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# COLIN THUBRON'S *JOURNEY INTO CYPRUS* AND THE LITERARY DEPICTION OF CYPRUS AS A NON-EUROPEAN COUNTRY

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## Abstract

Throughout his travelogue *Journey into Cyprus* (1975) Colin Thubron insisted on the negation of a pro-European feeling for Cyprus. After crisscrossing the island in 1972, he presented Cyprus as a conglomerate of cultures and civilizations (Hellenic, Phoenician, Ottoman, Egyptian, Italian, etc.), a fact that has provided the country with its uniqueness. However, despite the wide majority of the Greek population, the Hellenic element is minimised in Thubron's travel account. According to the English writer, Cyprus is more Levantine than Greek, more Byzantine than Lusignan (French) or Venetian (Italian), more eastern than western, more Asian than European. Never in the whole book is the country's European identity affirmed, as for Thubron the Lusignan or Venetian influences have remained confined within the aristocratic and royal minority and have therefore hardly permeated the lay population of Cyprus. Curiously enough, in spite of the 82-year British occupation of Cyprus (1878-1960), the author hardly mentions anything that the ex-colony may have inherited from her metropolis, "apart from chips". The reasons for Colin's negation of a European feeling for Cyprus may be attributed to the subtle anti-British feeling that Thubron perceived in the opinions of the Greek Cypriots that he met, most of whom believed that Britain had supported the Turkish Cypriots in the encouragement of the inter-communal strife between the two main ethnic and religious communities of the island, Greeks and Turks, and in the Turkish Cypriots' quest for the partition of Cyprus.

Key words: Colin Thubron – *Journey into Cyprus* – Cyprus – Greek Cypriots – Turkish Cypriots - Europe

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As far as I know, little scholarly criticism –apart from the odd book review and Jim Bowman's *Narratives of Cyprus* (2015)<sup>1</sup>– has been published on Colin Thubron's literary work, being as he is a living and still highly productive writer. His novels do not seem to be so widely recognized, but his travel books are, to the extent that he is considered to be one of the leading and most successful Anglo-American travel writers nowadays, together with Bill Bryson, Bruce Chatwin, William Dalrymple, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Norman Lewis, Jan Morris, Eric Newby and Paul Theroux. Thubron's travel and fictional production have received the attention of numerous reviewers from the 1980s onwards. Alas, his *Journey into Cyprus* was first published as early as in 1975, when he was virtually unknown as a travel writer.

*Journey into Cyprus* (1975) is,<sup>2</sup> according to Lewis (2002:1),<sup>3</sup> Thubron's first mature travel book, the one in which he found his voice. It is the account of a six-hundred-mile trek on foot through the island barely one year and a half before the Turkish invasion of 1974, during the spring and summer of 1972. In his book Thubron intertwines personal anecdotes with the history of the island (emphasizing the capacity of the Cypriot culture to survive through centuries of foreign invasions) and the development of myth, mainly that of Aphrodite. By being both erudite and accessible the English writer is sure to cover the two main types of travel reader. First, it caters for those who enjoy a more learned approach to the travel phenomenon and hope to use the book as a substitute for a guidebook, as it provides the reader and would-be visitor in Cyprus with the amount of information needed to benefit from a *de facto* journey. Secondly, it is also for those "armchair travellers" who enjoy a more anecdotal and popular approach to the journey where the human <sup>4</sup>element is more evident. The fact that the book is based on a walking journey throughout most regions of the country invariably gives the writer an undeniable credibility, both as regards the local inhabitants and the readers at home. Thubron's slow account of his journey, his personal impressions, his character and route descriptions as well as the transcriptions of conversations held with inhabitants of the island from different walks of life are realistic, perfectly credible and evidently honest. Thubron is aware of the advantages of walking when a travel writer wishes to capture the population's spirit to the full and to reach its most inner soul.

Thubron states his journey “is to be a journey through time as well as space” (1). It is to be a faithful description of a mixture of his adventures in Cyprus and as well as a collection of historical and cultural passages and explanations of his own write which complement the visit of towns, villages, valleys, rivers, monasteries, farms, mosques, shrines, mountain tracks, Byzantine churches, archaeological sites, etc. Most adventures are centered on his conversations with the local inhabitants and his search for a good place to camp when in the mild open air of the Cypriot spring and his willingness to accept the charity of peasants, shepherds and monks to provide him with food and accommodation. Throughout Thubron’s journey the humble folk of the island prove to be extremely hospitable to him, in spite of his being English.

However, throughout his travel account Thubron insists on the negation of a pro-European feeling for Cyprus. He presents the island as a conglomerate of cultures and civilizations (Hellenic, Phoenician, Ottoman, Egyptian, Italian, etc.), a fact that has provided the country with its uniqueness. However, despite the wide majority of the Greek population, the Hellenic element is minimised. According to the English writer, Cyprus is more Levantine than Greek, more Byzantine than Lusignan or Venetian, more eastern than western, more Asian than European. Never in the whole book is the country’s European identity affirmed, as for him the Lusignan or Venetian influences have remained confined within the aristocratic and royal minority and have therefore hardly permeated the lay population of Cyprus. Curiously enough, in spite of the 82-year British occupation of Cyprus, the author hardly mentions anything that the ex-colony may have inherited from her metropolis, apart from chips. In his travel account Thubron seems to be possibly denying any possible European identity of Cyprus in the 1970s.

Thubron begins by introducing Cyprus to his English-speaking reader as part of the Levant and therefore part of “these half Asiatic lands” (1). This English traveller at no time acknowledges any possible cultural or political relationship of the island of Cyprus to Europe or any special feeling of Europeism. Cyprus is to him “where Asia touched on Europe” (7). He also declares the island to be an “eastern Mediterranean land” (7). Indeed, according to him, “this land [is] moored between Asia and Europe” (9). Later on in the book he believes the medieval Cypriots’ collective personality to have been a blend of oriental and Hellenic traits where their Byzantine identity still prevailed:

The Cypriots, I rather think, were natural members of this dazzling hybrid, Byzantium. They, like it, lay midway between the classical and the oriental. Their softness and conservatism were not Hellenic. To them the character of the Greek mainland was unsympathetically masculine, and all through mediaeval years the Cypriot nobles continued to send their sons for education to Constantinople, which they felt to be their mother-city. (102)

Thubron’s loitering among the Neolithic ruins of Khirokitia incites him to theorize on Cypriot identity. He seems to reach two conclusions. On the one hand, that Cypriots are the result of the mingling of bloods of different races, namely western powers (Mycenaeans, Romans and Crusaders) and eastern powers (Egyptians, Phoenicians and Turks) and that his journey was therefore partly to be, in his own words, “a burrowing upwards through these alien strata, as through the layers of a rich and gigantic cake” (5). However, he omits mentioning the British presence and influence on the ex-colony. He also attends a country wedding and its celebration, which he describes with gusto (its food, its “eastern-tinted music”, its dances, clothes, symbolism, guests and human types) (14-16).

Thubron continues with his walking journey through Paphos, with a view of the Troodos Mountains in the distance, in the region of Akamas. Paphiots, he says, believe themselves to be more honest and more intelligent than their fellow Cypriots (18). These positive traits, according to him, are generally attributed to the fact that their blood is mixed with that of the Turks (18). Once again Thubron philosophizes on the identity of the Cypriots: they are a mixture of two races, the Mycenaean Greeks and the Semitic Phoenicians. “Other nations –Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians–”, he says, “governed the land yet never touched its soul” (19). And once again he omits the role of the British in the formation of the Cypriot identity. According to him, the Cypriots’ conservatism is explained by the fact that, though Greeks, they did not benefit from the influence of Ionian and Dorian cultures and therefore remained Mycenaean and Achaean stock. Their ancient thirst for orientalism was fulfilled by their close contact with eastern culture (22). The only British legacy during their 82-year occupation is referred to while in his lodgings in Paphos, run by a Greek hotel owner called Antis. Thubron does not appreciate the cooking qualities of the hotelier, who has a high regard for his own cuisine; therefore, Thubron is forced to accept chips. “That is the legacy of the British occupation”, he adds, having “conquered the remotest hamlets of the Troodos and Kyrenia mountains” (28).

Thubron visits the palace of Vouni, among many Turkish villages of the nearby valleys, and explains its relationship with Queen Philocypus and its use by the Persian king of Marion to keep a watchful eye on the neighbouring Greek city of Soli (58), but admits that it is after all a palace without

history (58). He arrives at Soli, “a very Greek city”, a symbol-city of the struggle of the Greek Cypriots against Persian rulers during the fifth and fourth centuries BC. This was a time when the Greekness of the island was at stake, under the influence of Semitic people such as the Phoenicians. It was a time when Solis was therefore in danger of becoming an oriental city. The traveller then wonders: “For to whom, precisely, did the Cypriots belong –to the East or to the West?” (59). The Hellenistic “Aphrodite of Soli” kept in the Cyprus Museum has become the trademark of all things Cypriot. In spite of being called “The Cyprian” or “The Cyprus-born”, according to Thubron, Aphrodite’s oriental origins are still evident, as she was worshipped by prostitutes, to the extent that “Cyprian” in English remains a synonym for “lewd” (61-62).

In the whereabouts of Episkopi Thubron sees the promontory of Curium rise. This gives him the opportunity to narrate its history and its expropriation by General Di Cesnola, “who was not so much an archaeologist as a systematic plunderer” (152-53). He makes the point of reminding us that the treasures discovered by the Italo-American consul from thousands of pilfered graves “were not only Greek, but Phoenician, Egyptian, Assyrian and Chaldean” (153).

Thubron heads for Kyrenia and the Kyrenia mountains, full of resonances of Mount Kornos with Kyparissovouno, St Hilarion and TrypaVouno, Buffavento, Pentadactylos (165). He compares the Kyrenian ridge, which is more Gothic, to the Troodos Mountains, which is considered to be more Byzantine (165). Once in Kyrenia, he highlights its charming water’s edge, full of history, its castle belonging to different successive rulers, Byzantines, Crusaders, Lusignans, and Venetians, but which was never stormed, as it always capitulated all its surrenders, its Venetian mansions turned into restaurants, its fishing harbour, its Lusignan lighthouse, its English residents’ villas, the paradise of retired civil servants escaping income tax and the cold (166-67).

He once again philosophises about the Cypriot identity. The so called Great Age of Cyprus, that is, the Lusignan Age, he says, did not leave any deep mark on Cypriot identity. According to the author, “it died exotically in a soil which could not nourish it” (218). He believes that its identity owes its being to two different ages, both of them Greek: the Mycenaean age, later followed by the Achaeans, which Hellenized the island, and the Byzantine age, which Christianised it. Finally he heads for Salamis’ Royal Necropolis, describes its tombs and relates them to Homer’s times and customs, but he does not fail to remind us readers that “the feel of the East –Assyria, Phoenicia, Egypt– is never far” (228).

The oriental/Levantine/Byzantine identity that Thubron seems to be granting to Cypriots benefits the Turkish-Cypriots’ claim to partition on the grounds that Cyprus is not after all as Hellenic as Greek-Cypriots claim their country to be. Thubron, let us not forget, is British, and from his conversations with the Greek-Cypriots who are old enough to remember the British occupation, he occasionally notices a slight feeling of resentment towards the ex-metropolis for having sided the Turks during the Greeks’ struggle for *enosis* first and for independence later (37-38, 39, 53, 153). Thubron laments that the British are sometimes blamed by the Greek-Cypriots for the rivalry between both Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots as it was the British who “granted the Turkish minority too large a share in the affairs of the island” (53), and used the Turks against their War of Liberation and as auxiliary police –including the torturing of Greek-Cypriot EOKA members in prison camps (38)–, two facts which effectively helped the two Cypriot ethnic and religious communities from continuing on friendly terms. In spite of the 82-year British occupation of Cyprus, the author hardly mentions anything that the ex-colony may have inherited from her metropolis, perhaps with the intention of exonerating Britain from any type of future fate of the isle, whatever this might be. Furthermore, he seems to openly favour the Turkish cause by declaring to like Turkish-Cypriots twice in the book (78, 135), something which he never does when mentioning the Greek-Cypriots. These are the reasons which we believe could lay behind the fact that Thubron’s travel account seems to be denying any possible European (mainly Hellenic) identity of Cyprus in the 1970s. Indeed, Thubron laments that the English are sometimes blamed by the Greeks for the rivalry between both ethnic communities on the grounds that it was the British who used the Turks against their War of Liberation and that they used the Turks as auxiliary police, two facts that stopped the two communities from being on friendly terms any more. According to Thubron, the Greeks blamed the British for the sowing of the tension by having “granted the Turkish minority too large a share in the affairs of the island” (53). He then anticipates events when he affirms that after having lost many villages to the Greeks in 1963 and 1964, the Turks would have their revenge a year after Thubron’s visit to the area, that is, in 1974, “when all the north-east island –over a third of the country– was seized by their [the Turks’] invasion force” (53).

As a conclusion to the paper, I could summarise it thus: Throughout his travelogue *Journey into Cyprus* (1975) Colin Thubron insisted on the negation of a pro-European feeling for Cyprus. After crisscrossing the island in 1972, he presented Cyprus as a conglomerate of cultures and civilizations (Hellenic, Phoenician, Ottoman, Egyptian, Italian, etc.), a fact that has provided the country with its uniqueness. However, despite the wide majority of the Greek population, the Hellenic element is

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<sup>1</sup>Bowman, Jim. 2015. *Narratives of Cyprus*. Modern Travel Writing and Cultural Encounters since Lawrence Durrell. London, New York: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>2</sup> Although Thubron's *Journey into Cyprus* was originally published in London by William Heinemann Ltd in 1975, I have consulted (and therefore quote from) the 1986 Penguin edition.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, Jeremy. 2002. "Colin Thubron: 'I Wanted to Vanish into the Background'". *The Independent*, 6 July 2002.