# Edith Hall and Henry Stead A People’s History of Classics, Class and Greco-Roman Antiquity in Britain and Ireland 1680 to 1939 Routledge 2020 pb p. 642 978-0-367-43236-2 £26.00

We all know that Classics is “elitist”. What is less well-known is the part that Classical studies and learning played in the lives of the non-elite over the centuries. Hall and Stead tell this story for the UK and Ireland perhaps for the first time. Elite institutions have largely ignored this history, and non-elite and working-class cultures, while quick to dismiss Classics as the mark of the upper classes, have been unaware of how much their own movements have involved in some way. Just as Tom Holland in his *Dominion* has shown how deeply Christian our culture is even among those who profess no religion, Hall and Stead show how Classics permeates the culture of all classes even though we may not recognise it.

This is a colossal undertaking weighing in at more than 200,000 words, covering a vast range of sources from countryside autodidacts to bodybuilders and living statues. It is arranged thematically and individual chapters will provide rich material for further research into a diversity of topics. They deal with popular entertainments such as the Siege of Troy shown at London Fairs in the 18th century, the publication of translations of Greek and Latin writers in inexpensive editions, many different writers from non-elite backgrounds, performers who used to entertain crowds using their bodies in some kind of a classical setting, subversive and radical scholars, and many more. They show how some struggled to learn Latin and Greek without any formal education and who went on to become writers themselves, in contrast to the privileged young men who learnt the ancient languages as a badge of class. This is an emerging theme of the book which is reflected in the still continuing debate between Latin and Greek languages and Classical Civilisation. Still the snobbery of studying the actual languages as opposed to merely reading the texts in translation pertains today. The frequently cited example of Tom Paine, the radical political writer, makes the point. Many refer to him as being anti-classical, and as hating Latin. While he, or perhaps his father for him on religious grounds, refused to learn Latin, he was not opposed to reading the classical authors, as his writings show. Having Latin and Greek was the mark of an educated gentlemen, and not having them was the opposite, which some wore as a badge of pride. Paine though used his reading of Plutarch and others in the development of his radical thinking. These anti-Classics attitudes are still prevalent today among some who argue against teaching Classics in state schools for class reasons. If they read this book they will see the non-elite attitude towards classical learning has not always been as they imagine it. The languages formed the class barrier rather than the content of the ancient world as a whole. Yet Classical Civilisation (or Classical Studies in translation) continues to be disdained and considered inferior to the study of the ancient texts in their original languages.

Perhaps these non-elite students of Classics were the real innovators in their widening of the scope of Classics to include more than just the texts. The stories of the ancient world were re-enacted and parodied in the burlesques and spectacles or used for political ends, and Classical myths and visual culture were used to give respectability to performers of the *poses plastiques* such as the body builder Eugen Sandow and the living statues La Milo and Vulcana who all posed as figures from mythology in imitation of naked sculpture. These shows had their origin in the “attitudes” of Emma Hamilton and reached as far the nudes of the Windmill Theatre in the 1930s and 1940s.

The range of material is vast and includes among many other aspects an examination of the state of Classical knowledge of the pottery workers of Josiah Wedgwood’s factory in Etruria, Stoke. Wedgwood was inspired by the publication of the Greek vase collection of Sir William Hamilton to produce fine classically themed pottery which was within the financial reach of some ordinary people. His workers, shaping and painting the pots, will have somehow acquired a knowledge of and a taste for the stories and culture of the Greeks whose original works they were imitating. Other groups whose interests are researched include shoemakers and miners as well as Irish, Scots and Welsh folk into whose local cultures Classics also spread. The survey continues with chapters on radical and communist scholars of the 20th century, the working-class poet and artist David Jones (whose work *In Parenthesis* the authors see as neglected) and the radical theatre practitioners Joan Littlewood (of the Theatre Workshop) and Ewan MacColl whose careers began with an adaptation of *Lysistrata*. The approach is broadly chronological but the thematic chapters can cover a wide time span. The coverage reaches as far as World War II, and so the effect of the extension of education after the war to provide grammar school and university education to a wider social range after the 1944 Education Act awaits treatment. As does the story of Classical Studies in other European countries many of which have strong traditions. How far does the question of class affect learning Classics in Germany or the Netherlands? Does the close association of the teaching of Latin with the teaching of French or Italian first language in France and Italy affect the attitude of the public to learning the ancient languages?

Hall and Stead’s approach does not seek to cover the whole story of Classics on the culture of the UK and Ireland, but only the non-elite aspects. (The other aspects have after all been covered extensively elsewhere.) The authors have a clear purpose to set the record straight, or at least provide a counterbalance for Classics which as they conclude is a discipline “sorely in need of a democratic makeover”. There are many young practitioners currently questioning the approach of the subject to gender, imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy and racism. These are difficult questions which have not been posed before and traditional members of the profession are having to face up to them perhaps for the first time. Classics is not the only discipline which is being asked these difficult questions, but Hall and Stead here show that some Classicists are facing up to them and trying to provide an alternative narrative.

John Bulwer