 'Academics at War: The British School of Athens during the First World War', *British School at Athens Studies*, 17 (2009) 163-77 (171).

9 *Asty*, 26 November 1894.

10 N. W. Ellenberger, *Balfour's World: aristocracy and political culture at the fin de siècle* (Woodbridge 2015) 247-53.

11 *The Speaker*, 7 (17/6/1893) 686, also *Saturday Review*, 75 (17/6/1893) 662, *The Graphic*, 48 (15/7/1893) 75. For additional reviews see the most useful site <http://efbensontheothernovels.blogspot.com/>

one is a holiday for the other [. . .] As an excavator he is among old temples, as an author he likes to write about today. The one holiday to the other [. . .] and so by way of recreation he flies from antiquity to modernity.<sup>12</sup>

Over the next three years Benson published four more books (drawing on his life or readings), each progressively diminishing what reputation he had made: *Rubicon* (1894) about a selfish woman in a love triangle who commits suicide; *The Judgement Books* (1895), on a painter who paints his self-portrait inspired by *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, actually an attempt to emulate the *Portrait of Dorian Gray*; the autobiographical *Limitations* (1896) about a Cambridge student who on a trip to Athens decides to become a sculptor in the ancient style; and the likewise autobiographical *The Babe BA* (1896) on Cambridge undergraduate life.<sup>13</sup>

As we have mentioned, 1896 (the death of his father) was crucial for Benson's career. Since he couldn't embrace the career of an archaeologist or other respectable employment, his only way out was to become a professional writer.

### Benson on Greece while there

It was at that time that Benson started writing *The Vintage* in Egypt after a time of subconscious 'stewing'. 'Every morning, and all morning as we went up to the Nile in the post-boat at some sequestered corner [. . .] while the sandbanks and the vultures and the wicked old spell of Egypt were working on my subconscious mind [later *The Image of the Sand*], I exuded on paper what I had captured of the sunnier spell of Greece' (*Our Family*, 321).

*The Vintage. A Story of the Greek War of Independence*, Illustrated by G.P. Jacomb-Hood,<sup>14</sup> was first published in *The Graphic* v. 56 from 3 July to 25 December 1897 and then in book form in 1898 with a crucially different subtitle: *A Romance of the Greek War of Independence* and with the following dedication: 'This Romance dealing with the Regeneration of her people is dedicated by permission to her Majesty Olga Queen of the Hellenes'.<sup>15</sup> It is divided into three sections: The Vineyard, The Eve of Gathering, and The Treading of Grapes. It is clear from the epigraph 'And the wine-press was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the wine-press' (Rev.

12 'The Writing of *Dodo*. A Talk with Mr. E.F. Benson by Raymond Blathwayt', *The Bookman*, 5 (November 1893) 5.

13 Brian Masters, *The Life of E.F. Benson* (London 1991) 125-6. On *Limitations* and other books by Benson, particularly *Princess Sophia*, see D. Roessel, *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American imagination* (New York 2001) 101, 127, 129, 143-5, 155.

14 Jacomb-Hood, who was sent to Greece for the purpose of collecting material for illustrating the *Vintage*, acted also as an artist-correspondent for the First Olympic Games at Athens. He recounted his experiences (and his travels with Benson), imparting enlightening information, in his book *With Brush and Pencil* (London 1925) 145-58.

15 *The Vintage. A Romance of the Greek War of Independence. With a map, and eleven illustrations by G.P. Jacomb-Hood* (London 1898). The map suggests a strong wish to reacquire the reader of the 1890s with the *realia* of the Revolution, particularly the beacons marking its launch.

14:20) that Benson uses the vintage (a familiar symbol of village life) as a symbol of the last phase of the rotten Turkish domination.

The story centres around the adventures of Mitsos Kydonis, a Naupliot fisher-boy of giant stature and fiery soul who participates in the struggle against the Turk after being prepared by his uncle Nicholas Vidalis, a prominent organizer of the independence struggle with Bishop Germanos and the Maniat leader Petrobey Mavromichalis. The last part describes the beginning of war with the capture of Kalamata, the siege and capture of Tripolitza (and the atrocities of the Greeks carried out there, as also those in Monemvasia and Pylos), the creation of the Peloponnesian Senate, and the quarrels between the notables and primates on one hand and the warriors on the other after Dimitrios Ypsilantis' arrival. In the end Vidalis dies of the plague, honoured by soldiers and primates alike, and Mitsos returns to his home. The heroic feats are intertwined both with the affectionate friendship of Mitsos and Yannis Mavromichalis and the love-story of Mitsos and Suleima which is complicated by a situation of vital tragedy. Suleima is Theodora, Mitsos' fellow villager, who had been abducted at the age of six, and now keeps her Turkish name even after her liberation.

The novel takes place in the Peloponnese, particularly in places that Benson had visited and described both in his travelogue 'Ten days in the Peloponnese' (Megalopolis, Sparta, Mani, Kalamata, Diavolitsi, Phigaleia, Bassae) and in the first volume of his reminiscences (Nauplio, Epidaurus, Corinth, Mega Spilaion). His main sources for the historical facts are Gordon's and Finlay's histories of the Greek Revolution; from which, however, he deviates, especially in the exaltation of the Maniats (apparently as descendants of the Ancient Spartans) and their leader.

The reception of the novel by English critics was generally positive. *The Vintage* was considered 'a start afresh' in the literary career of the author 'on entirely new lines', away from the London drawing rooms with the futilities of *Dodo* to the vineyards about the Greek port of Nauplia. Although it was considered unjustifiably long, the author was praised for the knowledge of topography and the observation of pastoral life of the vivid Greeks under the influence of the newly aroused patriotism which is rendered 'with charm and aptitude in the manner of Björnson and Verga'.<sup>16</sup> Yet the last part of the novel, in which the author is taken up with the actual facts, was thought dull from insufficiently assimilated knowledge. The political interest supplants the interest of emotion and adventure. 'If Benson has left Verga and Björnson behind, he hasn't caught up with Tolstoi and Sienkiewicz.'<sup>17</sup> *The Vintage* 'is not a masterpiece, but it is an excellent piece of romantic literature, and [...] Mr. Benson is really on his legs again.'<sup>18</sup>

16 *The Saturday Review*, 85 (5/2/1898) 178, *The Academy Supplement*, 1347 (26/2/1898) 230, 241, *The Outlook*, 1 (26/2/1898) 118.

17 *The Times* (18/4/1898) pointed out 'that he has not Scott's way of describing battle, murder, sudden death without offending delicate susceptibilities'.

18 *Saturday Review*, 5/2/1898. The reviewer for *The Dial* maintains that *The Vintage* surpasses Stefanos Xenos' *Andronike, The heroine of the Greek Revolution*, trans. from the original Greek by Edwin A. Grosvenor, 1897, because the English author 'with adequate literary training, backed by the continuous

*The Capsina: a historical novel*<sup>19</sup> appeared in 1899 as the sequel to *The Vintage*. The London edition was dedicated to the American wife of the Russian minister in Athens: ‘To my Friend Madame BakhmétiEFF I dedicate this Book.’<sup>20</sup>

Sophia Capsa from Hydra, (‘Capsina’), is a shipowner’s young and beautiful only daughter who refuses to follow a woman’s life. Instead of marriage she builds ships, becomes involved in public affairs trying to resolve the discord between shipowners and sailors, and dedicates her fortune and her life to the liberation of Greece with two ships, one of which is commanded by Canaris, the other by herself and Mitsos Kydonis (with whom she falls in love not knowing he is married to Suleima and a father, a fact that she only learns much later). They sail the Corinthian Gulf (Naupaktos, Erateini, Galaxeidi, Porto Germeno) where they ascertain Turkish atrocities and commit the like in revenge. The Revolution after the Fall of Tripolitza is described selectively and from unusual viewpoints: the National Assembly; Argos Castle, the battle of Dervenaki, the rescue of women and children of Nauplia; the setting on fire of a Turkish frigate by Canaris in Tenedos; the siege and surrender of Nauplion and what followed, due to the Greek greed (especially on the part of Theodore Kolokotronis) ward off by British intervention (especially of Hamilton). At the end Capsina leaves Nauplion to avoid the dispute over the loot and flees to Galaxeidi, where she blows herself up in a hut so as not to fall into the hands of the Turks.

English critics considered *The Capsina* superior because it centred entirely on the eponymous heroine: a ‘wild Amazonian maiden’, a Grecian ‘New Woman in her own way eighty years ago’, a ‘kind of Dodo’ in a different region and a different time, who behaves with pride and dignity.<sup>21</sup> Yet the plot was thought deficient because ‘the welding of adventure (fighting and bloodshed on sea and land) with travel, and the subordination of both to the necessities of a love motive tend to scrappiness.’<sup>22</sup> Objections were raised to the historical element: the author was thought

overanxious to impart his newly acquired information. But the politics of the period, the intrigues of the Primates and the treachery of the leaders can hardly be expected to interest the modern reader. To the normal mind there are few subjects more unsavoury than stale politics, more especially the stale politics of a foreign country<sup>23</sup>

tradition of good fiction writing which is his birthright, succeeds in making from his alien point of view [...] a finer treatment of the subject’: William Morton Payne, ‘Recent Historical Fiction’, *The Dial*, 24 (1/5/1898) 293-4.

19 E.F. Benson, *The Capsina*, Illustrated by G.P. Jacomb-Hood (London 1899).

20 Madame Bakhmetieff, the American wife of the Russian Minister, gave a picnic in the woods of Daphni in honour of the Olympic Games’ champions, especially the Americans, immortalized in a well-known photograph (with the royal princes and Spyros Louis).

21 *The Athenaeum*, 3729 (15/4/1899) 462, *The Sketch*, 26 (26/4/1899) 20, *The New York Times*, 6/5/1899.

22 *Manchester Guardian*, 14/3/1899.

23 *The Morning Post*, 6/4/1899.

However, there was an interesting closing remark in the review in the *Manchester Guardian*:

For ourselves, we regret that his sympathy [. . .] with Greek character, even on the seamy side, should not be turned to better account. We remember with regret a short realistic study in '*Cosmopolis*' dealing with the late war [the 1897 Ottoman-Greek War fought along Thessaly and Epirus] in which Mr. Benson gave a masterly analysis of the Greek as he is, sordid perhaps, but capable at a crisis of supreme devotion, nervous and even ineffectual in action, yet exalted and careless of self in a moment of panic.<sup>24</sup>

The critic seems to be referring to the short story 'The Death of Demétri', *Cosmopolis. An International Review*, 23 (November 1897) 305-25, immediately after the defeat, which conveys in a masterful way the excitement and the response of the Diaspora Greeks (especially of Egypt).<sup>25</sup> Demetri Capsas, an immigrant from Greece and a grasping merchant in Cairo, is excited by the news about the Cretan Revolution and the outrageous attitude of the Great Powers. He leaves his shop, travels to Greece, applies to the headquarters of the 'Club of Patriots' [= 'National Society'] as a volunteer without pay, putting all his savings at the disposal of the Club. He enlists in the first contingent of volunteers/irregulars in an atmosphere of excitement. They travel through Volos to Larissa, and the contingent is forwarded to Mavromati [Mati?]. In the battle that follows Demetri fulfills his wish to kill a Turk. He is killed immediately, in a moment of happiness that cannot know the disappointment of the outcome of the war.

The story appeared in translation first in *Esperini Acropolis* (from 28/10/1897),<sup>26</sup> under the title «Ὁ θάνατος τοῦ Δημήτρη. Δίγημα Ἑλληνικόν» and a short introductory note: 'The author, who proves himself to be a deep cognizant of Greece and the Greek character, is the same Mr. Benson whose great novel *The Vintage* on the Greek War of Independence, which is being published in the London's *Graphic*, will soon appear in *Acropolis*.' Indeed, the short story, published in a time dominated by the negative criticism of most of the British press against the Greek people, army and royal family,<sup>27</sup> is impressive for the positive image of the patriotic and spirited

24 *Manchester Guardian*, 14/3/1899

25 The activities of the National Society that recruited volunteers among the Greeks in Egypt is also depicted in 'Nikos, The Boy Volunteer. A Story of the Late Greco-Turkish War' which celebrates the relation of an older man and a younger boy by the Rev. E. E. Bradford (a Uranian poet), in *Kind Words for Boys and Girls* (London n.d.), 243-4.

26 It appears that it was common practice for journalists-writers in Athens to permit the publication of their texts in translation in *Acropolis* before their publication abroad. Cf. also E.I. Δύλλωνος, 'Ἡ τύχη τῆς Ἑλλάδος', *Acropolis*, 21-28/6/1897= E.J Dillon, 'The Fate of Greece', *Contemporary Review*, 72 (July 1897) 1-34. Usually, it is stated that the permission is given without payment. This is not the case with Benson.

27 See e.g., the following articles in the *Saturday Review*: Ernest Gardner, 'Greek Soldiers' (24/4/1897) 435-6, 'The Greek Royal Family' (1/5/1897) 462-3, 'Greece and its Rulers' (25/9/1897) 333-5, 'Greece and

Greek and for the suppression of everything that refers to the empty enthusiasm, deficient military organization, unjustified retreat, and eventually the bitter taste of defeat.

Benson showed the same positive feeling of Philhellenism as Honorary Secretary of the Greek Refugee Committee in his reports and correspondence (published in *The Times*) to the Duke of Westminster, president of the Committee,<sup>28</sup> which collaborated with the 'British National Society for the Aid to the Sick and Wounded in War' (Lord Wantage). This philhellenic committee which joined liberal politicians (Gladstone, Dilke), academics (Waldstein), wealthy Diaspora Greeks (Ralli, Vagliano, Averoff), with the secret support of the Princess (later Queen) Alexandra of Wales (King George's sister) and the Dowager Empress Frederick (Kaiser Wilhelm's II and crown princess Sophia's mother), was very careful in the formulation of its views: 'I [Duke of Westminster] hope as I believe that Englishmen desire to maintain the integrity of the Greek Kingdom and to see the whole weight and influence of Great Britain applied to the support of the Hellenic Federation in the Mediterranean and to secure for it the sympathy of France and Russia which was formerly shown by those nations when they joined in ratifying the declaration of Greek independence.'<sup>29</sup>

Benson collaborated with the British Minister, Lord Egerton, and his wife due to their friendship since the time he stayed at the British Legation (*Our Family*, 293-4). Beyond general pleas for help of the destitute Thessalian refugees Benson contributed in three ways. First, he gave an eye-witness detailed account of the situation in Euboea with reference to specific problems per area, kind and gender of refugees and put forward specific proposals.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, he stressed the need for two qualified medical practitioners from Athens with stores of medicine for Thessaly for six months due to the smallpox epidemic in Larissa.<sup>31</sup> Finally, he bestowed lavish praise on Lady Egerton's initiative to organize looms and to establish a School of Embroidery in Athens with refugee women and girls who learn 'an industry self-supportive in the present and profitable in the future'. He suggested that since the refugees were going back, it was 'most desirable to make this embroidery a permanent industry, to transplant it from Athens to the towns of Thessaly [...] and to give the looms to local Communities.'<sup>32</sup> The policy of making people (especially women) support themselves (instead of short-term help such as the 'soup kitchens') is particularly important because it spares them idling or 'the demoralizing effect of daily doles'.

its People' (30/10/1897) 456-7. Most of them were republished in Greek newspapers; some of them were hotly disputed. An example in the realm of comic poetry is cited in R. Mucignat and D. Ricks, 'The Revolution and the Romantic imagination: echoes in European literature', in P. M. Kitromilides and C. Tsoucalas (eds.), *The Greek Revolution: a critical dictionary* (Cambridge, MA 2021) 639-58 (654-5).

28 The Duke of Westminster (an old family acquaintance) supported Benson in his early career as an archaeologist (Roman tombstones in the City Wall of Chester, *Our Family*, 275-6).

29 *Times*, 17/3/1898.

30 *Times*, 26/7/1897.

31 *Times*, 27/11/1897, 19/4/1898.

32 *Times*, 19/4/1898 and *Standard*, 3/5/1898



The Greek newspapers<sup>33</sup> spoke highly of the English enterprise as akin to the coming of volunteers to fight; this is explicitly expressed in Nikos Episkopopoulos' column: 'We suppose that among the many and various forms of philhellenism the most practical, the highest, or rather the most laborious and effective is the form of philanthropy to which we must be most grateful.'<sup>34</sup> Lord Wantage publicly praised 'Mr. C. Bingham, Mr. Noel, Mr. E.F. Benson and the energetic secretary Mr. Atkins'<sup>35</sup> for their relief work, and probably these same names were proposed for decoration to King George for their engagement. Eventually only Atkins was decorated,<sup>36</sup> something that caused Benson disappointment and accounts for his barbed comments about the Royal Family in his memoirs (*Mother*, 76).

On 31 October 1897 *Asty* announced the serialization of a Greek illustrated novel: 'Mitsos Kydonis' written by 'the famous English author E.F. Benson'. 'The story refers to the Greek War of Independence, takes place in Nauplion and elsewhere and is most dramatic, most emotional and most Greek.'<sup>37</sup> On the very next day (1/11) *Acropolis* announced the serial publication of *The Vintage. A Novel of the Greek War of Independence*. 'The Vintage is a work of national interest because it draws its plot from heroic Greece [. . .] The author's pen, backed by the English tradition of good fiction writing, will cause patriot pulses [to the race]. [. . .] Benson is particularly liked by students and women but in Greece he will be liked by everybody because the story is Greek'. The melodramatic advertisement of *Esperimi Acropolis* (1/11/1897) reveals the actual reason of the publication: 'Amidst the sadness, the heartbreak, the contempt for so many national misadventures *The Vintage* comes to comfort us with the memory of other times of healthy national life, full of vigour, hopes, glory and greatness.'

The difference in the reception of the novel in Greece can be easily discerned. For the British reader it is an anti-*Dodo* book which marks Benson's turn to serious (historical) literature. It comes in for praise, not for the unassimilated political and military events of a small foreign country, which after all are of little interest to the foreign reader, but because it depicts the simplicity of pastoral life under the influence of a newly aroused patriotism, in contrast to the modern degeneracy which has overtaken Britain's highest social groups.<sup>38</sup> The Greek newspapers praise the same characteristics (contrasting the sound English novel with the French on subject-matter and method) but above hail the Englishman's novel because it dwells on the glories of the Revolution (regardless of certain events for which the Greeks could not be proud). After his departure from Greece Benson returned to the style of his first success.

33 *Asty*, 17/11/1897, 21/11/1897, 27/12/1897.

34 *Asty*, 29/11/1897.

35 *Times*, 30/3/1898.

36 *Empros*, 19/10/1897, *Esperimi Acropolis*, 28/10/1897 with mention of his overall role.

37 Although specific information is devoted to the illustrator's efforts to achieve accuracy (*Asty*, 1/11/1897) only the first illustration is reproduced in the Greek newspapers.

38 Cf. Ellenberger, *Balfour's World*, 250.

## Benson in and on Greece: antiquities

Two shorter texts by Benson, the travelogue ‘Ten days in the Peloponnese’, *The Pall Mall Magazine*, 2 (February 1894) 574-80 and the short story ‘By the Waters of Sparta’ (1903), refer to a quite different sphere of Greek experience, one more closely associated with his classical formation: the perception and exploitation of Greek antiquities. And their different perspectives can be seen as reflecting the change of Greek fortunes between the early 1890s and the start of the new century. The first was written at a time when ‘mass tourism’ was emerging due to the facilitation of new means of transport (railway), archaeological activities peaked in 1880s with excavations in Olympia, Mycenae, Epidaurus and organized tours with or without a dragoman or guide book (Murray, Baedeker) were increasingly common.<sup>39</sup>

Benson distrusts the ‘hideous discoveries of civilization and science’ which turn people into something like ‘commercial transaction’<sup>40</sup> and remove the ‘halo of romance’ from Greece considered as a central region of imagination, a sacred site in timeless isolation.<sup>41</sup> Thus his travelogue deviates in certain ways concerning both the manner and the means of journey (just two educated friends travelling with ‘apostolic simplicity’<sup>42</sup> on foot or horseback) in traditional, aristocratic manner; and also the itinerary: not the highlights mentioned above but a journey starting from Sparta and ending at the temple of Apollo in Bassae. In addition, the photographs: except for one or two images with stereotypical sites, Benson’s photographs are landscape views marked by personal presence of the travellers.<sup>43</sup>

Even Sparta, however, is not described as an archaeological site but is limited to the valley of Eurotas which resembles ‘the Garden of Eden’. If anything, Benson attempts to justify the contrast between the unexpected beauty of nature and the ‘hardy, mountain-bred rustic man of iron’ Spartan, in opposition to the belief that geographic conditions determine national characteristics: ‘Lycurgus was legislating against what must have been the effeminating influence of the lotus-eating climate [. . .]. When we realize that he [the Spartan] was reared in the plain with its stupefying luxuriance of

39 Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Greece* was in its fifth edition in 1884 ‘thoroughly revised and corrected’; Baedeker’s *Greece. Handbook for travellers* was translated into English in 1889.

40 A phrase reminiscent of Ruskin: ‘Going by railroad I do not consider as travelling at all; it is merely “being sent” to a place, and very little different from becoming a parcel’ in *Modern Painters*, III (London 1856) 321.

41 George Macmillan, who travelled in the Peloponnese with J.P. Mahaffy and Oscar Wilde, gives a similar account in his ‘A ride across the Peloponnese’. Cf. Iain Ross, ‘Oscar Wilde in Greece: Topography and the Hellenist Imagination’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 16ii (June 2009) 176-96 (185-6, 188-9).

42 ‘Apostolic simplicity’ is highly ironic: the horses carry ‘camp beds, toothbrushes and shirts, slippers, umbrellas, several boxes of cigarettes, soap and sponge, wine, tinned apricots.’ In the slightly later journey Jacomb-Hood writes that they ‘had their own cavalcade of mules and muleteers, with our cook, bedding, baggage and our guide’: *With Brush and Pencil*, 153.

43 D. Harlan, ‘Travel, pictures and a Victorian gentleman’, *Hesperia*, 78.3 (July-September 2009) 421-53.

vegetation, the existence, and, more than that, the observance of such laws [of Spartan culture], becomes nothing short of marvellous' (578).<sup>44</sup>

Nor is the Temple of Apollo at Bassae depicted as a monument but rather as an impression caused by its sudden emergence from the clouds and the 'enshrouding' mist. The same strange occurrence (a kind of epiphany) is repeated in Benson's reminiscences during a second visit to the monument with the company of the young diplomat Reggie Lister who was to become Benson's lifelong friend (*Our Family*, 315-7).<sup>45</sup> The deity is revealed before the eyes of the (classically educated) Britons, who participate in a deep aesthetic and emotional experience and thus transformed into 'ecstatic pilgrims who behold the shrine of Apollo' (317).<sup>46</sup>

The epiphanic experience in similar conditions is recontextualized in a separate chapter of *The Vintage*, 'The Vision at Bassae' with its corresponding illustration. Here the spectators are Greek (Mitsos and a priest) who ascend the mountain for practical reasons: to find the most suitable location for the placement of the beacons as signals for the beginning of the War. Mitsos – Benson's mouthpiece – unfolds an aestheticist approach to the monument: 'Mitsos stared amazedly at the tall gray ruins which stood there crowning the silence and the strength of the hills, still unknown to all but a few travellers and the shepherds that fed their flocks in summer – a memorial of life and death of the worship of beauty, and the god of sunlight and health and imperishable youth [. . .] One might think that the temple was lit from within' (178-80).

Mitsos' admiration meets with the fear of the priest, who justifies his belief that the place is haunted through the embedded narrative ('a story of a devil') of Apollo's miraculous appearance to the shepherd Demetri who penned his flock in the temple (182-4). The god vituperates the shepherd, kills the ram with his rays, sees the decline of the Greek race ('not so fair') and declares that the ancient religion is superior to Christianity: 'joy is better than self-sacrifice, and beauty than wisdom or the fear of

44 P. Matalas, 'Europeans in the Greek landscape: idealization, appropriation, disillusionment', in M. Vöhler, St. Alekou, M. Pechlivanos (eds.), *Concepts and Functions of Philhellenism: aspects of a transcultural movement* (Berlin 2021) 195-209 and 'Travellers and ruins in the Spartan Landscape', in S. Voutsaki and P. Cartledge (eds.), *Ancient Monuments and Modern Identities: a critical history of archaeology in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Greece* (London 2017) 42-61.

45 There is also a third visit with two interesting companions: the painter Jacomb-Hood, illustrator of the *Vintage* 'in order to correct upon the spot the manuscript of the new book', and the American photographer and travel-lecturer E. Burton Holmes, who coined the term travelogue: 'an illustrated lecture about places visited and experience encountered'. The detailed accounts of Jacomb-Hood and especially Burton Holmes, *The Burton Holmes Lectures, with illustrations from photographs by the Author* (Battle Creek, MI 1901), 159 with marvellous photographs of landscapes, historic monuments and scenes of everyday life, in some of which Benson is also depicted, are very illuminating.

46 For the visit to ancient temples as pilgrimage and the unresolved duel between Christian spiritualism and Hellenic glorification see A. Leontis, *Topographies of Hellenism: mapping the homeland* (Ithaca, NY 1995) 50-2.

God.<sup>47</sup> The shepherd disentangles himself from the nightmarish vision by making the sign of the cross. Mitsos attempts to rationalize the narrative, but he also remembers similar ‘strange stories of his childhood which had been seen floating like leaves in the wind round the old temples in the Acropolis and cries that came from the hills of Aegina’. (180-1).

It is noteworthy that the place names mentioned (Bassae, Aegina, Acropolis) coincide with the notorious cases of exportations of antiquities in pre-revolutionary Greece. Apart from Elgin it was Charles Robert Cockerell who participated both in the excavation of the temple of Aphaia in Aegina, ‘conducted by a multinational team, the findings of which ended up in Munich, and in a group of antiquity lovers in the excavation of the Temple of Apollo Epicurius in Bassae where they discovered the first fragments of the frieze transferred to Zakynthos in 1814 and sold to the British Museum the following year.’<sup>48</sup> In all three cases the excavation and the transfer of the antiquities were permitted by Ottoman authorities but found resistance from the local primates.

By using the device of Apollo’s ‘epiphany’ to the Greek shepherd and the British connoisseurs Benson seems to rework the ‘oral’ Arcadian tradition<sup>49</sup> according to which the simple-minded shepherds around the temple of Apollo considered the [ancient] Hellenes (whom they identified with anything heroic and gigantic) as the predecessors of the Franks, deft foreigners who dominated the country some time in the past. This explains their frequent visits and the interest they show towards the ancient remains. Actually, the ‘oral legend’ had been included in Stackelberg’s book<sup>50</sup> in the narrative of the dig, to depict the behaviour of the Greek shepherd-workers during the excavation and the transportation of antiquities by Cockerell as an admirable co-operation with the excavators, tinted with ethnographic colours.<sup>51</sup>

By glorifying ancient Greece through the eyes of experts in Greek art Benson refers to Hellenists who had created a cultural and intellectual communion that claimed classical Greek culture as its parentage. On these grounds, before the War of Independence the

47 The declaration echoes the Arnoldian contrast between Hellenism (a mentality and a viewpoint of men with a cheerful view of life and proud of evolving) and ‘Hebraism’ (Christianity, a mentality of men with ascetic drives, hostile to all images and addicted to spiritualization).

48 D. Plantzos, ‘From Phigaleia to Carlton Hill. Philhellenism and the classical ideal during the War of Liberation’, in M. Lagogianni et al. (eds.), *These Are What We fought For: antiquities and the Greek War of Independence* (Athens 2020) 202-14 (204-7). Benson mentions Cockerell’s visit without naming him (*Vintage*, 212).

49 I.Th. Kakridis, *Οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες στη Νεοελληνική λαϊκή παράδοση* (Athens 1997) 38-9.

50 O. M. von Stackelberg, *Der Apollotempel zu Bassae in Arkadien* (1826). An extract from his book translated into Greek appears in G. Tolia (ed.), *Ο πυρετός των μαρμάρων 1800-1820*, (Athens 1996) 127-64 (135).

51 G. Gotsi, ‘Ο θρήνος των Καρυατίδων: Βιογραφία μιας παράδοσης (1803-1902)’, *Modern Greek Studies Online*, 1 (2015), A55-104 (A 64-5, 74) studies the ways in which colonial imagination and literary discourse have shaped what appear as pre-modern sensibilities (in Bassae as oral legend). <http://www.moderngreek.org.uk/journal/sites/default/files/articles/Gotsi%202015.pdf>

limit between expertise, excavation, looting and protection to the safety of European museums or private collections is blurred.<sup>52</sup> After the liberation of Greece antiquities, considered symbolic capital that determines the identity of the nation, came to be protected by the formal introduction of legislation which castigates looting and commodification.

This is exactly the issue on which the short story 'By the Waters of Sparta' *Temple Bar: a monthly magazine for town and country readers*, 128 (August 1903) 151-7, comments. The story takes the form of a letter sent by one Englishman to another. It too takes place in the Eurotas valley close to Mystra, characterized as 'a deserted Turkish town'; the inhabited unnamed monastery-church [Pantanassa] is referred to only for its amazing view, and a play by an itinerant company on the persecution of brigandage which excites the villagers is so mockingly presented that 'the young lady in pink ties and wearing a helmet and sword' who frees the captives 'is confidently believed to have represented a colonel in the Greek army.' (154)

The story recounts the adventure of Anastassi, a villager whom Benson used as muleteer during his trips in the Peloponnese, who found a 'black-wave vase' containing around six hundred silver and gold coins and asks Benson for his advice. Using his expertise, the Englishman sets aside 'a gold coin of Tenos which I think unique, and a gold coin of Epidaurus, which I am sure is', promising to bring them for sale to the British Museum<sup>53</sup> and sends Anastassi with the rest to an antiquity dealer in Athens. From the sale Anastassi earns a respectable amount that leads him to a happy marriage.

The short story comments in a parodic manner on the laws on Antiquities (1834, 1899) which prohibit the illegal excavation, sale or exportation of antiquities as well as illicit dealing as 'sacrilege and behaviour unworthy of the nation'. More specifically it refers to the cases both of ownership of antiquities discovered beneath private land and of export licence granted only to objects which were 'duplicate' of those in the museums or of objects declared to be 'insignificant' or 'surplus' to the requirements of state museums.<sup>54</sup> The English expert advises the Greek villager to break the law and use the coins literally as commodity (which leads to his personal affluence and thence to the satisfaction of his desires), while the foreign archaeologist himself breaks the law to enrich with singular antiquities his own national museum (cultural capital) at the time of the growth of museums in the West and the resulting competition for scientific

52 E. F. Athanassopoulou, 'An "ancient" landscape: European ideals, archaeology, and nation building in early Modern Greece, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20 (2002) 273-99.

53 'C-' is Cecil Harcourt Smith, director of the British School at Athens 1895-97 and later Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum.

54 D. Voudouri, 'Greek Legislation concerning the international movement of antiquities and its ideological and political dimensions' in D. Damaskos and D. Plantzos (eds.), *A Singular Antiquity: archaeology and Hellenic identity in twentieth-century Greece* (Athens 2008) 125-39 (126-7); D. Voudouri, 'The legal protection of antiquities in Greece and national identity' in Voutsaki and Cartledge (eds.), *Ancient Greek Monuments and Greek Identities*, 77-94 (79).

and cultural prestige. The 1903 story reflects a disillusionment with Greece. The Greek draws on antiquity only to gain an economic advantage from it. The English Hellenist who is well versed in its arts is the only one qualified to appreciate it and ‘protect’ it by transferring the artworks to his own museum where the epitome of the world civilization is housed. This line of argument leads later in the Reminiscences in the support of Elgin.

### Benson on Greece up to thirty years on

Benson would depict the Greece of the 1890s as he had lived it in the first three volumes of his reminiscences *Our Family Affairs* 1920 (chapters 13 and 14), *Mother* 1925 (chapter 3), *As We Were. A Victorian Peep-Show* 1930 (chapter 8), that is up to thirty years after his departure and while world-historical events have occurred such as the Balkan Wars, First World War and its dramatic consequences especially in Greece (King Constantine’s ‘neutrality’, in fact pro-German attitude, National Schism, the joining of the Entente, the Asia Minor expedition and disaster). The titles are indicative of the contents: the first two volumes focus on his life in the frame of the family. The first, which ends with the death of the father, includes his studies at Cambridge as well as his archaeological activity in Greece and Egypt; the second, which ends with the death of his mother, his participation in the Refugee Committee (though from another perspective); while in the third, a detailed treatment of the second half of the Victorian and the Edwardian eras up to the outbreak of the Great War, the personal participation is repeated, yet downplayed in the interests of critical evaluation. In addition, the subtitle ‘peep-show’ ‘gestures to both a populist virtual tradition with little regard to accuracy, and the assumed voyeurism to which this appeals’.<sup>55</sup>

In all three volumes the Greek experience is mostly lived in Athens, yet Athens seems to revolve only around the Grand Hotel at Syntagma Square, the British School at Athens, the British Legation, the other Archaeological Schools, the Foreign Embassies and most of all the Royal Palace.<sup>56</sup> When then Benson argues that Athens ‘was in some subtle way my spiritual mother, so that on many subsequent journeys, as I went from England there, and from there back to England again, I travelled but from home to home, οἶκοθεν οἶκαδε’ (*Our Family*, 286-7), one is inclined to interpret his statement in the context of Hellenism in the sense that classical Athens (and above all the Parthenon) is the standard of beauty and perfection as well as the birthplace of Western civilization and especially of

55 Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, ‘An immense quantity of clever and thoughtful rubbish? Twentieth-century Victorians and the problem of history’, *Life Writing*, 10.4 (2013) 387-99 (387-9, 393-5).

56 In her letters to their mother Maggie adds their visits to the ‘dreadfully affectionate Miss Tricoupis’ with whom they exchange autographs (of Tricoupis and the archbishop) and speak about the political situation; also, the visit of a ‘Greek member [of Parliament] who ‘wears a national costume and has a blood-feud in his family’ in *Life and Letters of Maggie Benson by her brother Arthur Christopher Benson* (London 1917) 155-62.

democracy. Yet such an attitude can also be read as being a form of colonization: this limited Athens is a certain London in miniature.

Indeed Benson's description of his Athenian circle differs in manner and form from the rest of reminiscences only perhaps in degree. Fred was, according to his brother A.C. Benson, an egregious 'snob, happiest in the London drawing rooms and at the dinner tables of the titled rich and the fashionable famous'.<sup>57</sup> It is precisely this society that he portrays as a novelist of manners. He becomes less and less an active participant and more a wry and ironical observer of periods and places, cynical but without malice. He lights up personalities in terms of voice and idiosyncrasy of gesture and creates characters built up of anecdotes and gossip, endearing despite their foibles.<sup>58</sup>

If the historical romance was considered suitable for the rendering of the recent past of then heroic Greece, and the idyllic for the description of the Peloponnesian landscape, then the genre qualified for the depiction of modern Athens confined to the Palace in Constitution Square and its vicinity is the comic in all its versions. The depiction of King George and the Royal Family up to the end of the nineteenth century is a characteristic example. Let it be noted that at the time of the publication of Benson's memoirs King Constantine, who ascended the throne in 1913, was forced to abdicate in 1917, returned in 1920, and permanently resigned in 1922. From 1924 until 1935 monarchy in Greece was abolished.

Benson does not limit himself to the selection of anecdotes and happenings (the bugler, King George's audiences for every foreigner, the Sunday afternoon stream-tram to Phalerum, palace balls, the rampaging horse during a parade stopped by a courageous boot-black who slings his blacking box in its face while the troops scatter (*Our Family*, 290-5)) iterated or singular (*As We Were*, 157-63). Nor to happenings of which he is the only witness: George and his sister Queen Alexandra in the Royal Garden (*Our Family*, 294-5, *As We Were*, 162); conversation with the Dowager Queen Frederick -Victoria's daughter- in the British Embassy in Athens who speaks out against her son Kaiser Wilhelm II (*Our Family*, 285-6, *As We Were*, 160-2);<sup>59</sup> nor to the concise simile of the country as 'toy-kingdom'. Benson uses all the versions of the comic with intertextual references to relevant genres or specific plays so that the reader 'reads' or 'watches' the Royal Family 'as they were playing kings and queens' (*As We Were*, 163) in all sorts of musico-dramatic popular genres: *operetta*, *opéra bouffe*, Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera. Certain happenings at court are likened to Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring: a fireside pantomime*, a satirical work of *fantasy* fiction set in the fictionalized countries of Paflagonia and Crim Tartary which criticizes, to some extent, the attitudes of the monarchy and those at the top of society and challenges their ideals of beauty and marriage. Finally, Benson and his sister

57 Masters, *The Life of E. F. Benson*, 154

58 Cf. e.g. *The Fortnightly Review*, 128 (October 1930) 557-8, *The Sphere*, 122 (13/9/30) 464, *New York Times*, 2/11/1930.

59 Add the visit to the Empress Elisabeth of Austria in Corfu (*As We Were*, 162-3).

Margaret (Maggie) organize a performance (1893) for the Christmas amusement of the English governesses in Athens and the sailors of the British Mediterranean Fleet attended by all the Royals and appreciated by the King as ‘broad comedy’. The chosen play, Arthur M. Heathcote’s *The Duchess of Bayswater. A comedietta in one scene* (1888), deals with the ways in which men and women made wealthy by trade can cultivate aspirations for social consideration in a commercial age.

The selection of the same events and happenings augmented or omitted from the one volume to the other gives a hilarious, frivolous picture of modern Greece (*in vacuo*) which is addressed to British readers by criticizing in a veiled manner the condition of the institutions (notably, the army) as a harbinger of the 1897 defeat. Even enterprises such as the archaeological excavations or the Olympic Games, in which the royalty had focused its energy and connections to reinforce its power on the domestic political scene and advance Greek interests on the international stage,<sup>60</sup> are either suppressed (archaeology) or ridiculed (the Olympics). Concerning archaeology it is well known that the Palace did its utmost ‘to enhance the cordial collaboration between the nations in the service of the archaeological progress’, that is to combine cultural autonomy with diplomacy, through the legislation on antiquities but also through the privileged founding of foreign archaeological schools and the assigning of the right to excavate (Olympia to the Germans,<sup>61</sup> Delphi to the French), their visits to the excavations, the participation in foreign national committees abroad for the raising of funds for the schools,<sup>62</sup> and the maintaining of balance in the rivalries of the schools. On the opposite Benson castigates the Greek laws on the outputs of the excavations and considers the pre-revolutionary plundering (of the British and the Germans) as ‘rescue from the destruction of the barbarians [Turks]’ (*As We Were*, 156).

The first modern Olympic Games (1896), part of a wider Greek attempt to recapture the glory of the ancient ancestors by re-establishing their culture and institutions admired by the modern world are presented as a poorly organized fiesta involving second-rate foreign and amateur Greek athletes who dispute over the many victories of the foreigners. The most memorable moment of the entire event, when Spyros Louis won the marathon, is not only downplayed by ‘the ugly conjecture’ that he had been assisted, but maliciously connected with the defeat and retreat of the Greek army in 1897 (*As We Were*, 167-8, *Mother*, 72): ‘Refugees from the Greek army – they could hardly be called deserters because the army no longer existed at all – poured into Athens, and the first to arrive easily distancing all competition was Louis, the winner

60 M. Schneider, ‘A “Sporting Hermes”: Crown Prince Constantine and the ancient heritage of Modern Greece’, in F.L. Müller and H. Mehrkens (eds.), *Royal Heirs and their Uses of Soft Power in Nineteenth Century Europe* (London 2016) 243-61. An illuminating account in L. Louvi, ‘The Royal Family and the First Olympic Games’ in Ch.Koulouri (ed.), *Athens Olympic City 1896-1906* (Athens 2004) 99-124.

61 S. L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany 1750-1970* (Princeton 2003) 77-91 (82-4).

62 Archbishop Benson chaired two committees where the Greek Crown Prince was present (*Times*, 20/7/1893, *Ephimeris*, 22/7/1893, *Estia*, 5/7/1895).



of the Marathon race the year before. He had silenced for ever all doubts about his running' (168). As Llewellyn-Smith comments, 'the well-turned story was nonsense, for Louis did not take part in the war'.<sup>63</sup> Similar cases justify A.C. Benson's opinion: 'I never feel quite sure whether credence is to be attached to anything he [E.F.B] says. All his stories are wildly inaccurate and yet absolutely positive as to details.'<sup>64</sup>

In a similar way the narration of the events in Thessaly differs from Fred's reports to the newspapers. Instead of the Euboea journey Benson narrates his visit to Thessaly via Volo to distribute relief and medicine to the peasants who were stranded there. Compared to the disorganization of the Greeks 'the disciplined behaviour' of the Turks is praised, especially of the civilized Edhem Pasha, Commander in Chief of the Army in Thessaly, who describes with 'cynical benevolence' the battle of Pharsala (a 'host of hares' for the foes they never had occasion to meet')<sup>65</sup> and helps Benson on his mercy mission to the Greeks by giving him a guard to protect him from the Greek bandits.<sup>66</sup> Comic, likewise, even satirical, is the way in which the Greek doctor who accompanied the author persuades the villagers to submit vaccination for the smallpox, by telling them either that it was an order by the King of Greece, or a present by Queen Victoria or an elixir of life that would make the old and ugly young and beautiful (*Mother*, 75-6).

Greece thus turns into a subject of caricature, abetted by the invention of stories. As Benson admits in a similar case: 'many of these items though possibly fabulous, ring so true that it really does not matter whether they are authentic or not. Internal evidence based on a thorough knowledge of the character to whom they are attributed is the only test which is worth anything: if they are really characteristic, they should be accepted. . . if they are not true, so much worse for the truth' (*As We Were*, 133).

In the end Benson's description of Greece may be encapsulated in the following paragraph. (The bracketed parts, extracted from other parts of Benson's chapter, function as my glosses to his assertions.)

Athens, with its high-born princes [and their relatives, particularly those related to England] and its national pride [for the stubborn ancestors who 70 years ago had risen under the leadership of the Mainats [...]] and for the earlier ancestors who built the Parthenon, [and to whom the whole world is indebted], and its army dressed in Albanian costume [...] and its fleet of three small cruisers [but

63 M. Llewellyn-Smith, *Olympics in Athens 1896: the invention of the modern Olympic Games* (London 2004) 188-9.

64 Masters, *The Life of E. F. Benson*, 150.

65 The gist of this description appears for the first time as early as 1909 in Benson's travel/diary-novel *A Reaping* (London 1909) 247-63, along with the worship of classical Athens and its spring nature. There he arrives at the benevolent conclusion that 'the tragic futility [of 1897...] does not really touch Greece or the sentiment that lovers of the lovely land feel for it [...] once in this country beauty was shot up [...] and whatever the world has achieved afterwards [...] is set by the standard set then.'

66 He refers to guerrillas in Macedonia supported by the 'National Society' who crossed the borders and engaged in conflicts before the war and in looting after it.

without sufficient stokers to enable the fleet to move together] and its national assembly of bawling Levantines [by way of formula to characterize population of mixed blood],<sup>67</sup> and its boot-blacks called Agamemnon [...] were precisely like the fabulous kingdom of Paflagonia in the ‘Rose and the Ring’ or some Gilbertian realm of light opera. (*As We Were*, 157).

The persistent likening of the Greek Kingdom to various kinds of light musical theatre, in which the monarchy is the protagonist while the rest of the country is denigrated as a faceless collectivity, may be read as an allegory of the existence of the toy-kingdom created by the Great Powers. The Greeks consider their sovereignty to be the repayment of the immense debt to Greece owed by European civilization, which, accordingly, must support Greece in its ambitions for integration. On the other hand, the Great Powers, which happened to be unanimous each for its own reason in the 1890s, ‘wanted to keep it small and stabilized it as they might have set up a clock-work mechanism to control the flow of water through the sluices of some reservoir’ (*As We Were*, 165). It is evident that the control of the flow is regulated according to the rivalries and interests between them. Benson’s view here is coloured by deep cynicism, and not only about the Greeks.

The above overview has pointed to the various aspects of Greece in Benson’s life and its appearance in his work always and foremost from a British point of view. As a Cambridge graduate, he was steeped by the Winckelmannian admiration of classical art characterized by simplicity and grandeur which the Greeks achieved because of their geographical and political situation. He joined the British School at Athens in its first steps without any major dig at that time as those by the German and the French. He participated in the Megalopolis excavations which was ‘devastatingly criticized’ by the German doyen Wilhelm Dörpfeld (*Our Family*, 294-5).<sup>68</sup> Ironically, archaeology helped him to learn Modern Greek, helpful for his later activities. ‘This year excavation was equivalent to sitting on a wall while a lot of workmen removed tons of earth [...] It was not thrilling, but at least one could incessantly talk to them in what purported to be modern Greek, until it became so’. (286). Besides, he did not manage to redeem his research with an academic post.

As a professional novelist Benson would exploit his first-hand knowledge of Greek landscape and history to disengage himself from the notorious success of *Dodo* and establish himself (through the historical novel) as a more serious writer. However, it

67 The term connotes Europeans who had acculturated to the ‘Orient’, untrustworthy, because tainted by the culture of the East, particularly by the negative attributes of self-interest, greed and corruption. Cf. N. Pissis’ review of Oliver Jens Schmitt’s *Levantiner* in *Δελτίο του Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών*, 17 (2011) 327-34. [https://www.openarchives.gr/aggregator-openarchives/edm/deltiokms/000076-deltiokms\\_article\\_view\\_2414](https://www.openarchives.gr/aggregator-openarchives/edm/deltiokms/000076-deltiokms_article_view_2414)

68 Cf. M. Beard and C. Stray, ‘The academy abroad: the nineteenth century origin of the British School at Athens’, in M. Daunton (ed.), *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain* (London 2005) 371-88 (380-1).

seems that the Greek War of Independence no longer had the capacity to excite a British audience as a historical event. English critics seem to have read the novels in the context of issues concerning Victorian society (notably, the ‘Woman Question’), while the Greeks took note of them to serve their national needs. Through his short stories Benson again sought to comment on cultural or political matters of contemporary Greece (such as the exportation of antiquities).

As honorary secretary of the Refugee Committee and *Times* correspondent Benson would find himself aligned the ‘circumstantial and temporary’ Philhellenism at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> This took the form of philanthropy, either with immediate food supplies or by advertising British initiatives with lasting results as far as modernization of the country is concerned. His failure ever to be decorated by the King with the Cross of Redeemer (reward on an individual level) made him embittered.

Finally, as a memoirist looking back on the 1890s, motivated by the anti-German spirit that dominated England since the First World War, ‘which smouldered the old order of secure prosperity into ash’, he would come to describe Modern Greece up to 1897 in a disparaging way. He will focus on his contact ‘with the very well-connected Royal Family’<sup>70</sup> ‘provided’ by the Great Powers which guaranteed Greece’s Independence under their protection. Under the guise of comedy and satire, the politics of King Constantine (who is also held responsible for the 1897 defeat) would be considered a sort of betrayal towards the Powers (read: England) and generalize a disillusionment about the ‘toy kingdom’ which does not meet British expectations (to become a model kingdom). Greece, as he saw it, should moderate and subordinate her aspirations<sup>71</sup> to the interest of the Great Powers. That is not exactly a sentiment that one associates with Philhellenism.

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69 G. Tolia, ‘The resilience of Philhellenism’, *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 13 (2016) 51-70 (70).

70 The British and European connections of the Greek Royal Family are emphasized in Benson’s biographies *King Edward VII: An Appreciation*, (London 1933) 181-5, *The Kaiser and English Relations* (London 1936), *Queen Victoria’s Daughters* (London 1938) 282-4. This, of course, was before the First World War, when family relations and friendships between the sovereigns were thought to play a decisive role in politics and problem solution.

71 R. Holland, ‘Patterns of Anglo-Hellenism: a “colonial” connection?’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36.3 (September 2008) 383-96.