The Greek Experience

Patmos

by David Solway (February 2022)

What struck me most forcefully about the island of Patmos when I revisited a few years ago was not the towering Monastery of St. John or the famous apocalyptic grotto (where the *Book of Revelations* was *not* written) or the sprawling waterfront village with its liveliness and color or the wide sweep of its many inviting beaches, but the character of its inhabitants. Everywhere I happened to go I found an old-world sense of hospitality that was utterly unexpected on what is now one of the wealthiest and most popular, so presumably "spoiled," of the Aegean tourist islands.

People took the time to offer directions and advice. Cigarette kiosks were little oases of conversation. Newspaper vendors actually commented on the headlines and bus drivers cracked jokes with their passengers. My waiter at breakfast returned the 100 euro I had mistakenly given him with a short lecture

on how to distinguish it from the 10 euro note. (When I thanked him for his kindness, he replied: “It is nothing. I am a *patmiótis*.”) The elderly proprietor of the streetfront travel bureau, who dealt with the myriad cruise ships docking several times a day, was still trying to domesticate his fax machine while patiently attending to a rather boisterous grandson. The hotelier at the *Blue Bay* abandoned the check-in counter to engage in a long conversation about contemporary Greek poetry. No wonder cyberguru Nicholas Negroponte spends his summers on the island, doubtlessly recuperating from the Johns Hopkins media-frenzy factory.

But the fable of St. John, who in reality composed the last book of the New Testament in what is now Izmir, tells us that not all is as it seems in Paradise and that a Greek island is as much a façade as it is an embodiment—the Docetic heresy assuming insular form. I was therefore both amused and bemused by the chastening account of miching mallecho and slick mendacity in Tom Stone’s *The Summer of My Greek Taverna*. Stone, who first arrived in Patmos at the age of thirty-three in order to complete a novel and deurbanize his life, is no tyro at the Greek experience but a tempered veteran, having survived over twenty years navigating its beauties and treacheries, its harsh elementals and levantine sinuosities, its enchantments and disenchantments. It was in Patmos that he met his wife and in Crete that he raised his young family before returning to Patmos to become a temporary partner in a beach taverna pseudonymized as *The Beautiful Helen*, a name which should immediately trip an epical alarm system in the reader. For as we gradually discover, Stone was royally swindled and almost bankrupted in the pursuit of another Hellenic mirage, a mythic destiny which the epigraph from Euripides’ *Helen* signals early on. (The gorgeous babe was never in Troy; it was a phantom the heroes sought.) One comes to see that, like the monastery and the grotto, Stone’s taverna was both real and not real, attesting in its presence on the scene to something that belied its description,

although unlike the Saint it was on the very spot he recorded his belated revelations.

Our protagonist was lured into the project by an unscrupulous Greek "friend," a neighbor from the old days and the owner of the taverna, whom he calls with a certain tongue-in-cheek irony by the common local name of Theologos (i.e., "God's word"), a man otherwise known on the island by the premonitory nickname *O Ladós* or "the oily one." In giving an account of that ill-fated adventure, Stone provides a detailed picture of island life along with a legendary and historical retrospective, a portable library of entertaining and sometimes harrowing stories complemented by a series of descriptive vignettes of people and landscape that ring absolutely true, and a collection of original recipes—an idea possibly inspired by Frances Mayes in her *Under The Tuscan Sun*—which are alone worth the price of the book. (His Chicken Retsina, even if he does say so himself, is "truly a gift of the Greek gods").

The prose is generally brisk, serviceable and unpretentious though rarely, it must be admitted, as succulent as his acclaimed culinary accomplishments nor, perhaps, as finely spiced as Patricia Storace's *Dinner with Persephone*. Clichés occasionally distract—seas sparkle, darkness is thick, breezes are soft, the author "need[s] closure"—and the influence of Peter Mayle's rather lightweight *A Year in Provence*, for which he professes great admiration, is evident throughout as a tonal and structural template. But the quality of the writing deepens toward the end of the narrative with a kind of skeptical nostalgia for the inevitable lost paradise which is the price of maturity. Indeed, Stone never surrenders to sentimentality or bitterness but consummates his deposition with a sober gratitude for an eventful education. "Fateful things seem to happen to you in Greece," he concludes, "more than in other places." The overall impression readers come away with is that of seasoned and yet insouciant authority—of

someone who knows what he is talking about, pays exorbitantly for an untenable innocence and yet manages to preserve his love of place without the need for illusionary embellishments.

Such is precisely the property that one fails to detect, for example, in the more heated and exaggerated productions of writers like Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller who offer us far more of themselves than they do of Greece. Where *Prospero's Cell* and *The Colossus of Maroussi* are largely the inventions of unfettered (and privileged) Romantic sensibilities—Durrell's characters are often fabricated composites who live mainly in his imagination and Miller is still the butt of Greek intellectuals who chuckle over how profoundly the American *naïf* was taken in by that colossal mountebank and word-sorcerer, Katsimbalis—*The Summer of My Greek Taverna* both throngs with authentic characters and at least partially exorcises the oleaginous demon of misrepresentation and cozenage.

What it may lack, comparatively speaking, in ecstatic rhetoric, it more than makes up for in workmanlike clarity and genuine insight. His take on the enigmatic Greek character is right-on: the endemic distrust of the other founded in four hundred years of hardscrabble survival under the Ottoman oppression, the generous hospitality of the home immediately transformed into the clever deceit of the shop, the disarming courtesy of initial conversation often leading to the thorough despoilment of the unsuspecting interlocutor—which is, as he points out, the standard technique of the Socratic dialogues, the curious mix of nobility and deviousness, charm and predation, amiableness and tenacity that renders this people unique. The book reads, in fact, like the higher Baedeker: plain-speaking, self-aware, almost lurid in those passages devoted to the German occupation, unsparing in its summations, yet rich with a candid and festive appreciation for a complex and unforgettable land. And this despite the disappointments which that land inevitably inflicts on even the most committed

of Grecophiles.

The more intimate aspects of his personal life remain somewhat obscure, especially those having to do with his sphinxlike wife “Danielle” who is recommended chiefly by a pair of shapely breasts to which Stone often draws our attention, but who otherwise flits through the story strangely unengaged. She paints icons and looks after the kids, but why she refrains from perusing the accounts, given that hubby is slaving twenty hours a day at stove and table and is thus at the mercy of the nefarious Theologos, is never explained. One intuits a certain lack of connection or devotion there, reinforced by the backpage note which informs us that the couple has recently “concluded an extremely amicable divorce.” What appears to be at work here is not so much discretion as innocence, suggesting that Stone has not entirely disabused himself of his primary character trait. His unspoken maxim seems to be: better disappointed than suspicious. A fatal error in a country like Greece.

Nevertheless, one has to hand it to the man. Fifty pages, and I was not only deep in the story but back in the Cyclades with its incomparable light, its scents and flavours, its sheer and denuded limestone cliffs, its spirited café life where politics, gossip and weather necessarily dominate the talk, its shrewd and enterprising people at their various trades and tricks, and the imminent presentiment of *peripetéia*, of sudden reversal, that keeps one always a little on edge, unsettled in one’s cups. Stone manages to bring it all home again for those who have shared the experience or to conjure land, sea, and people, as well as that paradoxical atmosphere of menace and delight which Greece invariably evokes, into palpable existence for those who are unfamiliar with them. As we read on, we find ourselves in the company of a reliable guide and witness who writes with a trigeminal sensitivity to the country that both rescued and betrayed him. And though he currently lives in California, which is reminiscent of Miller

after his Greek affair, one senses that he is destined to return to the "place that will obviously never—witness this book—leave me." Once bitten, twice infected, as it were.

Readers who intend to embark on an extended visit would do well to inoculate themselves in the pages of *The Summer of My Greek Taverna* even if the antidote is bound to wear off eventually. For the truth is, when you really get into Greece, there's no getting out again, as Stone both ruefully and jubilantly acknowledges. "There are places that seem to be waiting for you out there somewhere, like unmet lovers," he writes, "and when (and if) you come upon them, you know, instantly and unquestioningly, that they are the ones. It is as if, far back in time, there had been an intimate connection to that very spot…" You feel it the moment you arrive and nothing or no one, not even the unavoidable Theologos whose clones flourish on every island, sitting "perhaps at a corner table" in some taverna "waiting to teach [us] a lesson," can change that irrational passion and beleaguered loyalty. For the expatriate lover of Greece, that is the Greek experience.

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David Solway's latest book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.