

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

SPAWFORTH (T.) **What the Greeks Did for Us.** New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023. Pp. x + 335, illus. 9780300258028.
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It is something of an oddity that when classicists write books for that mythical beast, ‘the general public’, they are usually sent for review to the least suitable reader, another professional classicist. Such a reader is unlikely to fulfil the aim of the book, which, in the case of the book under review, as for so many similar projects, is to be stimulated to discover antiquity. Indeed, it is hard for even a generous professional scholar not to feel slightly patronized by the laborious attempts at being chatty and friendly, and vexed by the unwillingness to use names or other ‘difficult’ words, let alone the inevitable shortcuts of argument. The best one can hope for is that the reviewer admires the footwork. Tony Spawforth, whose last major work of scholarship I happily and admiringly co-edited, is not only an emeritus professor of distinction, but also has many years of experience both as a tour guide in Greece, and as a talking head for archaeological films. So, there is at least a fair chance his work will find some of its intended, more suitable audience.

It is, however, a particularly difficult time to write a book like *What the Greeks Did for Us*. When J.C. Stobart published *The Glory That Was Greece* (London 1911), he could be comfortable with a Greece that ended with Alexander’s conquests, with a set of values that lauded the Greek miracle and with the celebration of the origins of Western culture in this privileged past. There was no Greece under the Roman Empire, no Christian Greeks and no Byzantine life, let alone modernity and the reception of antiquity in music, film, novels and advertising. Nowadays, not only are the chronological and geographical boundaries of ‘Greece’ differently drawn, but also what counts as cultural analysis has become a highly contested battleground. Spawforth is well aware of this, and writes with a disconcerting ease that he imagines that some people will not appreciate what he includes or excludes, how he writes with personal reminiscences interwoven into his history or what he has to say about the inevitably provocative topics of sexuality, race, class, politics. Such demurrals will not win over the ideologues or the cancellers, but he does at least honestly note where the points of contention are and navigates them with a certain openness. From the start, he allows that every word of the title needs immediate qualification: who ‘we’ are, who ‘the Greeks’ are and how the influence of antiquity, for good and bad, can be evaluated. There is not much glory and quite a lot of careful positioning.

Nonetheless, the 14 chapters set their sights on some familiar topics for such a modern treatment: politics, sex, architecture, theatre and film, beauty, literature, philosophy and a rather small amount of Christianity. There is no chapter that will frighten the horses. I liked it best when Spawforth did mix his personal narrative into the history, though these were also carefully discreet, limited anecdotes, and showed none of the brilliance of Daniel Mendelsohn’s voyage around the *Odyssey* with his father (*An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic* (London 2017)), or the searing confessional mode of an Edmund Gosse’s liberating encounter with literature, or even Mary Beard’s or Natalie Haynes’ amused self-positioning against the institutions of learning. As might be expected, the most poise is evident when the book talks about Alexander or the archaeological record or the historicism that underlies the account. These are Spawforth’s areas of expertise and his deep knowledge shines through in the ability of the prose to be instructive and informative without becoming overloaded. It is less successful (in my professional view) when it dips

into philosophy or religion or literature. The treatment of tragedy and the role of theatre in the Western tradition is particularly thin and unreflective. Nor am I sure that 'threesome' is quite the *mot juste* for God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is telling that after the one chapter on the Nicene Council as a turning point in Greek Christianity (a good thing in itself to include, for sure), the next chapter moves on to the ideals of Greek beauty, without any connecting argument about flesh, the body or even how the Renaissance's rediscovery of Hellenic ideals redrafted the notion of how the human form should be represented, something the Greeks very much did for us. Indeed, too many chapters drift through exposition and piquant detail, in tour guide mode, without pinpointing the impact of antiquity on modernity in a sophisticated enough or rich enough fashion. In the end, to this professional and unsuitable reader, it rather short sells what the Greeks actually did do for us.

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