

The Ghikas House on Hydra: From Artists' Haven to Enchanted Ruins

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We sat on the terrace under the starry sky and talked about poetry, we drank wine,
we swam, we rode donkeys, we played chess—it was like life in a novel.
(Ghikas, quoted in Arapoglou 56)

Introduction

The Greek island of Hydra has become known for the colony of expatriate painters and writers that became established there in the 1950s and 60s (Genoni and Dalziel 2018; Goldman 2018). Two 'literary houses,' the homes of several of the island's most well-known foreign residents during that era—the Australian couple, writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift, and Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen—have become places of pilgrimage for aficionados of Australian literature and popular music. Visitors wend through the maze of car-less, stone-paved lanes, asking for directions along the way, in order to stand outside the objects of their quests. Standing in the small public courtyard in front of the Johnstons' house, or the tight laneway fronting the Cohen house, there is not much to see—the houses are quiet, the doors closed, the stone and white-washed walls surrounding the properties, which are typical of Hydra, are high. This doesn't keep people from coming. They can picture in their minds' eyes what is on the other side of the walls, having seen photographs of the writers at work and leisure inside the houses, and having read the books and listened to the songs that were written while the Johnstons and Cohen were in residence. Just a few days ago (at the time of writing), the international press picked up on an Instagram post by the musical artist Bono, featuring a photograph of himself and his party outside the Hydra house where Cohen had lived and quoting several lines from Cohen's song, 'Bird on a Wire.'

'Literary tourism' of this sort is now commonplace, a part of the broader phenomenon of 'cultural tourism,' and a touristic leveraging of the forms of cultural capital that are accrued by tangible locations associated with writers (Herbert). Literary tourism is increasingly seen as a legitimate form of fandom and a valid adjunct to reading and comprehending a text, and in this endeavour literary pilgrims are simply following in the footsteps of scholars. Literary critics and biographers alike have long appreciated that personal exposure to various places associated with the subjects of their research is an important form of research. Researchers have also focused attention on the manner in which studying the physical environment in which writers work 'opens a window onto both authors and text,' and how 'what we may at first perceive to be the timeless and universal truth of writing cannot be so neatly extracted from the complex particularities of its spatial and material origin' (Fuss 1).

The sites that fall within the orbit of literary tourism (both scholarly and touristic) might include not only houses, but schools and universities; sites where writing was undertaken or books written; places described and used as settings in texts; towns or neighborhoods; locations for significant life events; gravesites, and others. Literary tourism has particular potential when it is applied to a 'network' of affiliated writers—for example, 'Bloomsbury,' the Beats, or the

Algonquin Roundtable. Not only is the number of potential sites of interest multiplied, but the richness of the experience of visiting sites is also enhanced when they can be spatially associated within a particular location or area. A quick internet search will reveal numerous maps of Liverpool pinpointing various sites of interest associated with the Beatles and their families and associates in the late 1950s and 1960s, including houses, schools, performance venues, and places of work. Understanding the relationships within the band as well as between the band and other key people is enhanced with a visit to Liverpool that allows fans to see first-hand the houses and other buildings associated with the band's early years. This also gives fans a sense of physical proximity to the objects of their admiration. Tourist guides to Cyprus include instructions for finding the house in Bellapais where Lawrence Durrell lived in the 1950s, as chronicled in his book *Bitter Lemons* (1957). Likewise, fans of his brother Gerald Durrell seek out the former Corfu homes of the Durrell family, as described in *My Family and Other Animals* (1956) and other books by Gerald, and are invited to walk along the 'Durrell Trail.'

At the same time that the Beatles were finding each other in Liverpool the expatriate artist community had formed on Hydra. The island places now associated with this community include buildings such as taverns, bars, schools and monasteries; the harbour and beaches; and socially constructed spaces such as the *agora*. But it is the houses of those who lived on Hydra for a protracted period that are the most attractive to literary tourists, with their deep associations with the private lives of these public figures. In addition to the houses of the Johnstons and Cohen, there is a third literary house on the island that now attracts fewer pilgrims, but which has an equal claim to interest because of its pivotal role in Hydra's long association with the creative arts, and the literary networks that formed on the island in the wake of the arrival of Clift and Johnston in 1955. This is the imposing home of Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, a noted Greek painter who opened up his home to selected painters and writers.

Unlike the houses of the Johnstons and Cohen, the Ghikas house can now only be experienced in a ruined state, and through the writings and photographs that document it. The ruin of the burnt-out mansion lingers on the mountain slope above the village of Kamini, immediately to the west of Hydra's main harbour. The island is about 20 kilometres long and lies parallel to the Peloponnese, at the juncture of the Argolic and Saronic gulfs. Ruins are everywhere on Hydra. In the early nineteenth century, when boat-building and maritime trade brought prosperity to the island, there were over 20,000 inhabitants (Sofianos 22). By the latter half of the twentieth century, the population had dwindled to some 3,000 (Sofianos 23), resulting in many abandoned dwellings in various states of decay.

These many ruins were rarely lifeless. Fig trees took over courtyards and terraces. Cats bore their young in dark corners. Some ruins became donkey and goat pens. In the late 1960s and early '70s, hippies used them as crash pads. Most ruins had been humble cottages, some no more than two- or three-room stone huts. A few had been grand properties. One of these was the eighteenth-century mansion—the *archontiko*—of the Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas family, who had originated in Albania and settled on Hydra in 1628 (Sofianos 83). The newness of this ruin set it apart from the hundreds of other ruins on the island. As a child, I walked past the abandoned Ghikas estate countless times, half-paying attention to the tales my father told about the house, the man who owned it, the many luminaries who enjoyed his hospitality, and the fire that ended everything (Goldman 2015).

Christopher Woodward has argued that when we look at ruins, the viewer is, of course, confronted with the past, but that the real fascination with ruins is rooted in how they compel

us to contemplate our own future:

To statesmen, ruins predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man's aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art.

(2–3)

Rose Macaulay explored in splendid detail the perverse pleasure taken in gazing upon ruins, tracing how this fascination has evolved from ancient times to the present. This obsession reached bizarre heights when the craze for fake ruins seized the upper classes in England, France and elsewhere in the eighteenth century. Macaulay's final chapter hints at her anguish when her London home was bombed during a war that created many new (not fake) ruins in England: 'New ruins have not yet acquired the weathered patina of age . . . new ruins are for a time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless; blackened and torn, they smell of fire and mortality' (453).

When my father led my sister and me past the Ghikas estate on our way to swim at Vlichos, it was still a fresh ruin, which lay like a wound on the hillside. In a child's imagination it still smelled faintly of soot. This newness set it apart from other ruins on an island where ruins—reminding us not only of Hydra's former prosperity, but also, as Woodward explained, invoking our own futures—were everywhere. This was a time before Hydra's ruins were bought up for pittances by Athenians and foreigners and reconstituted as luxury properties. Among the expatriates who remember Hydra in the mid-century there is a nostalgia for the time when there were still many ruins and life on the island was still simple, almost 'primitive' (Goldman 2018).

Ghikas's house was also significant in the formation of Hydra's artists' colony and in the lives of those many artists and writers who visited or stayed there, including Johnston and Clift, and Sidney and Cynthia Nolan, as well as Henry Miller, Patrick Leigh Fermor and John Craxton. It is through their various writings (and paintings and photographs) that the house can be known today.

Ghikas

Until 1961, the vast ruin sprawled on the mountain slope above Kamini had been the beloved second home of the Athens-based artist Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas (1906–94). Ghikas (or Ghika), as he was known, was a leading modernist painter of international renown. He had studied in Paris in the 1920s and '30s, had exhibited in London and Paris, and was a founding member of the Association of Greek Art Critics (Moraiti). His work is held by major international galleries, including the National Gallery in Athens, the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, the Tate Gallery in London and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, as well as private collections.

Ghikas had spent summers in the dilapidated family house on Hydra as a child, and in 1936 he decided to restore it for his own use, declaring: 'The roof leaked, the terraces were sinking, the shutters were collapsing . . . My childhood home seemed to have dwindled into primeval silence' (Arapoglou 52). Even in its unrestored state, however, the appearance of the house was strikingly memorable. During his travels in Greece, the Italian artist Francesco (François) Perilla visited Hydra—probably in the 1920s or '30s—and in a beautifully illustrated account published as a limited edition many years later, he described the Ghikas house as being perched

above the town like an eagle's nest, with 'flowered terraces at the top of a steep staircase with innumerable steps . . . [Ghikas] unveils the secrets of this very old building, its dark alcoves, its labyrinths, its room where the guards of old kept watch through the loopholes' (18, author's translation).

Influenced by the planes and angles of the restored house and its terraces, and the dramatic visual perspective its location afforded, Ghikas would go on to produce extraordinary works of art in the house's expansive studio. 'It's beautiful and it soothes the mind,' he wrote (Arapoglou 60). The many literary and artistic friends Ghikas invited to stay were similarly inspired. Ghikas's close friend and frequent guest, expatriate British painter John Craxton, alluded to how strongly Ghikas and his Hydra house were identified with one another: 'Tall and solitary, the whitewashed mansion mirrored Ghika's personality and character to perfection' (Arapoglou 50). Craxton recalled in an obituary that Ghikas himself was 'the seemingly most English of Greeks, elegantly dressed, serious, charming, approachable.' He was 'intelligent, humane, and knowledgeable, inquisitive, learned, and daring. He possessed, too, a towering dignity and an aristocratic presence . . . he could also be mockingly witty, satirical, and full of fun' (Craxton). The British writer Patrick Leigh Fermor described Ghikas as 'tall and Stravinsky-esque in appearance . . . Rather solemn, thoughtful, generous and kind' (Sisman 243).

Henry Miller: wild and naked

One of the earliest visitors to the Ghikas house to leave an impression was American writer Henry Miller. In 1939, on the eve of the world war that would devolve into the Greek Civil War, Miller travelled to Greece at the suggestion of British writer Lawrence Durrell, who was living on Corfu (Duatis 31). Through Durrell, Miller befriended two Greek writers, George Seferis, a diplomat and poet who would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963, and George Katsimbalis, an editor and publisher who was enormously influential on Greek literature of the period. The two Georges escorted Miller to Hydra to meet their good friend, Ghikas. An annex of the Athens School of Fine Arts had been established on Hydra by another Greek painter, Perikles Vyzantios, just a few years before, so the island was already not quite the intellectual and artistic backwater it might have seemed.

Miller was intoxicated by the island, with its Cubist blocks of white-washed stone houses rising up around the main port. In *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), his account of his travels in Greece, Miller claimed that Hydra caused him to lose 'all sense of earthly direction' (50). For him, the town was, 'Aesthetically . . . perfect' and he extolled 'This purity, this wild and naked perfection of Hydra' (49). Ghikas's art also had a powerful, transformative effect on Miller: 'Ghika's canvases are as fresh and clean, as pure and naked of all pretense, as the sea and light . . . It was Ghika's painting which roused me from my bedazzled stupor' (47). Miller also described with similar rapture Ghikas's mansion, and the hospitality provided by the painter and his first wife Antigone (known to friends as Tiggy or Tiggy):

The house had forty rooms . . . The big rooms were like the saloon of an ocean liner . . . Madame Hadji-Kyriakos, Ghika's wife, laid a wonderful table; we rose from the table like wine casks. From the terrace, which was distinctly Oriental in flavor, we could look out on the sea in drunken stupefaction. (52)

In *The Colossus of Maroussi*, considered by many to be Miller's greatest book, the author also wrote about playing ping-pong with Ghikas, and sitting up with the painter over a bottle of whisky, talking about Tibetan monks (51–52). Miller was by no means the first foreigner to

describe Hydra's visual appeal in print. The British politician James Emerson wrote glowingly about Hydra in 1826, describing 'the white arms of the little town clasping the rugged bosom of the wild rock, on which it is situated' (124) and its 'extremely beautiful prospect' (127). Another nineteenth-century example is provided by Fredrika Bremer—called the Swedish Jane Austen—who visited Hydra in 1859 and remarked upon its 'multitudes of white marble houses gleaming on the fearsome barren cliffs' (50, author's translation).

Though other travellers had written about Hydra, when *The Colossus of Maroussi* appeared in 1941—soon to be widely available as an inexpensive paperback—it brought the impoverished island to the attention of an international readership like never before.

Patrick Leigh Fermor: Babylonian ziggurat

In Miller's wake, after the Second World War and the subsequent civil war had run their terrible course, more writers, artists and socialites enjoyed the hospitality of Ghikas and were inspired by his house and its island setting. Among visitors in the 1950s were the nomadic British writer Patrick Leigh Fermor and his partner, photographer Joan Raynor (later Joan Leigh Fermor), someone who knew about ruins. During the Second World War she had been employed as a photographer to work on the National Buildings Record, a project created to photograph important buildings that were considered 'vulnerable' to enemy attack during the war. After the London blitz of 1940 and 1941 much of her work involved photographing buildings in a ruined state, often prior to their demolition (Collins and Stewart; Fenwick), which recalls Rose Macaulay's fascination. Leigh Fermor and Ghikas had met in London in the 1940s and were to be lifelong friends. Leigh Fermor stayed at Ghikas's house for stretches of various lengths, sometimes when Ghikas was also there, while at other times Leigh Fermor, alone or with Raynor, had the place to himself.

When Leigh Fermor was staying on Hydra in 1953, he wrote to his publisher, Jock Murray, that the house was 'quite empty, very romantic and beautiful . . . I'm working hard on this new stuff' (Sisman 76). Notoriously prone to distractions, Leigh Fermor found that he worked very well in Ghikas's house:

the roof under which I did most work in the '50s was Niko Ghika's fine family ziggurat in Hydra . . . Apart from the exhilaration of progress, there was the delight of living in that still inviolate island—long may it remain so!—as empty of wheels as pre-Colombian America. We were living in the heart of a vast three-dimensional Ghika painting. (Arapoglou 62)

In 1954, Leigh Fermor boasted to Lawrence Durrell that being given the run of Ghikas's house was 'the best bit of high-level cadging I've done for years, a real haul' (Sisman 100). He described the house, and life in it, in a letter to Ann Fleming (wife of writer Ian Fleming) that same year:

It's a large house on a steep slope with descending terraces . . . The sun sets in the most spectacular way . . . and every night Joan and I watch it from the top terrace drinking ouzo, then eating late . . . by lamplight at the other end of the terrace . . . everything looks insanely beautiful . . . I've got a marvellous empty studio to work in, where I write away all day like a fire hydrant. (Sisman 93–94)

Leigh Fermor also informed Durrell that 'I'm sticking on in Niko's house as long as he'll let

me' and urged Durrell to 'come over and stay for a bit. It's the perfect Shangri-la for work' (Sisman 100). It wasn't all work, though, and Durrell was not the only friend to receive such an invitation. Leigh Fermor invited numerous associates from England and elsewhere to share his good fortune, reporting in a letter that: 'Over New Year . . . we had a great party of about twenty-seven starting at 9, going on til about 5' (Sisman 104). Among the many from a generation of (mostly British) writers and intellectuals who shared in the hospitality at Ghikas's house were writer Norman Mailer; classicists Rex Warner and Maurice Bowra; photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and Roloff Beny; architect Walter Gropius; historian Patrick Balfour; novelist and biographer Nancy Mitford; art historian Roger Hinks; critic Cyril Connolly; writer Barbara Skelton; travel writer and explorer Freya Stark; poet Stephen Spender; and publishers Jock and Diana Murray.

During his stay on Hydra through the winter of 1954–55, Leigh Fermor wrote most of *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* (1958), widely considered one of the outstanding travel books of the twentieth century. If Leigh Fermor was a lodgings cadger of the highest calibre, he also penned fine bread-and-butter letters. He wrote to Ghikas and Tiggie:

I think with immense nostalgia & gratitude of Hydra, where most of my book will have been written—in fact 1954–55 is the great *étape dans ma vie*. I didn't need to tell you both how we loved it and how valuable and important it was, because I think you know . . . without Hydra, the book would never have been written. (Sisman 112)

The rich, enduring friendship between Leigh Fermor (who eventually built a home in the Peloponnese), Ghikas and John Craxton (who settled on Crete) was documented in an exhibition held in 2017 at the Benaki Museum of Greek Culture in Athens and in 2018 at the British Museum in London under the title *Charmed Lives in Greece: Ghika, Craxton, Leigh Fermor*.

The Nolans: book of hours

In November 1955, the Australian painter Sidney Nolan and his wife, novelist and travel writer Cynthia, came to Hydra at the invitation of their fellow countrymen, the writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift (Underhill; McGuire 152–53; Kinnane 152). The Johnston–Clifts had settled on the island with their children earlier that year. After staying with them for a short period, the Nolans moved into the Ghikas house, which had recently been vacated by Leigh Fermor.

Johnston and Nolan shared a passion for Greek mythology, and Johnston loaned Nolan copies of Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* and Homer's *Iliad*, and also urged him to read an article, 'Return to a Legend,' by fellow Australian Alan Moorehead, which had appeared in the *New Yorker* earlier in the year (Johnston 1967; Kinnane 153). Moorehead, who was living on the nearby island of Spetses, where he was finalising his book *Gallipoli*, had given Johnston the article, which discussed the similarities between the campaigns of Troy and Gallipoli. As a result, Nolan began working 'as if in a ferment of excitement' (Johnston 1967) in his studio at the Ghikas mansion, producing sheaves of experimental sketches relating to the Trojan War. After he departed Greece, after a stay of some six months, these would eventually resolve themselves into his Gallipoli series, a theme to which he would return for over two decades. Johnston first saw some of Nolan's finished Gallipoli paintings in 1961, in London. He later recalled a 'howling meltemi-swept night in Ghika's house when all the kerosene lamps had

been dancing in a jump of shadows, and . . . [Sidney] had flung his sketches down and cried, “You can’t paint it! You need metal and a forge, it’s got to clang!” But he had painted it’ (467).

Nolan also completed landscape paintings of Hydra during his stay at the Ghikas mansion. One of these appeared in a photograph illustrating an item about the couple in the *Australian Women’s Weekly* (McKie 17). In this picture, Cynthia and Sidney are standing on the terrace of the house, with the village below them in the background; Sidney is apparently applying the finishing touches to a painting of the view from the terrace (Genoni and Dalziell 2018). Another photograph in the *Women’s Weekly* article shows Cynthia in the terraced gardens, posing on the stone steps under an almond tree, with the buttressed perimeter wall of the estate looming up behind her.

The garden seems to have held special significance for Cynthia. In a letter to her friend, Australian novelist and television writer Pat Flower (who had also visited the Johnstons on Hydra), Cynthia described the sectioned flower gardens of the Ghikas house as looking ‘like some book of hours’ (Kinnane 156). ‘I am happy, content, relaxed, at home as I haven’t been since eighteen,’ she continued. Like Miller, she was enraptured by the house and the island: ‘I am in love again, besotted, swooning . . . Every day the madness grows’ (Kinnane 156). Cynthia told Flower that Sidney:

would die of boredom if he was confined to any island, while I could spend my days within just such walls as would fill my hours with meditative scrapings and weedings . . . creating a garden that would become one of the wonders of the world . . . Such a garden is my thing. One over which I dwelt a lifetime, and which would take other lifetimes to grow entirely to perfection. (Kinnane 156–57)

While Johnston later recalled a companionable scene as he drank and discussed Homer with Nolan at dockside taverns, for Cynthia these evenings spent socialising were not unalloyed pleasure. She wrote to Flower that when she and her husband were joined at a cafe table, ‘I always notice a rush as they hasten to bring their chairs and place them jammed tight around S[idney] while I sit in a lonely state with three quarters of the table to myself’ (Kinnane 158). Thus sidelined, she perspicaciously observed the competitiveness of Hydra’s budding expatriate culture, where ‘everyone gives everyone else their things to read and wants to know what they think . . . and each in turn says Wonderful out of one side of their mouths and Crap out the other’ (Kinnane 158).

Cynthia told Flower that she enjoyed Johnston’s company only ‘in short doses’ and speculated that he ‘dislikes me intensely’ (Kinnane 157). She noted that she and Johnston had ‘qualities in common that he would not admit to’ (Kinnane 157). One trait they shared, but which Cynthia did not remark upon, was ill health. Cynthia had a stomach ulcer at the time (Underhill) and she and Johnston would both be treated for tuberculosis (O’Neill; McGuire 157; Kinnane 295), Johnston ultimately unsuccessfully. He would die of the disease in 1970.

Cynthia, on the other hand, praised Cliff in her correspondence with Flower, writing that ‘Charm is admirable truly . . . She swings along, shoulders back, great smile working . . . I can’t remember [knowing a pregnant woman] . . . who bore herself with such verve, with such an air’ (Kinnane 157). This flattery was not, however, returned in Cliff’s somewhat fictionalised memoir of her and Johnston’s first year on Hydra, *Peel Me a Lotus* (1959). Cliff uses the characters of ‘Ursula’ and ‘Henry Trevena’—recognisably the Nolans—to represent a contrasting kind of Australian couple. Whereas Charmian and George are presented as true

expatriates, committing themselves to the island and taking all the risks this entailed—buying property, enrolling their children in the local school, and, in spite of the limited health care services, giving birth there (of which much is made in *Peel Me a Lotus*)—the Trevenas, in sharp contrast, are transients, who

came here last November largely on our recommendation of the island as a place of great beauty which was cheap enough and quiet enough for Henry to put in an undistracted winter's work. Yet in spite of Henry's immediate passion for the high, harsh beauty of the mountains soaring up from the jewelled crescent of the port . . . and in spite of Ursula's constantly reiterated intention of refusing to budge ever again, these two are only temporary islanders. (18)

Assigned this role in Clift's story, the characterisations of Ursula and Henry are almost necessarily somewhat snide. Ursula—who, of the four Australians, is the only one who has not come to Hydra to paint or write a book—bears the brunt of this. Ursula is 'worn out' (Clift 19); 'hunched in withdrawn and angular concentration' (21); she 'yawns and yawns as she hunches down into her coat and broods' (41); her face is 'ravaged' (64); she 'seldom appears in the port in daytime—finding it more comfortable . . . to send Henry for supplies while she lies on her bed reading Proust or writing her interminable letters to people who might possibly be useful' (40). Nancy Underhill, Sidney Nolan's biographer, points out that Cynthia needed to write to gallery managers, agents and possible buyers since the Nolans depended on the sale of paintings to sustain them—and this was all work that fell to Cynthia. Clift portrays Henry/Sidney giving little thought to money or other practicalities, leaving such matters to his wife to sort out, yet he enjoys living well, with 'faith in his own philosophy of always having the best, whether you can pay for it or not' (44).

In *Peel Me a Lotus*, Johnston and Clift pay a visit to the Trevenas at the Ghikas house. From the port of Hydra to the Ghikas mansion, at the higher, furthest west, reaches of the town is a stiff uphill walk through crooked, stepped stone lanes. The lofty rooms of the grand house are described as having tiled stoves, 'beds with inner-spring mattresses . . . fine carved furniture, and rare carpets' (41), and there was that rarest of conveniences on Hydra, a flush toilet. It was luxurious by local standards.

The one creative endeavour that Clift allows Ursula/Cynthia in *Peel Me a Lotus*—gardening at the Ghikas house—is depicted as pathetic, futile and even destructive:

she is indefatigably tearing up the old neglected garden that surrounds the house so that she might at last begin on her ambitious project of replanting with forget-me-nots, sweet alicia, and various other herbaceous plants which she has ordered in seed from England. It seems sad that none of these flowers are likely to thrive on a mountain rock through a parching summer, so that even this, her one real longing to be creative, is almost certain to end perversely in destruction. (42)

When the Johnstons arrive at the house, Ursula climbs 'painfully down from the high garden where she had been uprooting some innocent wild bulbs that offended her' (42). Whereas Ursula/Cynthia is associated, however malevolently, with the vast terraced gardens outside, Henry/Sidney is depicted as being engaged in *real* creativity in the studio, where he has 'spread out his winter's work for inspection: five hundred small sketches in oil paint' (42). Depicting islands, rocks, goats, thorns, shields and figures from Greek mythology, 'The sketches are terribly impressive . . . Henry might well turn out to be one of the really important artists' (42).

George Johnston would also base one of his characters on Sidney Nolan: Tom Kiernan in *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969), Johnston's semi-autobiographical account of his family's years on Hydra (Kinnane 160). While Johnston was writing the book, Clift had worried deeply about how she was represented in it (Brown 194–98; Kinnane 280). Cynthia Nolan remarked to a friend at the time, 'Poor Charm. George is killing her with that book!' (Kinnane 276). The remark was prescient, as Clift took her life with an overdose of barbiturates in 1969, just before the book was published. Her sad demise created a link with Cynthia that they had struggled to establish in life, when Cynthia also chose to overdose on barbiturates in 1976 (O'Neill), as did their mutual friend Pat Flower in 1977 (Lever).

A spark in the night

By 1960 several foreign couples had settled on Hydra to live and write or paint, and more were trickling in. Ghikas—Greek but also international—was a key figure for the expatriate colony that was establishing itself (Genoni and Dalziell 166; Sherman 2018). Ghikas took some credit himself for foreign interest in the island, tracing it back to the visits he received in the 1930s (Arapoglou 56). The fact that Ghikas did not have an open-door policy added to his mystique and that of his mansion. This is illustrated by a commonly repeated anecdote involving the destruction of the Ghikas house and a man who became the island's most famous resident.

The young Canadian poet Leonard Cohen, who was not yet a musical sensation, first heard of Hydra in London, in 1960, from Jacob Rothschild, the Fourth Baron Rothschild, of the European banking dynasty (Nadel 75; Simmons 79). Rothschild's mother Barbara Hutchinson was soon to become Ghikas's second wife, and Rothschild encouraged Cohen to visit them on Hydra, promising to write his mother a letter to pave the way for Cohen (Nadel 75). Some time after Cohen arrived on Hydra, he went to the Ghikas mansion as Rothschild had recommended, only to be firmly rebuffed at the door by one of Jacob's sisters (Nadel 77). As Cohen's biographer, Ira Nadel, relates the story, 'Angered by this reception, Cohen left, casting a curse upon the house' (77). The story goes on: 'while wandering back and forth on the terrace of his own house' late one evening in 1961, 'Cohen was startled to hear an explosion and see a fire high up on the mountain. The Ghikas home had exploded! He felt his curse had taken effect' (77). Cohen used to tell friends on Hydra this tale himself.

In Nadel's account, the fire, which destroyed the house, was caused by 'a careless watchman [who] . . . had misplaced some kerosene, which had ignited' (77). In an article entitled 'A Fire Destroys the Work of a Lifetime: The Paintings of Hadjikyriakos Ghika in His Hydra Mansion,' the 10 September 1961 edition of the Greek newspaper *Eleftheria* attributed the conflagration to 'a spark in the night' (Anon. 4, author's translation). The fire occurred on the night of 5–6 September (4), while Ghikas and Hutchinson were in London. The *Eleftheria* article noted that the mansion had survived the earthquake that rattled Hydra in 1769. It also mentioned the lack of fire-fighting services on this island without water and motorised vehicles, and lamented the destruction of the surfaces and objects that Ghikas had personally decorated in the house, such as door frames, walls, stools and cupboards.

In an account that originally appeared in the Greek newspaper *Kathimerini* in 1993 (Michalarou), Ghikas offered some details about the cause of the fire. He said a watchman had become drunk at a taverna and, upon his return to the mansion, had carelessly tossed away his cigarette. The watchman fell asleep and awoke to find that 'the flames were coming out of the roof and had already burned three rooms' (Michalarou). The recent publication of a letter by

John Craxton to Ghikas confirms this version of events and yields even more details. Ghikas had dispatched Craxton, who was intimately familiar with the house, to Hydra after the fire to sort through the remains. Not long before, Craxton had helped Ghikas decorate the house for Barbara Hutchinson, his wife-to-be with whom he was deeply in love. The two painters had applied faux marbling to the walls, painted the main bedroom with panels of symbols, embellished the woodwork, and decorated tables and chests (Arapoglou 70). ‘All this is done for Barbara,’ wrote Ghikas in a postscript added to the bottom of Craxton’s letter to Joan and Patrick Leigh Fermor (Arapoglou 70).

Surveying the destruction and speaking to the locals, Craxton reported from Hydra to Ghikas:

I have a rough idea of what happened. Foti got in about 11:30, went to his room, took his clothes off (it was a hot night, fairly windless) & as is his wont went to lie down on the terrace on one of those beds that were there. He passed out as usual & in two hours the flames that originated from a simple cigarette [dropped in his own room] started to roar down the passage & into the dining room. (‘Letter,’ punctuation added)

According to his letter, the house had been burning for several hours by the time it was noticed and help arrived: ‘as you can imagine by the time he [Foti, the watchman] woke up the downstairs passage & rooms must have been an inferno that probably not even fire extinguishers could have put out.’ Craxton believed that someone ‘rushed in at the last minute & saved the things that were vital,’ while the police ‘were on the spot fairly soon and . . . were very helpful & worked very hard to save things.’ Craxton included an annotated sketch documenting details of the damage.

So we have the highly combustible combination of a drunken man and a cigarette—and, for the supernaturally inclined, a curse. But, as my father used to intone as we went by the Ghikas ruin, *the plot thickens*. A biography of Leigh Fermor ascribed the fire to the housekeeper (Cooper 317), a claim repeated in the *Australian* (Green), while a biographer of Joan Raynor (Fenwick) pointed a finger at the gardener. According to these versions of the story, the fire was deliberately lit, with the culprit purportedly motivated by loyalty to Tiggie, the first Mrs Ghikas, after Ghikas’s marriage to Hutchinson. Craxton’s inquiry, as we have seen, produced a less gothic (and more plausible) cause of the fire.

For decades, it has been widely believed that many of Ghikas’s paintings were destroyed by the fire. Shortly afterwards the Greek newspaper *Eleftheria* emphasised the destruction of the ‘work of a lifetime.’ According to the newspaper article, the major loss was Ghikas’s paintings: ‘much of the work of Hadjikyriakos-Ghika was burned together with his home.’ Another notable Greek painter, Spyros Vassiliou, was quoted as commenting that ‘The real disaster . . . is how many valuable paintings were lost’ (4). A book about Hydra published in 1965, just four years later, asserted that ‘most of the works of the eminent Hydriot painter Chadjikyriakos Ghikas were lost’ when the house burned down (Sofianos 68). Hearsay still wafting about the island is that the villagers absconded with whatever furniture they could rescue for themselves and left the paintings to burn. Some believe that that the paintings themselves were stolen, a view expressed in print in a note by Alan Massie in a volume of Bettina Massie’s poetry. Such is Hydra’s dark rumour mill, to which anyone who has lived on this island can attest.

Craxton’s letters, newly come to light with their inclusion in the book *Charmed Lives in Greece*, published in association with the museum exhibit mentioned earlier, tell an entirely different

story about the fate of the paintings. Craxton reassured Ghikas and Barbara that ‘only one of Ghika’s paintings burned,’ and he provided his friend with a list of rescued artwork, including a number of paintings.

Photographs of Ghikas in his Hydra home, taken by *LIFE* photographer James Burke the year before the fire (see Dalziell and Genoni for details about Burke’s Hydra photographs), show the decorated door frames, as well as many pieces of art on the walls, including paintings recognizably by Ghikas himself. If Craxton was correct, only one of these paintings was ruined in the fire and the rest were rescued (not stolen). It is possible that some had been shipped to London where Ghikas had recently had a successful show at the Lefevre Gallery, according to an item about the fire in the *Evening Standard* shortly after the disaster (Arapoglou 76).

Less murky than the fate of the paintings is the effect that the fire had on Ghikas. In the *Eleftheria* article published days after the fire, Ghikas is quoted as saying, ‘Hydra is finished for me.’ In a much later interview published in the newspaper *Kathimerini*, Ghikas claimed that he never set foot on Hydra after the fire, as all was destroyed and the magnificent eighteenth-century mansion could not be resurrected. He said that he had spent his childhood there, had lived there with two wives, and had worked prodigiously there: ‘I couldn’t see it again’ (Michalarou). In fact, Ghikas did return for brief visits to Hydra, and was filmed in the port for a documentary (Maros), but he never saw the ruins of his house (Arapoglou 76). When asked why he abandoned Hydra, Ghikas responded, ‘I never left; they kicked me out’ (Michalarou). What he meant by this is another mystery of the story.

After the fire, Craxton wrote to Ghikas: ‘I look at the ruins and imagine rebuilding them,’ but perhaps it was ‘a sign from the gods to move on to other places.’ Ghikas resettled on Corfu. When Craxton went back, heavy hearted, to the ruin of the house on Hydra two years after its destruction, he ‘pushed open the front gate and wandered around Ghika’s old studio. Instead of easels and canvases there were now large bales of hay, fodder for Barbayannis’s donkeys’ (Arapoglou 76). The ruins are used for livestock to this day.

A painting by Ghikas of a moonlit harbour scene, entitled *Nocturnal Hydra* and dated 1967, reveals that he was still being inspired by Hydra years after he left.

The ruin

Your ruined villa still
guards the broken hill
observing avarice and fire

Thus begins the poem ‘For Ghika,’ by the American poet Bettina Massie (76). A note in the book by the poet’s husband declares that the couple used to filch figs and almonds from the garden (219). The Massies were not the only ones to enter the grounds of the ruin, or to make the attempt. Swedish writer and artist Henry Denander admitted that he tried to get inside the remains of the Ghikas estate but never managed it:

My friend the American painter and I dream of getting inside the house. He wants to take his easel there and paint the view from the terrace. I want to go inside and see if maybe the table tennis set is still there; I want to have a game on the very table where Henry Miller and Ghikas used to play. (np)

Ghikas is gone but the ruin remains, still inspiring poetry, still an object of wonder, speculation and gossip. Old Hydra hands cannot pass by the estate without thinking, however fleetingly, of Ghikas and the fire. Intact, the house fomented works of art and literature and was among the particles around which the island's reputation as a haven for artists coalesced, like pearl, starting in the 1930s. As the ruins are absorbed into the mountainside, Ghikas and his mansion have become absorbed into the island's mythology.

Nearly 60 years after its destruction, the Ghikas mansion is gradually becoming an old ruin, weathered and overrun with wildflowers, home to donkeys and goats, and yet somehow still evocative of dapper Nikos Ghikas and that period of Hydra's history in which he was a pivotal figure. Those who did not personally experience the island or that particular house at that time may know them now through books such as Miller's *The Colossus of Maroussi*, Clift's *Peel Me a Lotus* and George Johnston's *Closer to the Sun*, as well as letters, paintings and even songs. The fate of the Ghikas house as a recent ruin in a place—both the island and the country—pockmarked with old ruins lends it a special poignancy. Even as a mostly flattened, burnt-out shell the house still sparks flights of fancy, causing us to ponder the dark allure of ruins in our individual and collective imaginations.

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