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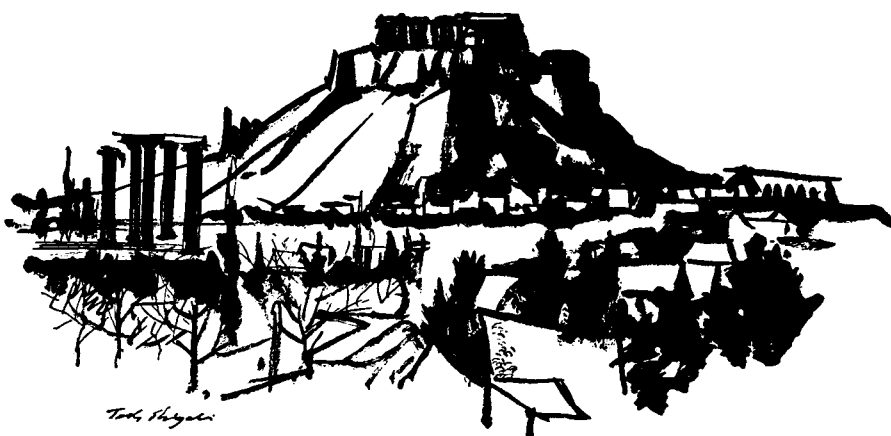
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## *The Athenians In Decline*

**RALPH RUSSELL**

**THE ECHO OF GREECE**, by Edith Hamilton. Norton. \$3.95.

For every generation, the ancient Greeks are apt, if their promoters don't watch out, to become as tedious as any other ancestors to whom we owe much and whose virtues are endlessly dinned into us. This is especially true in our generation, when most people cannot read Greek and have to rely on translators and interpreters. We have been told so often that the Greeks have shaped our minds, shown us the way to civilization, and left us a legacy of wisdom, beauty, harmony, wholeness, or what-have-you that we can hardly be blamed for yawning at the matchless philosopher-artist-athlete, cheerfully subsisting on oatmeal and olives, blessed with unerring taste and rippling muscles, who can one moment heave a discus over the Acropolis and the next sit down for a searching chat about the nature of justice.

Nostalgia for the good old days drove Miniver Cheevy to drink, and if we take any interest in the Greeks, it is undoubtedly healthy to remember that in many ways their civilization was as flashy, flighty, and neurasthenic as our own. Athens in its best days was a slum huddling beneath the Parthenon; the Parthenon itself was smeared with color and cluttered, like an antique shop, with bric-a-brac; and the people, to

judge from their obsession with the Almighty Drachma and their predilection for tales of patricide and matricide, must have been prey to tensions, anxieties, and pressures every bit as insidious as those which beset us.

Still, even taken down a peg or two, the Greeks loom as provocatively as ever—perhaps because, against the neutral, impersonal background of the despotisms that surrounded them, they appear to have brought humanity out into the open. They brought so much, indeed, into the open that out of the available materials pretty nearly anyone can construct his own Greece. As W. H. Auden has pointed out, there is a German Greece, a French Greece, and a British Greece, all perhaps equally valid and equally fragmentary. He adds that there may even be an American Greece, though he isn't so sure of it.

### **Admiration in the Ruins**

One of the most appealing of Greeces is Edith Hamilton's Greece, triumphantly mapped and populated in *The Greek Way*, which has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and deserves to sell as many more. In the present book, Miss Hamilton's tone is less triumphant, for she is concerned mostly with the fourth century B.C.—the century in which Athens, having lost its twenty-seven-

year war against Sparta, declined into a fourth- or fifth-rate power. Part of Miss Hamilton's task is, of course, to explain this decline, but her heart doesn't seem to be in it; she chides the Athenians for becoming more interested in what their government can give them than in what they can give their government—for demanding pay on jury duty and fretting over the price of sausages—and she quotes Plato, explaining why he forsook the Assembly for the Academy, to the effect that "customs were being corrupted at an astounding rate" and that "the whirlpool of public life" only made him dizzy. But though this book contains some scattered and reluctant stabs at the Greeks of the decadence, it is not so much a study of the debacle as a collection of essays on what the author finds to admire in the ruins.

She finds much to admire, for even in their decline the Greeks were a formidable lot. She writes of Plato and Aristotle, and although she is inclined to romanticize the former, particularly in her description of their meeting in the Academy ("no doubt Aristotle felt shy in that very superior gathering and was glad to be undistinguished"), she is fair enough to the less imaginative philosopher.

She is similarly fair to Isocrates, who was Plato's chief rival as the educator of fourth-century Athens and whom Plato denounced as a mercenary, since he accepted tuition fees. Indeed, in one of the most valuable, because least familiar, sections of the book, she recounts with warmth the career of Isocrates—how he stood bravely for a united Greece, preached a crusade for freedom against the Persians, came to realize the futility of all wars (even crusades for freedom), and reached the conclusion that a democracy cannot become rich and powerful and endure as a democracy.

#### Advice from Plutarch

Miss Hamilton warns us, early in the book, that the kind of events that took place in fourth-century Greece may take place again. In her chapter on Demosthenes she points out that in their best days the Greeks knew that "bigger" and "better" seldom go together. There

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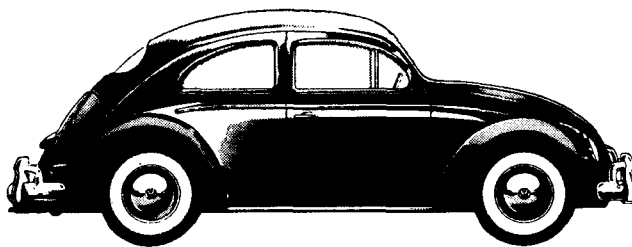


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are also essays on Alexander the Great and the surrender to Asian ways that went with his conquests.

Leaving the fourth century, she writes sympathetically of the Stoics and of Plutarch. The Stoics she exalts for bringing to a pitch the Greek tradition of self-mastery and for their talent for moderation (with all his austerity, Zeno, the founder of the school, was not above owning up to a fondness for beans soaked in wine), and Plutarch she portrays with delicacy and devotion, convincing us that he, who in a favorable era would have been a great public man, furnished an eternal pattern for public-spirited men living at a great distance from the center of political power. "You will have no wars to wage, no tyrants to put down, no alliances to consolidate," Plutarch wrote to a young Greek; but he went on to advise his friend to do what he could—"abolish some petty abuse, fight some bad custom, revive some charitable foundation, repair an aqueduct, rebuild a temple, adjust a local tax."

**I**N A wistful epilogue to a wistful book, Miss Hamilton takes up the curious speculation as to what history might have been if the Christian church had followed not the Roman way, with its emphasis on organization and discipline, but the Greek way, with its emphasis on independence and self-mastery. If the Greek way had been followed, she says, "The cruelties practiced in his [Christ's] name might not—almost surely would not—have defaced the religion of love," and there she leaves us.

There is a great deal left out of this book—and of *The Greek Way* (the two should be read together)—and even the Sunday-afternoon student of Greece will want other books as a corrective (the writer can recommend, as a starter, the section on Greece in Herbert Muller's *The Uses of the Past* and H. D. F. Kitto's Pelican book *The Greeks*), but certainly Miss Hamilton's Greece, perceptively and tenderly drawn, is one we can profitably start with. It is a Greece, primarily, in which the great actors speak their parts on a distant and austere stage, but those parts will live as long as men examine themselves and their destiny.



## Berlin Society Before the Wars

HORTENSE CALISHER

**A** LEGACY, by Sybille Bedford. Simon and Schuster. \$3.50.

These days, in the face of the novel's protean forms and laissez-faire habits, only the impudent or the unsophisticated dare raise the raw question, when a book is presented as a novel, of whether it is one. But if we can no longer ask that a novel take a particular form, or hew to a single one, we may still keep one weathered old stipulation—that it move with a continuous and imaginative sense of life. Anything goes in the novel if that goes. Here, in this brilliantly odd, at times oddly tedious chronicle of the merger of two impressively baroque families in pre-First World War Berlin, everything goes remarkably, except that.

"I spent the first nine years of my life in Germany," the book begins, "bundled to and fro between two houses." There follows a wonderfully plummy description of the inhabitants of one of these—the Merzes, parents of the narrator's father's first wife, who still give their son-in-law an income and his second family a home—very rich upper-bourgeois Jews whose eccentrically stertorous mode of life, so gleefully recognizable to anyone who has ever met it, demands the wittiest reportage, and gets it:

"While members of their . . . world were dining to the sounds of Schubert and of Haydn, endowing research and adding Corots to their Bouchers . . . the Merzes were adding bell-pulls and thickening the upholstery. No music was heard at Voss Strasse. . . . They took no exer-

cise . . . kept no animals . . . and there was a discreet mouse-trap set in every room. . . . Grandmama Merz had never taken a bath without the presence and assistance of her maid. They did not go to shops. . . . In his younger days Grandpapa Merz had gone to board meetings; now he still received . . . an individual who presented himself with a satchelful . . . of bank notes and gold . . . handed to the butler Gottlieb who paid the wages . . . Money, like animals, was not hygienic, and no one was supposed to handle *used* notes . . . everybody was paid straight off the press. The subsequent problem of change was not envisaged."

**W**E SETTLE down happily to what begins to be a first-rate memoir, semi-autobiography or who-cares-what—something reminiscent of Osbert Sitwell's chronicles, written by a mind more temperately endowed perhaps, and more interested in other people's *longueurs* than its own, but similarly a book in which the interest is in the "painterly" detail of a milieu so insolently rococo that one would never think of carping because the people blend too well with their own *chinoiseries*, or stand too marvelously still.

In the second chapter we meet the paternal side, the Feldens: "The language spoken in his family was French, the temper and setting of their lives retarded eighteenth century; their seat had always been in a warm corner of Baden . . . their home was Catholic Western Continental Europe. . . . They ignored,