

BOOK REVIEW

The Classics and Colonial India. By PHIROZE VASUNIA. Classical Presences. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp xii + 398. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-920323-9.

Part of the OUP's *Classical Presences* series, this book represents a further step in our understanding of the relationship between classical antiquity and later empire. Its examination of this connection spans the scholar and the soldier, the architect and the administrator, the colonizer and the colonized, and opens a window onto the multifaceted nature of the relationship between classical antiquity and empire in the Indian context.

The introduction sets the scene appropriately, showing how both classics as a discipline and British expansion in India were contemporaneous developments of the eighteenth century: as classically educated soldiers and administrators moved in, so was India's history synchronised with and subordinated to that of Europe.

The book is then divided into three parts. The first part concerns Alexander, and comprises two chapters discussing his legacy in European and Indian eyes. A compelling discussion of Droysen and Grote shows how the modern historiography of Alexander is deeply implicated in the ideologies of empire, and this is followed by a fascinating account of the synergy between classical scholarship and colonial officials. Scholars used the accounts of colonial agents, who in turn believed such scholarship on Alexander and *ancient* India could lead them to better understand their *current* environment. The reliance of the East India Company (EIC) on ancient accounts of Alexander's expedition is intriguing, as is the revelation that it played a role in shaping the thoughts and decisions of EIC policy-makers. The second chapter usefully traces the development of Eurocentric perceptions of Alexander alongside Indian readings.

Part two moves on to the relationship between Rome, architecture, and classical languages in the imperial experience. The third chapter concerns the place of India and Rome in Victorian debates about empire, debates which Vasunia places within the context of Disraeli's New Imperialism and its detractors. Reflecting the

classical education of those involved, these discussions centred on the utility of Rome as a parallel for the British position in India.

Chapter four engages with the presence of the Classical style in architecture. From British generals and admirals and their statues in Roman garb, to the classical columns of state buildings, we learn of an architectural dimension to the role of the classics in colonial India. The fifth chapter explains the role of classical languages in educating and regulating the membership of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), and how their pre-eminence served to exclude not only Asians, but also less desirable candidates within Britain.

Part three discusses in three chapters the British and Indian responses to Homer and Virgil, an Indian adaptation of Aristophanes, and the place of the classics within intellectual circles in Bengal. Chapter six is perhaps the strongest in its adherence to the book's central theme. While some eighteenth century Britons had little time for a tyrant's poet, others such as Gibbon and Burke felt that Virgil spoke to their anxieties about empire. By the nineteenth century, a number of British intellectuals found in Virgil a suitable expression of an expansive empire to mirror their own.

The epilogue focuses on how Ghandi and Nehru were both drawn to Hellenism, and suggests that in different hands the classics could produce significantly different readings. Nehru's contention that India, not Britain, bore the greatest resemblance to ancient Greece represented resistance to the British use of classics as a means of othering and subordinating India. The book then concludes by commenting on how the influence of classics was diminished by both its marginalisation in British education and the concurrent collapse of the empire.

This is a book which significantly deepens our understanding of how classics could exert an influence in a colonial context. Conclusions often appear tentative, yet this emphasis on complexity and diversity is no evasion. Rather, it is an accurate representation of the interaction of a diverse body of knowledge with an equally diverse range of individuals spanning two centuries. What is convincingly shown, however, is that imperial rule was in fact exercised through a classical prism.

One of the book's major contributions is to pave the way for further work. Vasunia comes tantalizingly close to answering the question of how, or rather whether, classical knowledge determined the official policy of colonial governors, but this remains an open question. Additionally, as the very idea of the classical was being formed while the colonisation of India was taking place, this poses the question of the influence of India on the formation of classics as a discipline. Per-

haps more could have been done to discuss how key developments in imperial history could account for the shifting emphases of scholarship, but the material is for the most part effectively contextualised.

All in all, and most importantly, while this book answers many important questions, it also provides a wealth of evidence to support future research into the nature of the relationship between the classics and empire. It is of undoubted value to scholars specialising in the field of classical reception, classical studies more broadly, and wider audiences interested in the history of classical scholarship and modern intellectual history in a colonial context.

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