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## BOOK REVIEWS

Andrekos Varnava, 2009. *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915. The inconsequential Possession*. Manchester University Press, 321 pp. ISBN 9780719079030 (hardbound).

In this book, Andrekos Varnava traces the history of Cyprus from the time that she became a British possession in 1878 until Britain made a formal offer to the Greek Government to take over the island in 1915. For the author of this well-researched book, no historical doubts exist. The British Government or better still, the Tory politician, Benjamin Disraeli, had adopted, to say the least, the wrong strategic policy. His vision for the Levant was to result in a messy political affair. He acquired a territory that had no value for British Imperial policy with the result that this acquisition became, in the author's words, '*inconsequential*' and '*a failed possession*' (p. 3). Britain's honeymoon with Cyprus did not last more than 35 years, which practically covers the entire period researched for this book.

Great Britain's interest in the Island of Cyprus began after the Crimean War. This war, fought in 1854, revitalized the importance of the island of Malta as a military base. The Islands began to assume a new role in the military strategy and maritime policy of the War Office. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 continued to heighten the importance of the island in military strategy; an importance which continued to increase concurrently with the use of steam-powered ships; vessels that needed depots for coal bunkering. At the same time, in 1864, Britain took the decision to cede Corfu

and other Ionian islands to Greece. Thus, in theory, Britain severed herself from her colonial possessions in the Levant. It goes without saying that such a cessation made by Palmerstone's Liberal government did not go down well with everyone. Disraeli was one of the British politicians who greatly resented such a loss. It was within this political scenario that the Island of Cyprus began to feature more and more in the political rhetoric of Imperial expansion.

Perhaps historians should begin to focus more on the negative influence that the Enlightenment period left on the political development of the Mediterranean region. It is associated with the discovery of the age of reason but it is also the movement that inspired Western colonial expansion and the subsequent atrocities that are associated with our twentieth-century history. In terms of English history, this movement brought to the fore the historical relationship that existed in the Middle Ages with the distant Mediterranean world. Cyprus was the island of the Crusaders, the place where King Richard, the Lionheart, lived and for some time was associated with the British monarchy. Therefore, in the popular perception that began to emerge in the nineteenth-century romantic period, Cyprus began to be seen as a sort of lost part of British territory. Acquiring this island was not perceived as an acquisition of another territorial possession but a land that had originally been part of the English crown.

Benjamin Disraeli was the politician who sold this idea to the British people. He visited Cyprus for just a few hours but

such a trip convinced him that this place could serve Britain as the link that united the Occident with the Orient. Strategic imperialism was being given a cultural cloak.

The crushing political events in Egypt were to be the final steps towards the occupation of Cyprus by Britain. Lord Salisbury argued that when Napoleon was waging war in Italy, Britain felt the need to occupy the Mediterranean Island of Malta. Now that France wanted to get hold of Egypt and was centring her attention on Asia Minor, Britain should interest itself in Cyprus. The Conservatives won the day and Cyprus became a British possession in 1878 ushering in, at the same time, the scramble for Africa. In fact, as a result of this occupation, King Leopold of Belgium, who had been eyeing Cyprus, decided to occupy the Congo.

Cyprus failed to fulfill Disraeli's political rhetoric, that of being an island with great military, naval, political and commercial advantages. William Ewart Gladstone was one of the forerunners in the Liberal camp who had rightly perceived the futility of this military adventure since this island had no strategic value for Britain. It also lacked a proper harbour. The only good harbour was that of Famagusta but by the end of the nineteenth century, this harbour had only a historical value of being the medieval port of the crusaders but it was not geographically suited to offer shelter to the big ironclad ships.

What may, at first, have appeared to be the Mediterranean '*El Dorado*' (p. 96) turned out to be a backward island infested with disease and extremely expensive to fortify while Famagusta harbour was useless. Even the idea of turning this harbour

into a modern port was unfeasible, a financial drain. Consequently, the Imperial maxim that '*the best mode to preserve wealth is power*' (p. 69) did not work in Cyprus. Britain demanded that Cyprus itself pay for this colonisation through generated revenue. The admiration that the local Cypriot community had towards the civilising British mission was soon to wane. Unlike the Ottomans, the British bureaucracy was failing in its paternalistic duties towards the smallholders, thus creating a hostile middle class.

Until Disraeli took away the island from the Turks, the author argues that there existed no collective consciousness in Cyprus of cultural diversity. The population did not seem to have been mindful of the ethnic differences between Christian and Ottoman Cypriots. But this cultural difference became a cultural identity under British imperial rule. Varnava's attempt to trace the present political division in Cyprus to Disraeli and his Tory supporters is without doubt a bone of historical contention and controversy.

In Varnava's words, the British love of Hellenism '*changed Cyprus from a multicultural to a multinational place.*' (p. 163) Unfortunately, a change in Government in Britain did not help matters. When the Liberals won the elections in England, their policy towards Cyprus, in particular the way in which they conceived the structure of a legislative council, heightened the political division between the Muslims and the Orthodox on ethnic principles.

The British love for Hellenistic culture had a counter-productive effect, so much so that prominent members of the Cypriot Greek community began to support *énosis* or the territorial unification of Cyprus with Greece. As was to be expected, the

more Cyprus became a back-water of the British Empire, the more the Cypriot Greek movement for unity with Greece became a strong, vociferous and militant one. Already by the 1890s, Cyprus' strategic value was history. All military priorities were concentrated on Malta. Cyprus became inconsequential and by the turn of the twentieth century her only value was of being used as a pawn or a good bargaining tool in the appeasement policy operated at this time in Europe. Twice Britain advocated swapping Cyprus with another territory. The first proposal was to hand it over to Germany in return for German East Africa. The second proposal came a few years later when Winston Churchill proposed that Britain should allow Cyprus to unite with Greece in exchange for Argostoli in Cephalonia.

It is highly commendable that the author adopts an open and fresh approach to Cyprus' history, in particular in the way how he looked in retrospect at the Ottoman period and its ramifications until British rule. At the same time, he is not content to describe how the British colonial policies went amiss but seeks to explain the origins of such policies in roots that went back to the distant medieval past. Varnava is not one of the supporters of the Enosis movement, whose roots he links to the British colonial past. For this reason, Varnava declines to attribute to the misdemeanours associated with the Ottoman period all that has gone wrong in contemporary Cyprus. Yet even British colonial history is multi-coloured and multi-faceted, and there was no such thing as a homogenous approach. The Tories and the Liberals approached the Cypriot question from diametrically opposing positions. Even the colonial ruler had more than one soul.

Therefore, it would be wrong to point a finger of guilt at the system. Varnava rather prefers to seek the culprit in the individual politician. The romantic zealousness of Benjamin Disraeli, according to Varnava, provides much of the explanation for the present identity crisis in Cyprus.

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Lino Borg, Joseph P. Cassar 2012. *Aldo Micallef-Grimaud (1925–2010)*, 72 pp. Malta: Glorian Micallef Grimaud ISBN 97899957-0296-0.

This finely crafted and colour-plated publication served as the catalogue for a recent exhibition at the Presidential Palace, San Anton, Malta, showcasing the work of a prolific artist who passed away two years ago at the age of eighty-five. The book is interesting in that it highlights themes and motifs connected with the Mediterranean, as well as the hybrid and representations, often fuelled by western constructions, associated with the region.

Aldo Micallef Grimaud established himself, throughout an eventful seventy year artistic period, as a portrait painter and a painter of still lifes, landscapes in oils and watercolours, and religious subjects. These paintings therefore provide representations of aspects of life on an island in the Mediterranean where inter-regional influences and cross-cultural exchange (blurring imagined and colonially-contrived North-South boundaries) have been and continue to be strong and widespread.

The collection dealt with in the book is rather large and by no means all