

Notes on Contemporary Greece

SINCE last March, the month of the writer's previous occupation of a part of THE BOOKMAN, the Neo-Hellenic literary group has had to witness, at a proximity somewhat unique, two momentous events. First, the enthu-

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siastic adoption of a republican form of government in a country that is of all countries the least hospitable to the letter of democracy; and secondly, the observance of the centennial of the death of George Noel Gordon Byron, the "Pilgrim of Eternity".

In spite of the more or less legendary and sentimental basis of Greek "byronophilia", it was an inspiring affair. Sir James Rennell Rodd, the author of that scholarly work "Customs and Lore of Modern Greece" (London, 1892), John Drinkwater, Lord Burnham, Harold Spender, and others were the official guests of the country and the recipients of honorary degrees from the National University. In this connection it is rather difficult for the writer of these lines to desist from calling attention to a review of Harold Nicolson's "Byron: The Last Journey" printed in the "Literary Review" of the New York "Evening Post" of June 28, 1924. It is my opinion that the reviewer has been ungracious and that the poet was more capricious than indifferent with regard to the fortunes of Greece as a nation. As for the Greek character, certainly even he would have admitted that 1824 was no time for passing fair and comparative judgment. Notwithstanding the exaggerated skepticism of some of our contemporaneous "literati", I say, "*Magna est veritas et prævalet!*" It was Byron who sang:

. . . And musing there an hour alone,
I dreamed that Greece might still be free!

Greece has lost three notable writers during the past few months: Eftaliotes, Tsokopoulos, and Polemes. The first, an historian; the second, a playwright; and the third, one of the more popular bards: all earnest workers in the field of intellectual pioneering. John Polemes wrote fair narrative and lyric verses invariably woven in a rustic atmosphere.

Of these the best known are included in the following four small volumes: "The Idylls of Theocritus", "The Old Violin", "Pacifica", and "Broken Marbles". The National Diploma of Merit in Arts and Letters was awarded to the last named a short time ago. Polemes was a native of the city of Athens, an advocate of the vernacular, and up to the outset of his brief illness the secretary of the School of Fine Arts of the National Polytechnic of Greece.

Mr. Ksenopoulos has been professionally taciturn for several months; occasionally, however, he is heard hurling his philippics against certain of his fellow craftsmen with whom he has been on strained terms for some little time. He has been accused of being a sort of Horatio Alger in the department of fiction, and he of course will confess to nothing of the kind.

Bertrand Russell's "Problems of Philosophy" has been put into plain modern Greek by the late Kostas Theotokis, the novelist. Edna St. Vincent Millay has been introduced to the modern Greeks through fragmentary translations from the pen of Leandros Palamas, the son of the national poet.

In my previous notes mention was made of the fact that the Neo-Hellenic novel is being diligently handled; it should have been added, however, that this form has as yet been semi successful. The modern Greeks have been figuratively fed with historical novels and histories pure and simple to a degree uncommon in other European countries, one of the causes of this fact being the extreme emphasis that has been placed upon the study of the historical muse by the educational leaders of this land ever since its political independence. For the same reason, Neo-Hellenic literature, undoubtedly humble in some respects, could, were it more accessible to the non-Hellenic world, show three or four

historical writers of a decidedly universal appeal, men like Trikoupes, Paparegopoulos, Sathas, Philemon, and Lampros; at the present time there is naturally a reaction.

Very many among the writers of modern Greece write for what is practically nothing more than the pleasure of writing; this explains why in the National Library of Greece alone, the fine structure adjoining the grounds of the University, we find four men of promise, not to speak of other holders of sinecures such as Miltiades Malakasses of the Library of Parliament or Mr. Drosines, secretary of the Society for the Distribution of Useful Books and editor and publisher of that quite popular "Year Book of Greater Hellas", a publication somewhat similar to our collections of prose and verse. K. Varnales is an instructor in the Yimnassio of Piræus ("Yimnassio" is the modern Greek term for an academic high school of the Germanic type).

There are now in Athens six publishing firms of considerable strength: Eleftherouthakes, Vassiliou, Zekakes, Kornaros, Sitheres, and Saliveros. Some magazine and book publishing is being done in Alexandria, Egypt, but the ancient city is unquestionably the modern publishing centre even for those who live abroad.

The women of contemporary Hellas are by no means unrepresented in the field of letters; be it sufficient here to recall the names of only two of them, Julia Dragoumes and Miss Karaiskakes. The former is the author of "Under Greek Skies" (Dutton, 1913) and "Men of Athens" (Houghton Mifflin). The latter is a zealous student of German literature and evidently a descendant of one of the Greek chieftains in the War of Greek Independence.

Some of the new books in my memory are "The Political History of Modern

Greece" by G. K. Aspreas, a poor translation of Shakespeare's "Anthony and Cleopatra", and an equally poor one of some of Heine's poems. In closing I should like to mention "Greek Life in Town and Country" (London, 1905) by Professor William Miller, the well known English Hellenist. Those of THE BOOKMAN'S readers who may be entertaining some curiosity as to this interesting nation will find the book full of attractive detail, thorough observation, and immeasurable power in presenting modern Greece without that proverbial bias of the average non-Hellenic Hellenist.

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