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# Pages on Dionysios Solomos

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The editors would like to express their gratitude to Andras Berkes for his heroic efforts to make this journal readable.

This issue is dedicated to Veronica and Andras.

The University of Sydney

### TWO ESSAYS

I.

### T.S. ELIOT, GIORGOS SEFERIS AND THE ANZACS

The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot was published eighty years ago and with the passing away of the last Anzac, Alec Campbell, it is timely to look at the reference Giorgos Seferis makes to the Anzacs, one of his rare references to Australia. Lines 199-201 of the "Fire Sermon" section read thus:

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter And on her daughter They washed their feet in soda water

When Eliot annotated lines 199-201, his sentence ran thus: "I do not know the origin of the ballad from which these lines are taken: it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia" Though some changes in the annotations did occur in later editions of *The Waste Land*, this note did not vary thereafter.

Eliot's collected letters do not reveal any acquaintance of his living in Sydney or visiting there before 1922, nor does his biography by Peter Ackroyd.<sup>2</sup> So the reporter of the ballad is unknown, it seems. But we can credit the reporting of these lines from Sydney at some date before 1922, because they had been around in Australia since at least 1900. Ian Turner in his *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* records it in Sydney in those years, and in Victoria, for example in Bendigo.<sup>3</sup> It was not a ballad but a children's song: the words were sung, Turner found in the 1960s, to the tune of *Little Redwing*. The full version given by Turner, and presumably that conveyed to Eliot, ran:

Oh, the moon shines bright on Mrs Porter And on her daughter, and on her daughter; They both washed their feet in soda water, To keep them clean, and so they oughter. Kane and Fowke give another version, featuring not Mrs Porter but Charlie Chaplin, which was current in the same years in Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Presumably there were other variants round the world.

We will leave it to Eliot scholars to demystify Eliot's use of an Australian children's rhyme. However, in Seferis' notes to, *H Erimi Chora*, his full translation of *The Waste Land*, of both the text and Eliot's notes, the first edition of which was in 1949, Mrs Porter took on another lease of life. Seferis translated lines 199-201 and Eliot's note, then added his own note, which read thus:

"We are dealing with a folksong. I happened to hear its story from a distinguished man of letters who fought in the Middle East during the Great War. Mrs Porter was at that time in Cairo, the madam of a brothel notorious among the imperial troops, the Anzacs as they were called. The brothel came to its end with a terrific fire one riotous night, but the song, then much more improper, lived on and touched glory in the very bloody attack on the Dardanelles; undaunted the soldiers sang it while amid the withering fire they rushed against the barbed wire. I don't know whether Eliot knew – it seems unlikely to me – the whole story."

The contents of Seferis' note would seem to be a fabulation.

- 1. On the face of it, it is most improbable that Australian children were singing about a Cairo madam fifteen years before the Great War. But the connection with Eliot is supposedly that this madam was called Mrs Porter. Can it possibly be, that when the Australians arrived in Cairo they found a brothel run by a woman with the same name they used to bounce a ball to when they were youngsters? It is not impossible; but according to James Barrett (later Sir James, Chancellor of The University of Melbourne) there was not a single Englishwoman among the prostitutes ministering to the troops in Egypt. Women of all breeds there were, but thank goodness not any English.<sup>6</sup> The women Barrett was talking about were of low grade, so that there might have been expensive call-girls in the purlieus of Shepheard's and the other big hotels in the city, and superior brothels. Here indeed a Mrs Porter with her daughter may have plied her ancient trade. But if there were such sex-workers, they were almost certainly servicing the officers and not the men; and were therefore unlikely to provoke riots.
- 2. It is most unlikely that any ANZAC sang during the dawn disembarkation at Gallipoli. There is nothing in any collection of soldier folklore from the Great War (such as *The Long Trail* by Eric Partridge, or Graham Seal's *Digger Folklore and Verse of World War One*) that hints at this song's ever being sung by troops in Palestine or France or anywhere.<sup>7</sup> Certainly the books on Gallipoli, including the soldier's eye view that is Carlyon's recent book, do not record any community singing amid the Turkish fire.<sup>8</sup> As to the supposition that a couple of individuals may have chosen to sing very quietly, and chose a children's playground song, it is

just ridiculous. Lastly, at Gallipoli there was no barbed wire because the Turks didn't dream that any invasion would take place at a beach with a cliff, and in fact it was by error that the troops invaded the site later called Anzac Cove.

The facts are simply these. Australian troops were based in Egypt throughout World War I, both for training and for what came to be called "rest and recreation". These young men, most of them overseas for the first time, responded vigorously to the strangeness of the East. The Army provided few facilities for leisure, so the soldiers, with money in their pockets turned for their amusement to the bars, bazaars and brothels in Cairo.

On Good Friday 1915 Australian and New Zealand soldiers sacked the red-light quarter around the Bab-al-Wazir, one of medieval Cairo's gates, near the necropolis or City of the Dead and in the shadow of the Citadel. For the previous few months the quarter had never known such a roaring trade. There were thousands of troops stationed in and around Cairo, among whom were the Australians, and leave to visit the city seems to have been liberally granted.<sup>9</sup>

Knowing they were to depart to fight the Turks, though not knowing quite where, a number of Australian soldiers manifested an access of puritanism exacerbated by its being Easter, and ran amok in the Bab-al-Wazir, wrecking and torching the brothels. The accusation that it was Greeks who had spiked the liquor [and not just men encountering ouzo and raki for the first time in their lives] had unfortunate consequences afterwards, especially when it was combined with the refusal of Greece to declare war on Germany and its allies. In December 1915 troops in Fremantle off a ship went on a rampage among the German and Greek-owned shops in the city. It was clear that they had been supplied with a list of the establishments: a number of Greek establishments were wrecked, causing havoc among the oyster bars. These depredations in Perth were, however, much less serious than the riot in Cairo. 10

C.E.W. Bean, who was the official war correspondent in Egypt and who later produced the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, reported on the Good Friday events, and the poet C.J. Dennis, the author of the extremely popular *Sentimental Bloke* (1915), wrote a long poem on them which was, however, suppressed by censorship for many years.<sup>11</sup> The ANZACS were not happy to have the story read back home.<sup>12</sup> This poem, "The Battle of the Wazzir", was written in the Melbourne argot of the period, which Dennis made his linguistic vehicle, and much of it has with the years become incomprehensible.<sup>13</sup>

The poem tells of the excitement of the Diggers when they got to Cairo with its exotic life, and especially the charms of the prostitutes. But these things were dangerous: "When they wandered frum the newest an' the cleanest land on earth, An' the filth uv ages met 'em, it wus 'ard". There were many men who acquired a venereal disease (one gathers), like "Bill from up the Billabong" who had always "lived an' fought an' acted clean", but now "'e's down in livin' 'ell, an' marked fer shame" (because all cases of venereal disease were instantly shipped back to Australia in disgrace).

The poem goes on about the Diggers' mounting anger and then the outbreak of violence:

Frum a little crazy balkiney that clawed agin a wall
A chair come crashin' down into the street;
Then a woman's frightened screamin' give the sign to
bounce the ball,
An' then there came a sudden rush uv soljers' feet.
There's a glimpse uv frightened faces as a door caved in
an' fell';
An' the Wazzir wus a 'owlin' screamin' 'ell.

Pianos and sofas and "giddy duchess pairs" were hurled out of windows and set alight as "the Wazzir's Great Spring Cleanin' starts as last". The police were helpless, and when the fire brigades arrived the rioters cut their hoses. "That old Wazzir'd 'ad the scourin' uv its life", C. J. Dennis (or at least his persona, "Ginger Mick") concluded. This riot, and another in the following July, are discussed in Brugger's *Australians and Egypt 1914-1919*.<sup>14</sup>

So where did Seferis get the idea from? Well, we can probably identify the day: on Sunday 10 October 1946; and the place: at his favourite taverna in Piraeus; and how: in a conversation that Seferis had with three friends, Rex Warner, George Katsimbalis, and Maurice Cardiff, together with a visitor to Athens whom Seferis only identifies as "B". In his diary, published as *Meres Tou 1945-51*, on October 13, 1946, he wrote:

"Yesterday I discussed Eliot with B. I met him one Friday evening in late September. We had a meal together at Basilaina's in Piraeus: Rex, Maurice Cardiff, Katsimbalis. Frightful talking machine. Among the few Europeans who still remain in Europe. European and traditional, moreover: he is a Hellenist. He speaks with familiarity about poets, from Pasternak to Lorca. He knows unprintable stories about the famous men of his time... We speak about *The Waste Land*. More especially/particularly about Mrs Porter and her daughter, he relates: It was a brothel in Cairo; the Anzacs torched it. Katsimbalis has told us this story many times. Mrs Porter was the madam of that famous brothel, and the words of the song that Eliot used were not

They wash their feet in soda water... but something much less printable."<sup>16</sup>

The idea that the original little poem was indecent ("much less printable" and "much more improper") may have been one of those details. But what on earth can Seferis have understood by this? Southam reported that, "Years later, Eliot emphasized that the soda water is not the aerated drink but bicarbonate of soda solution."<sup>17</sup> This does not seem very naughty, unless it contains an arcane allusion. But could "B." have referred rather to "Condy's water"? A swab with a solution of Condy's crystals was regularly used as a prophylactic in Egyptian brothels. Gary Simes' *Dictionary of Australian Underworld Slang* gives a number of expressions,

such as "maleesh condy's" (meaning, skip the preliminaries), and "condy boy" (meaning, a factotum in a brothel), which became part of the Digger slang. Can it be, that in the version "B." told, the soda water used by Mrs Porter and her daughter was instead Condy's water, and it was not their feet which were douched?<sup>18</sup>

What is clear is that the story was well-known to Seferis because he had been told it by Katsimbalis, who had a vast budget of stories and anecdotes which he would tell over and over again to anyone he could prevail upon to listen. The oddity is that all the rest had been in Cairo in the last few years and could have heard the story; Katsimbalis alone had not been in Cairo. But "B." told much the same story that evening in Piraeus and Seferis accepted it; possibly because it now came with some details that Katsimbalis had not supplied.

The conclusion is that it was quite illegitimate/unwarranted to link the lines about Mrs Porter with the ANZACS. Perhaps the most important of Seferis' rare references to Australia proves to be fallacious. Eliot's note to *The Waste Land* gives a nod in the direction of Australians, but there was absolutely no warrant for Seferis' informant to spin a tale about the Bab-al-Wazir in connection with line 199, nor any good reason for Seferis to proffer such a story in his own annotation. The only justification can be the heady combination of Cairo, drunken soldiers, sex, and arson – even though not true, it made a great story and Seferis could not resist telling it.

The last twist in this story seems to be Brian Southam's having encountered the story through his Greek contacts, either through Seferis's note to the *Waste Land* or directly from Katsimbalis himself, and his retelling it in 1960, in his own standard and ubiquitous work, *A Students' Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot.* Brian Southam says that: "Eliot notes that these lines come from a ballad popular among Australian troops in the First World War; notably, it was sung as they landed in Gallipoli in 1915", but does not indicate the place where Eliot notes this.<sup>19</sup> Thus Seferis' myth-making became part of Anglophone culture.

II.

#### SPORT AND THE GLOBAL GREEKS

In modern times the Greeks, like the Irish, have had an invisible empire: no overseas colonies but a worldwide society of migrants and their descendants that has been held together by family connections, sentiment, and culture. In the Americas, in South Africa and Australia, in Germany, and formerly in Turkey and Egypt, settlements of Greeks have formed which far outnumber the Greeks back in Greece itself. Each of these migrant settlements exhibits the interaction of the Greek background with the particular host culture in which it

finds itself. Greeks from Johannesburg can see much they hold in common with Greeks from New York, but there are differences!<sup>20</sup>

In most of the literature on the various Greek settlements, the means by which commonalities are maintained are said to be the church and the school, which of course in many instances are the same thing, as the schools are run by the church (except in Greece).<sup>21</sup> This is partly the ecclesiastical propaganda with which we are familiar – "krypha scholeia" and such legends – but it is also true that outside of Hellas at least part of the community building through education was done by the church, though especially in Asia Minor the sylloghoi/literary societies were equally important.<sup>22</sup> Often enough the role of Greek newspapers and other media as unifying forces is also acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> But hardly anybody seems to have noted that sport is one of the unifying forces. Whether it is the famous Neon coffee shop in Omonia Square or the little clubs/lesches in Brooklyn and Balmain, the Greeks are reading sporting papers and talking sport: the achievements of Panathenaikos and the play of the home team last Sunday. It has always been so, and it will continue to be so into the foreseeable future.

Incidentally, one can ask why this should be so. There are innumerable discussions on chain migration, the family and the Greek Orthodox Church, but hardly a book mentions the phenomenon of sport. Why don't they?

It is easy enough to see that foreigners who look at the Greeks (whether at home or in the diaspora) are actually extremely interested in folkloric survivals, at cultural items that are *peculiarly* Greek and are presumed have lasted since the year dot. They are especially interested in Greek dancing, for that reason, and rembetika.<sup>24</sup> They see nothing worth studying in football stadiums and swimming pools, which are *modern* and *global*; not even to the extent of conceiving of these things as part of today's folklore. They go to cafes and see men playing with their *kombouloghis*, and engrossed in tavli/backgammon, but they do not succeed in hearing them talk about that useless goalie and those tennis tantrums.

It is less easy to understand why the Greeks themselves do not think their sporting activities worth writing about. It can be suggested that the intelligentsia and the academics who perform *Kulturkritik* on matters Greek are not themselves sporting people, and have something of the snobbery which privileges intellectual activities and disparages physical activities, not yet, it seems, even 45 years after Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, having discovered that a fascination with popular culture is fashionable. <sup>25</sup> Two of the very few scholarly books on Greek sport are Giatsis' *The history of Greek sport throughout the Ages* and Linardos' football club histories of Ethnikos and of Panhellenios. On Australia there is an article by Doumanis in the text *Sporting Immigrants* and sections in Giannakis' *Megisti in the Antipodes* and Tamis' *The Immigration and Settlement of Macedonian Greeks in Australia*; and my own two texts. <sup>26</sup>

In any case, in every land where Greeks have settled, we find along with the church and the school and the lesche, sports clubs and sporting functions. Sports have been one of the most

important agencies of socialisation into Hellenism. The Greeks have always been athletes and interested in sports. This was true of the Greeks in Homer's time and the Greeks today. There is in fact, a tradition of Greek sporting activities which has been continuous down the centuries, unbroken through the history of the Greek people, which otherwise has been full of changes and revolutions.<sup>27</sup>

Even during the long Turkish centuries, we can find evidence of sports being played, which in fact can be shown to have an unbroken connection with the popular games of ancient times. In the village of a Sunday, in the market towns on Saints' days, there would be rude/unsophisticated competition in wrestling, in throwing the stone, in running, in tug-o'-war. These became formalised in such centers as Cydonia (Aivali), where the college students engaged in athletic exercises that became surrounded by all sorts of classical / Olympic decor and ceremony. These were carried to Athens after 1821 and grew into the Zappas Games (1859, 1870, 1875 and 1889). And in Turkey itself they survived in Smyrna and other centres until 1922.<sup>28</sup>

This was particularly important because non-Turks were not allowed in the Turkish army until after the Young Turk reforms after 1909, so that the Greeks of Asia Minor were not receiving military training like their fellows in Hellas. Therefore a series of gymnastic and athletic clubs, of which the most famous was Panionios in Smyrna, were created to build up Greek bodies and effectively to train a paramilitary force. The Panionian Club was under the patronage of the archbishop of Smyrna, Chrysostomos, and every few years it organised athletic carnivals which ended up attracting teams from Hellas and from Egypt.<sup>29</sup> Similar sporting organisations for the Turks were only begun a few years after that, in emulation of the Greek enterprises.

In Egypt the large and extremely rich Greek colony was in advance of the Greeks back home. They didn't have the Olympic Games, true; but they had sports clubs and sportsfields beyond almost anything that Greece could show. Egypt was Greece's southern frontier: unlike in USA and Australia, the Greeks did not go there as labourers but as merchants and professionals. The unique legal arrangements in Egypt meant that all non-Egyptians constituted the country's elite: most of the medical personnel in Egypt were Greeks. This colony survived almost intact until 1956, but in the next few years was reduced to a very few.<sup>30</sup>

The first sporting club formed in Egypt was Milon Athletic Club in 1873. The Alexandria Greek Sportmen's Association was formed in 1908 to coordinate the Greek clubs' sporting activities of the cities 8 major sporting and soccer clubs. They included the clubs: Alexandria, Ajax, Milon, Apollon, Olympia, Olympiakos, Graduates and Greek Sports Club. Two years later this organisation played a significant role in the organisation of the first Egyptian Panhellenic Games where all Greeks and Greek organisation in the Levant were invited to participate. With 17 sporting clubs participating, the Greek national stadium at Shiatbi was

crowded daily for three days. A full Olympic program, which included a marathon race, took place.<sup>31</sup>

The development in the United States was odd. Early studies of the Greeks in American cities do not portray them as engaging in any sort of sports.<sup>32</sup> That is the first-generation immigrants were not noted as having a great interest in sports. But because they played in every other Greek settlement, the claims that they did not play in the USA must just be a function of the lack of interest noted above, both by observers at the time and by contemporary historians. The younger generations grew up in a school system, which was increasingly cultivating physical education and in a society where sport was becoming very important and big money. These descendants of Greeks had an interest/involvement in sports that almost certainly surpassed that of the Greeks of Hellas.

The list of sporting activities for Greek-Americans was substantial with the main Panhellenic activity being the annual Greek-American Panhellenic Games. The Greek-American Athletic Club Lowell organised the first such Games in Lowell in 1907 and Greek societies were invited to send athletes to participate. At the 1908 Games sporting clubs represented primarily the various Greek communities of smaller towns and cities of New England such as Lynn, Springfield, Haverhill and Lowell. These Games grew in size and importance and rotated around the various American cities.

The pinnacle Games of this period was the Panhellenic Games of 1927, organised by the New York Hermes Club. The Games included a full Olympic Games track and field program and a soccer tournament where New York teams Hermes and Astiras played in the final. Meanwhile the Greek-American Panhellenic Boxing and Wrestling Championships took place each year in the Christmas period. The wealthy Greek-American Associations transformed America into the centre of Greek sport in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>33</sup>

A word about Germany. Whereas in other countries immigrants were viewed as eventual citizens and the second generation educated to the host country's culture, in Germany the guest-workers (so called) were intended to be disposable and never to be considered Germans. It was therefore very important that the Greeks in Germany should keep their ethnic identity very strong and their children socialised as Greeks, so far as possible, in view of the time when the German miracle would end and they would all be packed off home.<sup>34</sup>

Sporting clubs and sporting activities took on a national/ethnic importance that they had not had since the days of "Panionian" and the other organisations in Turkey. Generally the Greeks of Germany only established soccer clubs. There were some exceptions such as Olympia Stuttgart, which was involved in volleyball, swimming, athletics as well as soccer. Baden Württenberg was the centre not only for Greeks but also for their soccer teams.

In the area of Baden Württenberg, the Greeks were not allowed to join the local German competitions so they took the initiative in adapting and forming their own teams and

eventually established an all Greek soccer association – the Soccer Union of Baden Württenberg (EPEBB) in 1964 in Stuttgart. Some of the founding clubs included Odyssey Esslingen, Poseidon Macraingen, PAOK Ludwigsburg and Olympia Geislingen. Reaching its peak in 1973, this association was comprised of 80 competitive Greeks soccer teams. In all, over 100 different teams participated throughout its existence. The importance of soccer to Greeks in West Germany is indicated by the formation of the Union of Greek Referees Baden Württenberg (EEDPBB) in 1982 to officiate in the Greek league. The first referee school intake of 32 students took place in January 1980, in the Greek Hall of the city of Leonberg.<sup>35</sup>

And now a word about the sports themselves. Immigrants are not rich and it is years/decades before any diaspora community can afford the appropriate facilities. They begin with sports that require little equipment and investment, like wrestling, boxing and running. These sports have also been privileged in Greek history. There is no swimming or cycling. They then proceed to team sports that require considerable cash such as soccer and basketball.

Of course there have been thousands of Greeks, especially of the second and third generations, who have become involved in sports outside the narrow confines of Greek organisations. There have been top baseballers such as Milt Pappas and top Gridiron players such as Harry Aggannis to name a couple. These have sometimes been treated as traitors to the cause but they are more charitably seen as carrying on the passion for sports that has been an integral part of Greek culture.

We can therefore assert with confidence that sport deserves more careful attention in the study of Greek culture, both as a symbolic reinforcement of social cohesion and as a material activity that has involved Greek men over many generations, ever since the days when Achilles could think of no fitter way to celebrate the life and death of his beloved Patroclus than to organise an athletics meet.

#### NOTES

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