

Roderick Beaton. *Greece: Biography of A Modern Nation*. The University of Chicago press, Chicago, 2019. Pages i-xx, 1-398, notes 399-438, index 443-462.

Reviewed by John Frangos

Roderick Beaton's *Greece: Biography of a Modern Nation* is a splendid history of the Hellenic nation from the period leading up to the Greek revolution (1821) to recent times (2018). The book itself reads like popular history but in fact is scholarly, and should be pleasing to both the novice and the expert. It is also evident that the author has great love and affection for the Greek people though at the same time does not hold back his criticisms.

The author's purpose in writing this book is to "understand the modern Greeks on their own terms." Beaton wishes to show how the ongoing attachment to Greece's ancient legacy continued while it has modernized itself over the last several centuries that are covered.

The book is organized chronologically with the first chapters discussing the period leading up to the 1821 revolution, the revolution itself, the establishment of the monarchy, and the gradual expansion of the Greek state that would encompass more and more of the Greek speaking peoples. Beaton continues with chapters covering the Greek nation at the beginning of the 20th century to the time of World War One and the disastrous Greco Turkish war of 1919 – 1922, chapters of the interwar period leading to World War II and the Civil War, and ends with chapters on postwar Greece, recovery and establishment of a modern nation that would become part of the European Union. The book ends with Greece caught up in financial crisis. There is no concluding chapter where authors sums up arguments or conclusions. It is as if Beaton just stopped at a particular point in 2018 that leaves the reader hanging. The author did try to explain this as revealed in the title, *Greece: Biography of a Modern Nation*. A biography of a person has a beginning and an end, but nations, for the most part, have no endings, so he just stopped at a certain point.

Despite following a chronological timeline there are certain themes that run through most of the chapters. One theme is the idea of the Greek nation being greater than the Greek

state whereby for much of the 19th century there were many more Greeks living outside the Greek states borders. Another overarching theme is almost constant division among the Greeks, often political but reaching the point of violence. For example, during the revolution, beginning in 1821, there was one group of essentially middle and upper class Greeks inspired by Western ideals seeking to oust the Ottomans while another group, made up of rural "klephts" centered in the Peloponnesus, who led the fight from the mountains. In actuality, the rural "klephts" were much more effective in fighting the Ottomans. Unfortunately, these two groups while fighting what appeared to be the common enemy were also in violent conflict with each other. Even after the revolution was settled, this conflict continued. Beaton makes clear that success in the revolution only happened because of outside intervention of the great powers (Britain, France and Russia).

This theme of division would continue through much of the rest of Greek history. We see monarchists versus anti-monarchists, Venizelists versus Constantinists, who would fight each other even when Greece was involved in World War I, Communists versus rightists leading through World War II, in which Greece suffered terribly, through the awful Civil War. Even to this day we see this division of right versus left (Pasok versus New Democracy).

Beaton would also bring to the reader's attention the extreme levels of violence that would be part Greece's history in the 19th and 20th centuries. Some parts of Beaton's book were almost painful to read as a result. He begins his chapter on the 1821 revolution with the following statement: "it was, quite simply, a bloodbath." Women and children were not spared by either the revolutionaries or the Ottomans. It was the same during the Greek Civil War that essentially ran from 1944 through 1949. The result was reduction of the Greek population in whole parts of Greece. Even in the 21st century acts of terror were still being carried out by radical groups.

The author, does not neglect such issues as of the role of the military in its interference in Greek politics, the involvement of the Orthodox Church from the birth of the nation to the recent history of Greece. Cultural issues involving writers, poets, and even cinema as he discusses such films as *Zorba the Greek* and *Never on Sunday* are included. To me, the author's knowledge appears almost encyclopedic as he seems very knowledgeable of all things involving the Greek nation and its many leaders, from Alexandros Ypsilanti, who helped start the Greek revolution, to Alexis Tsipras, Prime Minister and head of SYRIZA, the leftist political party. I should add that Cyprus too is included as part of his story.

A note about the author: He was Koraes Professor of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at King's College London from 1988 to 2018. He has a PhD in Modern Greek from Cambridge University and has publications on Greece covering from

the 12th century to modern times. His most recent book, *The Greeks: A Global History* (NY: Basic Books, 2021), literally spans three and a half thousand years of the Greek speaking peoples. Beaton has spent many years in Greece giving him a unique viewpoint almost as a Greek but not actually being one.

I can recommend Beaton's *Greece: Biography of a Nation* wholeheartedly to both general reader and expert alike. Each will find new insights and surprising pieces of information that make it well worth reading.

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