

Roderick Beaton *Greece: Biography of a Modern Nation*, London: Allen Lane 2019. Pp. 462, 26. DOI:[10.1017/byz.2020.18](https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2020.18)

It was with a great deal of awe that I agreed to review Roderick Beaton's latest work *Greece: Biography of a Modern Nation*. His classic *Introduction to Modern Greek Literature* was a reference work throughout my student years and later in my research and teaching. Beaton's tireless insistence on the relevance of Modern Greek Studies is a model to follow, something for which he was recently honoured by the President of Greece with the Order of Honour. Without any claim to comparison, I take the liberty of saying that I share professor Beaton's lifelong fascination with and love of Greece. It is in this spirit that I have undertaken the present review.

Roderick Beaton has previously excelled in the genre of biography (Beaton 2003). In his latest volume, he presents the history of the modern Greek nation in quite an unusual way, as if he was writing about the life of a person. I was initially somewhat sceptical about this approach and it took me a little while to appreciate the true qualities of the book.

The first three chapters, 'East Meets West? (1718–1797)', 'A Seed is Sown (1797–1821)', and 'Born in Blood (1821–1833)' are relatively faithful to the metaphor of humanizing and portraying Greece as a biographical subject, with East and West depicted as parents. Even though I can see the charm of this metaphorical approach, I find it mildly redundant. The idea of a nation (and a state) having parents is vaguely banal and resembles more popular understandings (such as the 'brotherless Greek nation') that may seem unsuited to a serious historical account. The chapters that follow, covering the years after the establishment of the modern Greek state, are also accorded titles that refer to human life-stages, including 'First Steps', 'Military Service' and 'Midlife Crisis'. Yet, these life stage descriptors do not appear to play a significant role as the account of the period's events in Greece's history proceeds. Leaving aside the biography metaphor, Beaton succeeds in giving Greek history flesh and blood and one does, in fact, read this book as if it were a person that one would like to get to know better.

The coherence of the 'biography' concept is demonstrated throughout the book in recurring themes that are presented as the 'core identity' of Greece, or in some cases as fundamental rifts in the life of Greece. The most obvious rift is evident in the civil wars and schisms between, on the one hand, a modernizing pragmatic approach to statehood and, on the other, a traditionalist, self-sufficient and freedom-fundamentalist approach. The first civil war (1823–4) between these two understandings of the Greek nation "opened up a fault line in the fabric of Greek society that has never since gone away" (p. 90). Another rift is visible through the prism of the not always coinciding entities of 'nation' and 'state', i.e. whether the most important mission of Greece should be to liberate the nation, that is to extend its borders to include Greeks living beyond the state, or whether preference should be given to preserving and strengthening the existing state as a house for the nation, thereby avoiding external

conflicts for which the state is not well equipped. Another recurring theme is (of course) the question of whether the Greek state – and nation – turns primarily towards the East or the West for identification and support, a question that, according to Beaton remains, unresolved: “No one should take for granted that Greece and the Greeks will always align with the values, traditions and politics that we tend to lump together and call ‘Western’” (p. 398). As much as this dilemma has traditionally been seen as something specific to Greece, it is problematic to apply the essentialist concepts ‘East’ and ‘West’ not least in this current period of radically shifting cultural balances and geopolitical boundaries. A final recurring theme is the involvement of external powers, primarily the European Great Powers and the US, as financial supporters and direct or indirect influencers on Greece’s internal affairs. Such involvement even extends into the sphere of culture, where what is probably the best-known Greek novel, Kazantzakis’ *Zorba the Greek*, was turned into an internationally acclaimed film featuring non-Greek actors: “once again, the business of being Greek was never going to be a matter for Greeks alone” (p. 325).

The clarity with which the author reminds the reader of these recurring themes, amidst the wealth of detailed historical developments that he presents, binds together a narrative that spans more than 200 years of history and offers the reader a deep understanding of the dilemmas and crises that have shaped Greece. It is also interesting to be reminded how often Greece has either been a pioneer in international developments, e.g. nation-state building (1830) and modern democratic constitutions (1864), or represented a microcosm of larger competing forces and balances, e.g. the national schism during WWI and the civil war during WWII and the beginning of the Cold War. Here, it is possible that some readers may feel Beaton underplays British influence, when he states that in the face of persecution of anyone connected to the communists, i.e. the ‘white terror’, from 1945 onwards, “The British found themselves powerless to stop it. Their forces in Greece were limited” (p. 297). This would seem to contradict an earlier reference to Churchill’s attitude vis-à-vis the left-wing Greek resistance movement that he termed “miserable Greek banditti”, while ordering British forces to “act as if you were in a conquered city where a local rebellion is in progress” (p. 291).

Overall, this book is a well-balanced and comprehensive account of the historical developments that have shaped Greece in the international context as well as in terms of specific events, figures or movements. As an example of the latter, one could mention the comparatively under-reported phenomenon of an epidemic of suicides in Athens in the 1910s. The decades preceding the foundation of the Greek state and the ‘The Eastern Question’ are presented in line with up-to-date scholarship that avoids stereotypes about Ottoman decline. Also, the history of Cyprus in the twentieth century is included in quite some detail. Nothing seems to be missing from this thorough and well-written account of Greek history, which contains some sad reminders of how much harm Greeks have done to each other. Fortunately, the book also confirms how stable the country’s institutions have become since authoritarianism

and fascism were brought to an end in 1974, and how internal disputes since then have rarely resulted in violence.

My only serious issue with the book, however, is what I see as a downplaying of the disturbing recurrence of fascist and racist ideology and violence with the rise of the Golden Dawn party. Beaton states that “The appearance of a grassroots fascist movement in Greece was largely, if not entirely, a consequence of the ‘crisis’ and a response to the new conditions since 2010.” (p. 385) and that Golden Dawn is “the most obvious symptom of a populist backlash” (p. 395). He thus undermines the fact that Greek fascist genealogies go back at least to the 4<sup>th</sup> of August dictatorship (1936–40) and the security battalions/collaborators during WWII who were subsequently given ‘free pass’. Already during Greece’s Junta (1967–1974), Golden Dawn founder Michaloliakos was a member of the fascist party of 4 August. Since the 1990s, the followers of Golden Dawn have been seen on the side of the police force in clashes with anarchists. Beaton mentions the tragic death of fifteen-year-old Grigoropoulos in 2008 at the hands of a police guard but not the racist murders and the 2013 murder of Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn members and the still ongoing prosecution of members of the party for murder and other criminal acts, probably the biggest trial in the history of Greece. It is indeed difficult to select which events and trends to include with reference to Greece’s very recent history. Yet an account of the dramatic rise of a Greek Nazi party in contemporary Europe and its successful, but belated, dissolution by the Greek judicial system would certainly be indispensable to all future history books.

Based on a rich selection of major Greek and international historical sources, Beaton’s *Greece* is a thorough up-to-date account of Greek history. It will be an important reference work for anyone seeking a thoughtful and detailed introduction to the key events, political developments and socio-cultural trends that have shaped Greece from the late eighteenth century until the present day. This is a masterly and beautifully written book that will undoubtedly become a classic on a par with the author’s earlier works.

## Works cited

Beaton, Roderick, *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel, A Biography*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2003.

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