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The ‘conquest’ of Greece’s Mount Olympus by Anglophone travellers since 1900

David Wills

The year 1913 can be regarded as a turning-point in the long cultural history of mainland Greece’s Mount Olympus. A party comprised of two Swiss climbers and a local ‘goat hunter’¹ reached the summit of what proved to be the highest of the mountain’s several peaks. This achievement has since been recounted in scholarly journals, noted in successive generations of guidebooks, and commemorated upon its centenary through a set of postage stamps.

Although mountainous terrain may appear forbidding and inhospitable, it is important in practical terms as home to approximately a quarter of the world’s population.² But, as Hollis and König have recently observed, such regions are also ‘places of mythological memory’ which in the modern era have often attained ‘a prominent and very public role in representations of national identity’.³ Mount Olympus itself has featured in an ideological struggle over whether Greece is to be identified primarily as the backward-focused originator of Western civilization or is accepted as a modern European nation.

In this study I examine the main trends, as well as outliers, in modern representations of Greece’s highest mountain. I focus on factual encounters, which range from genuine attempts at summiting Olympus’

¹ Styllas 2012, 4.

² Price 2015, 5.

³ Hollis & König 2023b, 9 and 11–12.

peaks to distant viewings of a cloud-shrouded cone.⁴ In genre, these accounts include conventional texts such as alpine journals, travel literature, guidebooks and war memoirs, as well as YouTube vlogs and a rather eccentric re-imagining in which Olympus is personified. Central to my analysis is 1913, the year in which the home of the ancient gods was apparently conquered by the rationalism of modern science. But I will show that, despite the subsequent comprehensive mapping of a location which is now firmly on the tourist trail, what Hollis and König have called ‘the tension between expectation and reality, between imagination and experience’⁵ means that certain narratives and descriptions about Mount Olympus have endured.

Mountains are today important as ‘primary destinations for hundreds of millions of tourists each year’.⁶ Especially in the West, ‘More and more people are discovering a desire for them, and a powerful solace in them.’⁷ This has inevitably led to academic interest, so that ‘Mountain studies has emerged as a vibrant and diverse cross-disciplinary field over the past few decades’.⁸ Several recent scholarly articles and well-received books have considered reactions to Mount Olympus in antiquity, and have also examined the reception of ancient literature within later travel accounts published up to and including the 1800s.⁹ In contrast, the present study takes as its focus Anglophone encounters with Olympus dating from the early twentieth century until as recently as 2023. In doing so, I hope to raise further awareness of Olympus’ past and present representation at a time when ‘Mountains, and mountain people, are now firmly part of the global agenda’.¹⁰

⁴ The ‘Olympus Alpine Biblioteca’ offers scans of historic publications in addition to an extensive bibliography: <https://olympus.noblogs.org/home-en/>, accessed 23rd May 2023. For facilitating access to published travel accounts of the nineteenth century, I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the staff at the Hellenic and Roman Library in London.

⁵ Hollis & König 2023b, 12.

⁶ Price 2015, 12.

⁷ Macfarlane 2008, 274.

⁸ König 2022, xx.

⁹ For example: König 2018; König, 2022; Hollis & König, 2023a; della Dora, 2008.

¹⁰ Price 2015, 7.

The 1913 expedition and its nineteenth century antecedents

The significance of the first modern summiting of the highest peak, named Mytikas, was trumpeted by one of its Swiss ‘conquerors’ with the use of an imperialist comparison: ‘Olympus was at the opening of the twentieth century as unknown as the greater part of Central Africa’.¹¹ In this account by an adventurer of Western European origin, Greece’s relative backwardness was suggested through the lack of knowledge and endeavour apparently shown by the local people who had been employed to support the expedition. Although one Greek, the expert guide Christos Kakkalos, was acknowledged as essential, he was nevertheless downgraded to a ‘hunter’ who had ‘accompanied’ the more accomplished climbers. As he grilled several locals, including his muleteer, about their names for Mount Olympus’ peaks, expedition co-leader Daniel Baud-Bovy must have been delighted to receive inconsistent answers, since this subsequently enabled him to offer his own suggestions to what he regarded as the relevant officiating body, the Alpine Club in London.¹² In another sense though, members of Baud-Bovy’s party were actively thwarted in their efforts to progress knowledge, because ‘the terror of our porters’ meant that ‘the box containing our instruments had gone astray’.¹³ Despite his attempts to establish his credentials as a man of science, Baud-Bovy did allow himself to be awed at the top by ‘the truly divine beauty of the view which met our eyes’.¹⁴ This enabled him to assume a further, this time non-scientific, scholarly role – that of a classical connoisseur: ‘Once more we admired the force and truth of expression of the ancient poets when they spoke of “the long Olympus,” “the many-headed Olympus,” “the snowy Olympus,” “Olympus of the numberless folds.”’¹⁵ Although the 1913 expedition is often acclaimed as unprecedented – being the first to reach the summit – I will argue here that several of the themes from Baud-Bovy’s account were holdovers from previous Anglophone narratives about the mountain: an inability

¹¹ Baud-Bovy 1921, 207.

¹² Baud-Bovy 1921, 205.

¹³ Baud-Bovy 1921, 209 and 210.

¹⁴ Baud-Bovy 1921, 209.

¹⁵ Baud-Bovy 1921, 209.

to truly know the mysteries of Olympus despite the scrutiny of Western science, the incompetence and ignorance of locals, and an emphasis on the link to antiquity which was offered by witnessing the location first-hand.

As Jason König has shown, for nineteenth century travellers to Greece a visit to Olympus had involved ‘less emphasis on the awe-inspiring scale of mountain scenery’ and was instead valued for ‘where the classical past is visible and present to an unusual degree’.¹⁶ For example, F.C.H.L. Pouqueville, visiting in 1806, dismissed the surrounding natural landscape in comparison with the (Western European) Alps as ‘third class’.¹⁷ As he made his own ascent several decades later, Henry Fanshawe Tozer, who has recently been described as ‘very unusual in even attempting the journey’ because northern Greece was beyond the itinerary of Pausanias’ ancient guidebook which many travellers chose to follow, did celebrate Olympus’ physicality: ‘Nothing could well surpass the magnificence of the enormous basin below us, filled as it was with masses of white cloud, swirling and seething as in a huge cauldron.’¹⁸ But it is clear that his admiration of the spectacle was improved by its ancient associations, both historical (spying on the pass where Xerxes entered Greece) as well as mythological: ‘The heights on which we were standing were no unworthy position for the seat of the Gods.’¹⁹ In editing a compilation of travel writing about Greece, Martin Garrett has argued of Olympus that ‘travellers have always expected to find something divine here’, and this supposed vestigial power provided Tozer with an explanation for his failure to conquer the mountain: by sending a snowstorm, ‘the matter was settled for us by Jove himself’.²⁰

This appreciation of the landscape was regarded as the preserve of the modern, Western, observer. The locals, according to Pouqueville, were unable even to name the mountain correctly, instead using ‘its antique

¹⁶ König 2023, 147 and 148.

¹⁷ Pouqueville 1820, 111.

¹⁸ König 2018; Tozer 1869, 18.

¹⁹ Tozer 1869, 20 and 21. König 2018 specifies that Tozer’s visit was in the 1870s, which cannot be correct given the earlier date of the published account. Elsewhere, König amends this to 1850s and 60s: König 2023, 150.

²⁰ Garrett 1994, 117; Tozer 1869, 26.

name corrupted into Olymbos or Elymbos'.²¹ The long-held convention, articulated in the 1930s by the avowedly pioneering Margaret Fergusson, that 'it did not occur to [Ancient] Greeks to climb mountains', has recently been shown by Dawn Hollis to be a nineteenth century myth designed as 'one more way for modern mountaineers to be first'.²² It therefore suited Tozer to find the Greeks of his own time ill-prepared to take on the mountain, with the locals he hired lacking (Western European) modernity in both their attitudes and equipment. The guards protecting him from bandits, for example, 'were indifferent mountaineers, and delayed us much by frequently wanting to stop, complaining of their packs – which, as they only contained some provisions and a few wraps in case of a night bivouac, weighed about a quarter of what a Swiss guide would carry with pleasure.'²³ In addition, the men acting as porters possessed merely 'the moccasins of untanned hide which Greek mountaineers usually wear, [and] preferred clambering along the loose debris under the rocks on the southern side, while we ourselves, being shod with strong boots intended for Alpine climbing, found the crest of the ridge more agreeable.'²⁴

Although Tozer was warned by resident monks about the presence of wolves, for many travellers it was hostile humans which caused Olympus to remain frustratingly impenetrable.²⁵ With the north of Greece still under Ottoman occupation, J.P. Mahaffy found that 'As soon as you reach the slopes of Mount Olympus, on the other side the danger from brigands becomes very serious indeed.'²⁶ In a sensationalist French novella first published in 1856, Edmond About's protagonist had been held 'for fifteen days in the hands of the terrible Hadji-Stavros, nicknamed The King of the Mountains', an unrepentant rogue who was able to carry out torture and murder with impunity due to his influence with both police and politicians.²⁷ The lawless reputation of Greece's mountainous

²¹ Pouqueville 1820, 77.

²² Fergusson 1938, 129; Hollis 2017.

²³ Tozer 1869, 15.

²⁴ Tozer 1869, 18.

²⁵ Tozer 1869, 12.

²⁶ Mahaffy 1890, 213.

²⁷ About [1856], chapter 1.

regions provided a pretext for Mahaffy's lack of engagement with the contemporary reality of Olympus: 'These are the reasons why I (like other people who value their lives and liberty) was obliged to sail up the coast to Salonica, and so lose the splendid scenery of Mount Olympus, which would tempt any lover of the beauties of nature.'²⁸ Several decades before, viewing Olympus merely from a distance had been turned into a positive choice by Henry Holland – a way of preserving the mountain's mystery. Concealed as it was by cloud, 'There was something peculiar in the manner of seeing this spot, which accorded well with mythology that made it the residence of the gods; and looking to such association with ancient times, the distinct outline of Olympus under a summer sky might have been less imposing than this broken and partial display of its form, which seemed almost to separate it from the world below.'²⁹

Reflecting upon 1913

During the first half of the twentieth century, Anglophone arrivals at Olympus appropriately celebrated the 1913 mountaineers as 'conquerors' of a lodestone from antiquity: 'one of the symbolic episodes in the history of the world – the first ascent of the mountain of the immortals'.³⁰ At the same time, however, these next waves of adventurers sought to distinguish and justify their own (belated) investigations.

As a result of the Balkan Wars, Greece's 1912 expansion into Thessaloniki and Macedonia meant that Olympus no longer abutted Ottoman territory and so could be said to have been fully 'restored to Greek sovereignty'.³¹ The importation of mountaineering, a pursuit of the European leisured class, could be seen as symbolic of Northern Greece's admission to the (Western) modern world. Fear of the Ottoman-period crime receded, with Francis Farquhar and Aristides Phoutrides informed firmly by patriotic local monks as early as 1914 that there were 'no bandits or robbers now that the Greek government was in control'.³² Less

²⁸ Mahaffy 1890, 214.

²⁹ Holland 1815, 302.

³⁰ Halliburton 1927, 36–7.

³¹ Farquhar & Phoutrides, 1929, vi.

³² Farquhar & Phoutrides 1929, 9.

reassuringly, W.T. Elmslie's muleteer of 1926 believed that the bandit problem had only been solved when 'several had been killed the previous year'.³³ But just as the Greek state in recent history had often been subject to Western tutelage, and its borders at times determined by decisions of the Great Powers, so Olympus was regarded as having been revealed to the modern world only through the efforts of non-Greek experts. Amongst the locals, rather implausibly, 'No one had heard of anyone climbing the mountain, and no one had any idea of how to approach it'.³⁴ Elmslie, the first British citizen to successfully take on Mytikas, rejected advice to employ Christos Kakkalos, electing instead to demonstrate his foreign expedition's superiority: 'we preferred to make the attempt alone'.³⁵

In the 1920s Farquhar excitedly predicted 'a new series of explorations and ascents'.³⁶ In recording her late-1930s entry to this catalogue, Margaret Fergusson took the opportunity to promote the capacity of her gender through how straightforward she found her arrival at the so-called Throne of Zeus: merely 'one bit of real climbing'.³⁷ In contrast, American journalist Richard Halliburton had a narrative imperative for emphasising the difficulties of his climb, which had included 'clinging fearfully to the little crevices that allowed one to ascend only an inch at a time'.³⁸ Halliburton confessed that his ambition was to 'seat myself upon the very Throne of God', and he consequently found himself confronted by the wrath of a rejuvenated Zeus who appeared as an eagle 'returning to investigate his invaded habitation'.³⁹ Veronica della Dora has argued that 'climbing mythical mountain peaks meant conquering a common ancestral past', and Halliburton duly triumphed through a

³³ Elmslie 1927, 95.

³⁴ Farquhar & Phoutrides 1929, 4

³⁵ Elmslie 1927, 88.

³⁶ Farquhar & Phoutrides 1929, 36. In 1929 Farquhar republished his 1915 account of climbing Olympus, which had been jointly written with Phoutrides, with the addition of a new preface and historical notes of his own.

³⁷ Fergusson 1938, 134.

³⁸ Halliburton 1927, 26.

³⁹ Halliburton 1927, 25 and 43.

placatory sacrifice for the king of the gods which he improvised from his remaining food and drink in the teeth of a vengeful storm.⁴⁰

Halliburton's achievement afforded him an unparalleled opportunity to reflect on mythology – taking a particular interest in spying the former dwellings of centaurs and Orpheus – as well as on the sites associated with the invasion of Xerxes which the earlier Tozer had noted: 'from the foot of this throne of god all classic Greece rolled away'.⁴¹ Conforming to a trend within twentieth century travel writing which I have previously analysed, Halliburton also pointed to the contemporary Greek people as providing a link to the past: the mountain shepherds 'might have stepped straight out of mythological literature', so that 'we moved back two thousand years and lived again in classic pastoral Greece'.⁴² For Farquhar and Phoutrides, there had been intense revelations about the mythology of the mountain itself, since they claimed to have witnessed 'the banquets of the gods and attended their councils'.⁴³ Such examples would seem to be a continuation of della Dora's finding for the nineteenth century that travellers to the mountains of Greece 'enacted' the Classical past, 'they brought it into the present'.⁴⁴ Douglas Freshfield valued his experience more prosaically, providing scholarly confirmation for Homer's descriptions of Olympus as 'radiant' and 'many-crested'.⁴⁵ For those admirers who eschewed personal alpine scrambling, even a distant view of Olympus was deemed sufficient for enlightenment. William Macneile Dixon, for example, interpreted the visible weather as a connection between past and present: 'Far, very far off, there gleamed a misty cone, a tiny cloud suspended in air, the spear tip of the giant Olympus. Zeus of his kindness had vouchsafed us a glimpse of his home, the dwelling place of the happy gods. So was crowned a day of wonders in the heart of ancient Greece.'⁴⁶

⁴⁰ della Dora 2008, 226; Halliburton 1927, 40.

⁴¹ Halliburton 1927, 42.

⁴² Wills 2007, 82-91; Halliburton 1927, 30.

⁴³ Farquhar & Phoutrides 1929, 24.

⁴⁴ della Dora 2008, 223.

⁴⁵ Freshfield 1916, 295.

⁴⁶ Macneile Dixon 1929, 106.

In the opinion of James Ramsey Ullman, it was only ‘their ancient fame in history and myth’ that made climbing the ‘brown, crumpled hills’ of Greece’s mountainous areas worthwhile.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, many other post-1913 explorers justified their endeavours as leading to rational, scientific outcomes, including settling such geographical questions as the heights and names of the various peaks in the Olympus range.⁴⁸ Farquhar and Phoutrides’ 1915 publication was considered an advance because the earlier triumph of 1913 was ‘not widely reported’ in English, and the photographs which accompanied their account were celebrated as offering ‘the first views of Mount Olympus to be widely distributed’.⁴⁹ As result of work such as this, Farquhar declared that by the 1920s ‘the years of obscurity were now past for Olympus’.⁵⁰ However, the narrative of Olympus as mysterious and unknowable would endure into future decades. When British army officer John Hunt led Allied warfare training in a Greece newly freed from Axis occupation, it was alleged that ‘the mountain was still virtually unknown’.⁵¹ However, the second half of the twentieth century saw visitor numbers to Greece soar. Formerly regarded as an off-the-beaten-track haunt for bandit-dodging independent adventurers, romantics, scientists and classicists, Olympus was now part of a Greece that was increasingly commodified as a package-tour destination. The final section of this article will show the extent to which, under pressure of intense scrutiny and numbers, Mount Olympus has continued through to the early twenty first century as a mysterious locale, ripe for unique classical experiences, within guidebooks and travel narratives.

From the Second World War to the 2020s

Although ‘Olympus’ appears regularly within the indexes of travel books focusing on Greece, this almost invariably refers to the mythological abode of the gods rather than its current rocky manifestation. Only

⁴⁷ Ullman 1942, 83.

⁴⁸ As was attempted, for example, by Freshfield 1916.

⁴⁹ Farquhar & Phoutrides 1929, vi and vii.

⁵⁰ Farquhar & Phoutrides 1929, 38.

⁵¹ Harding 2001, 92.

eight, for example, of the almost one hundred travel narratives I have elsewhere listed as being published between 1940 and 1974⁵² mention encounters with the contemporaneous mountain. In addition, for most of the few authors who did visit during the middle of the twentieth century, recounting merely a distant or partial vision of Olympus was regarded as advantageous in preserving the ancient mystique of the site: ‘As a mountain it is not particularly impressive but when characterised by the curious interplay of sunshine and mist it has an unearthly detached quality.’⁵³ Robert Bell was even more direct in his interpretation of the apparently omnipresent veil of cloud: ‘The Gods must have been displeased with us’.⁵⁴ The famous wit Osbert Lancaster included a brief reference to the ‘romantic effect’ of Olympus simply to serve as a contrast with the disappointing modernity of nearby Thessaloniki, a city which he likened to the Blitz-affected British seaside resort of Southsea.⁵⁵

As a serviceman seeking refuge from Axis patrols, Chris Jecchinis was relatively unusual amongst British visitors of the mid-twentieth century in experiencing the ‘quiet and mysterious’ mountain slopes regularly and intimately, at one point finding himself falling into a slumber which left him ‘quitting the nickelled and jack-booted present for that sylvan past’, so that ‘my flesh was diffusing and my very being was going up to Olympus and the throne of the All-powerful’.⁵⁶ This sensation of what mountain advocate Robert Macfarlane has called ‘moving upwards in space, but also backwards through time’,⁵⁷ which I have already noted as prevalent in earlier accounts of Olympus, continued across the 1950s and 60s. The potential of the region as a portal to the past was clear to Herbert Kubly since, even from fields nearby, ‘I felt the presence of ancient gods’.⁵⁸ Barbara Whelpton’s experience was even

⁵² The number of these titles reaches 92 in Wills 2007, 122–129.

⁵³ Krippner 1957, 38.

⁵⁴ Bell 1961, 195.

⁵⁵ Lancaster 1947, 178.

⁵⁶ Jecchinis 1988, 134–135.

⁵⁷ Macfarlane 2008, 36.

⁵⁸ Kubly 1970, 10.

more intense: 'In the eerie light, the mountain was peopled with shadowy figures'.⁵⁹

As in earlier literature, it was often implied that another link to the ancient past might be found in the allegedly pre-modern attitudes and way of life of the modern inhabitants. Pausing for breath amongst the foothills, Patrick Anderson heard the 'chill sound of a boy's pipe' and 'sheepskins being churned to cleanliness in a basin below'.⁶⁰ Returning to his car, Anderson warned that on nearby roads travellers might still encounter men pulling chained bears which they forced to 'dance', the archaic cruelty graphically recorded elsewhere by the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos.⁶¹ As late as 1974, the relevant volume in Fodor's famous guidebook series contained the exaggerated claim that 'the whole countryside rising slowly towards the Olympus is a living museum of folklore', with specific admiration directed towards funeral traditions which 'would fit well into an ancient tragedy'.⁶²

Like their ancestors during the Greek War of Independence, who had boasted in song that 'For every peak there is a flag, for every branch a klepht'⁶³, local resistors to hated foreign oppression during the mid-twentieth century found their way to Olympus. A 1942 song repurposed the 'thunder on Mount Olympus' as less the indicator of ancient power and more the sound of the 'fight for liberty, the most coveted prize'.⁶⁴ Chris Jecchinis, whose British-Greek unit attacking Nazi trains was based in the region, set Olympus symbolically apart because its fame and antiquity gave it 'no part in the thousand-year Reich'.⁶⁵ Later in the same decade, during and following the Greek Civil War, it was inevitable that this relatively inaccessible location would revert to its nineteenth century role as a practical place of refuge for those who wished to evade the authorities. At the beginning of the 1950s, shepherds informed

⁵⁹ Whelpton 1954, 20.

⁶⁰ Anderson 1964, 237.

⁶¹ Anderson 1964, 237; the poem entitled *The Sacred Way* is translated in Sherrard 1987, 50–53.

⁶² Sheldon 1974, 259.

⁶³ Sfikas 1999, 46.

⁶⁴ Sfikas 1999, 40.

⁶⁵ Jecchinis 1988, 136.

Kevin Andrews that venturing to the mountain's pastures had until now been too perilous: 'A party of Athenians came to climb the Mytikas for the first time since the war, but they got no further than where we're sitting. Three andartes took all their money, their watches, and most of their clothes.'⁶⁶ Travelling in the same year as Andrews, John Pollard was similarly warned by one government official that lawless elements 'still roamed the mountain heights'.⁶⁷ However, by the time his account was published in the middle of the 1950s, Pollard was confident that this reputation would prove no setback to visitors emulating the Western European modes of mountain exploration: 'Nowadays guided parties are encouraged to make the ascent after the best Alpine traditions.'⁶⁸

With Pollard's prediction of popularity coming true, by the 1970s and 80s it became very challenging for travellers to continue peddling a narrative of the isolated and mysterious Olympus, as the celebrated author Eric Newby discovered. Newby felt himself fortunate to claim the 'last two bunks' at the nearest youth hostel, which was otherwise full of 'hill walkers with a distinctly aggressive approach to their chosen pastime'.⁶⁹ However, even though he was participating in what was by then a mass tourism pursuit, Newby sought to distinguish the ambition of his fellow mountain climbers – 'all French or German' – from the limited imagination possessed by even well-travelled Greeks: 'we had a number of interesting conversations in the cafés with well-dressed gentlemen who had spent most of their lives in such far-off places as Pittsburgh, Darwin and West Hartlepool but had never climbed Mount Olympus or even thought of doing so.'⁷⁰ In referring to 1913, the suggestion that it was foreign mountaineers who had got there first was another device used by a number of writers, including John Hillaby, to disparage native Greek attitudes and achievements: 'a local guide, Christos Kakkalos had helped two Swiss climbers, Baud-Bovy and Boissonas to climb to the summit'.⁷¹ When Hillaby failed in his own attempt, as a

⁶⁶ Andrews 1959, 233.

⁶⁷ Pollard 1955, 20.

⁶⁸ Pollard 1955, 44.

⁶⁹ Newby 1984, 174.

⁷⁰ Newby 1984, 176 and 173.

⁷¹ Hillaby 1991, 328.

British explorer, to emulate their achievement, he resorted to the well-worn trope of blaming the hail and thunder on a still-present Zeus.⁷² Travelling like Newby and Hillaby in the 1980s, the Western-educated but Greek-speaking Tim Salmon proved to be more understanding that mountain travel could be viewed locally as important for survival but inexplicable as a leisure pursuit. Focused as he was on studying groups of Vlachs who seasonally herded their sheep through the Olympus foothills, Salmon found himself accosted and condemned by an old man at a provincial bus station: ‘You must have got some brain missing’ because only ‘madness goes to the mountains’.⁷³

Despite such examples of incomprehension, visiting upland regions had, by the turn of the century, become a widespread choice of escape from urban life amongst people of many countries: ‘An estimated 10 million Americans go mountaineering annually, and 50 million go hiking’.⁷⁴ With aficionados such as Robert Macfarlane promoting mountains as offering a ‘spiritual vantage-point as well as a physical one’, it is understandable that Jill Dudley’s 2008 travel account should prominently feature the theme of experiencing the sacred at Olympus: ‘the presence of the gods was almost tangible’.⁷⁵ Ascribing, like so many before her in Greece, ancient attributes to modern inhabitants, Dudley acclaimed a young man who helped her across a fast-flowing river as ‘Dionysos, god, or Dionysios, saint’.⁷⁶ In her travel feature for the *New York Times* of the late 1990s however, journalist Caroline Alexander took a considerably more prosaic approach: ‘I now discovered nothing at all preternatural or even mysterious about the mountain before me’, which ‘looked comfortingly welcoming and accessible’.⁷⁷ So much so, she discovered that at the ‘Refuge A’ accommodation for trekkers ‘a supply of thick, soft blankets was in each room, and each bed had a pillow’.⁷⁸ There certainly, however, remains a strand within Anglophone

⁷² Hillaby 1991, 332.

⁷³ Salmon 1995, 1.

⁷⁴ Macfarlane 2008, 17.

⁷⁵ Macfarlane 2008, 158; Dudley 2008, 78.

⁷⁶ Dudley 2008, 81.

⁷⁷ Alexander 1998.

⁷⁸ Alexander 1998.

factual writing of keeping a distance from Olympus, an approach which may be physically undemanding but is sometimes regarded as intellectually advantageous. In writing a history of Olympus for young people, Claire O'Neal must have found it satisfying to note that 'fog coats the mountain like a mystery'.⁷⁹ During his recent visit, travel writer Peter Barber similarly observed that 'the peaks of Mount Olympus are hidden by a blanket of cloud', and he came to the realisation that 'I would rather not see the top of the mountain. It's much better to imagine Zeus and the other gods sitting on thrones in their own temple above the clouds.'⁸⁰

A YouTube documentary of 2012 which follows Kilian Jornet's record-breaking ascent and descent of Mount Olympus includes a scene in which a Greek muleteer stands rooted with astonishment as the Spanish athlete speeds past.⁸¹ In the aftermath of his triumph, Jornet is shown coaching local runners in the most advanced techniques for tackling the stony uphill paths.⁸² This ongoing narrative of visitors from the West assuming leadership over the Greeks in appreciating and conquering the ancient landscape has recently reached a surreal apogee with the imagined relocation of Mount Olympus to the USA. In her 2020 fable for children, DeAnna Kauzlaric Kieffer presents a Continent-hopping Olympus as having failed to find an appropriate refuge from exploitative humans in locations as far apart as the Sahara and the Himalayas. The personified mountain eventually discovers 'fine real estate in a friendly neighborhood' – Washington State – where 'the humans are almost civilized'.⁸³ For Kieffer, the New World thus represents the most fitting resting-place for the highest culture of the Old.

Despite such examples of foreign appropriation, greater credit is now being given to the Greek role in opening up Olympus to human exploration. This is similar to the reputational trajectory of Tenzing Norgay at Mount Everest: although in recent decades often given equal billing with the New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary, Tenzing was ini-

⁷⁹ O'Neal 2014, 4.

⁸⁰ Barber 2023, 119.

⁸¹ Jornet 2012a; O'Neal 2014, 33 duly notes Kilian Jornet's feat as the fastest climbing time.

⁸² Jornet 2012b.

⁸³ Kieffer 2020, 23 and 25.

tially dismissed by some in 1953 as ‘an aide with little mountaineering skill’.⁸⁴ Expressing a nationalist pride like that of the Nepalese, many of whom insisted that it was actually Tenzing who had stepped onto the summit of Everest first, Greeks of the Olympus region believed, they informed Kevin Andrews in the 1950s, that Christos Kakkalos ‘must have been up and down a hundred times before the foreigners came and made what they called the first ascent’.⁸⁵ As late as 2001, when J.G.R. Harding reflected on the events of 1913 for *The Alpine Journal*, the conventional approach taken by European mountaineers towards local experts was retained: the summiting of Olympus was ‘by the Swiss climbers Baud-Bovey and Boissonnas *with their Greek guide Kakalos*’.⁸⁶ Generally however, authors of the twenty first century, such as Claire O’Neal, have been even-handed in assigning credit: ‘Kakalos and Swiss photographers Daniel Baud-Bovy and Frederic Boissonas became the first people in recorded history to reach Olympus’s highest peak, Mytikas’.⁸⁷ Mike Styllas, writing at virtually the same time, was even more emphatic in reversing the traditional prioritization: ‘Christos Kakkalos, *together with* Swiss photographer Frederic Boissonnas and also Swiss Daniel Baud Bovy reached the highest point of Greece’.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Despite its huge significance within Classical mythology, Greece’s Mount Olympus was at the beginning of the twentieth century, due to its absence from the much-followed ancient guidebook of Pausanias and its geographical location on the margins of the modern Greek state, relatively uncharted territory for Western travellers. The first successful ascent of Olympus’ highest peak in 1913 opened the way for the comprehensive exploration, demystification and, indeed, exploitation of the mountain by generations of visitors. Subsequent written accounts have

⁸⁴ Twigger 2016, 346.

⁸⁵ Twigger 2016, 346; Andrews 1959, 230.

⁸⁶ Harding 2001, 92, emphasis added.

⁸⁷ O’Neal 2014, 6.

⁸⁸ Styllas 2012, 4, emphasis added.

ranged from the fantastical to the highly technical, the latter including a geological article by Clive Michael Barton which reaches the conclusion that ‘as Olympus records continuous carbonate deposition from the Triassic to the Eocene, with no marked Cretaceous discordance, there is no possibility of transport across the platform in pre-Tertiary times.’⁸⁹

Although now a thoroughly mapped and analysed location, Olympus has recently offered new ways of viewing the natural world for photographer Agorastos Papatsanis. In successive years a ‘Wildlife Photographer of the Year’ category winner, Papatsanis has explained that the mountain enables him to get lost in ‘the interplay between fungi and fairy tales’.⁹⁰ The increasing interest in mental as well as physical health has led writers such as Silvia Vasquez-Lavado to advocate travel in such landscapes as ‘healing trauma through nature’.⁹¹ At the same time though, there is greater understanding that exploring Mount Everest, for example, ‘should inspire humility rather than bravado’ because ‘to the sherpas it was a sacred place’.⁹² In a 2024 article aimed at tourists, Georgia Drakaki has insisted that Olympus be approached with ‘discipline and reverence’.⁹³ Although such reflections on natural landscapes and their importance – intrinsically, symbolically and imaginatively – are part of wider contemporary movements, a sacred aura for Mount Olympus has long been recognised. In contrast to Everest, this interpretation of Olympus was regarded as largely the preserve of Classically-educated foreigners rather than local farmers and shepherds. According to generations of Anglophone writers, the uses of the mountain were for the people of Greece overwhelmingly practical: the high passes as routes connecting the north and south of the country, the pastures for seasonal flocks, the streams for laundry, and the inaccessible caves for hideouts from the Law. It was thought that only those from a Western European background could be Olympus connoisseurs, possessing the sensibilities necessary to understand how the present landscape might reflect ancient

⁸⁹ Barton 1975, 395.

⁹⁰ *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* 2022, 27.

⁹¹ Vasquez-Lavado 2022, 105.

⁹² Vasquez-Lavado 2022, 190.

⁹³ Drakaki 2024, 116.

stories and traditions, and able to comprehend the attraction of mountain conquest as a leisure pursuit achievable through use of the latest equipment and expertise.

The perceived virtues of a visit to Mount Olympus have to some extent developed – from colonial conquest and transportation to a mythical past, to more recent ideas about self-discovery and reconnection with nature. But as I have shown, certain narrative tropes about Olympus – for example, as unknown and unknowable – have persisted for much of the last 120 years. As late as 2001, Harding recommended Olympus to other adventurers – and justified his own reporting of it – on the basis that ‘the mountains of Greece remain a blank on the map for most British climbers’.⁹⁴

The issuance in 2013 of Mount Olympus postage stamps to commemorate the centenary of the first summiting also serves as a milestone in the evolving *ownership* of that achievement. The accompanying text proudly listed the Greek climber first: ‘In August 1913, Christos Kakalos from Litochoro and the Swiss climbers Frédéric Boissonnas and Daniel Baud-Bovy succeeded in ascending to the Olympus’s virgin peak, Mytikas’. Narratives of Olympus will continue to reflect wider debates about such issues as mountain exploration and tourism, environmentalism, and nationalism. Nevertheless, due to the dominating theme of this locale within ancient mythology as sacred and powerful, the representation of Mount Olympus as inscrutable is likely to persist.

⁹⁴ Harding 2001, 89.

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