

Phiroze Vasunia, *Classics and Colonial India: Classical Presences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 398. ISBN 978-0-19-920323-9. £85.00.

'Classical Presences', a radical if sometimes uneven series from Oxford University Press, has done much in recent years to open up the horizons of the discipline of Classics. The latest in the series by Phiroze Vasunia ought to be considered a valuable contribution. In a nutshell, Vasunia explores how the discipline of Classics and the British Empire in India profoundly shaped one another. This complex and shifting relationship is traced through the study of institutions and individuals. The imagination and breadth of scholarship on display here promises many further lines of enquiry. The qualms expressed in this review are therefore minor and should not detract from the overall recommendation to anyone interested in the history of the British in India or the history of Classics to consider carefully the material and arguments presented here.

Vasunia distinguishes himself by being both conceptually sophisticated and a close reader of evidence. The book lays out the parameters for the inquiry in an Introduction that considers what the index of classicism is (what is meant by 'Classics' and 'Classical'? How can these meanings be historically contingent?) as well as what relationships are set up between past and present when the 'Classical' is invoked as a rubric. Vasunia identifies the challenge that Sanskrit, as another classical tradition, posed to those who had invested in Graeco-Roman antiquity, when they encountered India in a modern imperial context. The essential argument of the book is powerful; the classical past is malleable in the service of both the colonizers and the colonized. That is to say, the past can be both instrumentalized as a tool of hegemony and of envisioning a post-colonial India. Vasunia does well to make such a complex argument without denying the oppressive fact of empire and colonization.

In Part One, 'Alexander in India' (pp. 33-118), Vasunia looks at two imperial contexts of the use of Alexander. Firstly Vasunia argues that Alexander occupies a central place in the imagination of those Europeans who set out to chart the terrain of the East and to establish trade and administrative structures. The fascinating implication of the argument is that Alexander is an anxiety-inducing model for the proponents of liberal empire, since he is a fraught site for negotiating contradictory meanings (Sober or sot? Conqueror or tyrant? Imitable or inimitable? Greek or not Greek?). Vasunia works through the European historiographical traditions concerning Alexander stretching from Droysen in the nineteenth century to G. S. Robertson. In the second half of his argument in Part I, Vasunia dismantles the nationalistic claim that Alexander played a minimal part in Indian history. Rather, Vasunia examines the utility of 'Sikander' to Indian rulers at the end of the first millennium AD for the delineation of their political power. In examining the politicized interactions of these historiographical traditions together, Vasunia's dynamic view of the reception history of Alexander answers the charge of being sterile and over-awed by Alexander.

Part Two, 'Caesar in Peccavistan' (pp. 119-238), examines another dense and sometimes contradictory complex of imperial emulation and rivalry, whereby the British Empire in India, as an institution and as represented by individual administrators, conceptualized itself as a latter-day Roman Empire. Vasunia is rightly suspicious of the complacent idea that Rome was a 'natural' comparandum for the British in India. In Chapter 4, 'Visions of Antiquity' (pp. 157-92), Vasunia makes a bold move in argumentation to look at the 'architecture of architecture' (p. 158) or the racialised ideologies of power that underpinned the 'what, how and where' of British colonial building in India. In this context, this reviewer feels more emphasis could have been placed on the decision to move the colonial capital from Calcutta and to make a new Delhi in 1911.

The final chapter in Part II, '*Competitionwallahs*: Greek, Latin and the Indian Civil Service' (pp. 193-238), is perhaps the most pertinent to classicists interested in the history of the discipline. Vasunia demonstrates how the unequal weighting towards Greek and Latin in the curriculum reflected the privileged position of Oxbridge classics with the Indian Civil Service, especially for those under the aegis of powerful figures in both politics and the academy, such as Benjamin Jowett. Again, looking at the subjects that were offered and the

types of questions put to candidates, allows Vasunia to track how 'colonial anxieties and fantasies were being triangulated through Britain's complicated relationship with Greek and Roman antiquity' (p. 235). For Vasunia, this exposes one of the great contradictions of the empire; though notionally open to Indians, the Indian Civil Service was a game rigged in favour of those who had been trained in Greek and Latin, underpinned by normative ideas of race and class.

Part Three, 'Co-operation and Liberation' (pp. 239-350), returns to the literary mode. In Chapter 6, 'Homer and Virgil' (pp. 239-278), Vasunia makes explicit that Greece and Rome can offer different political and cultural stimuli to different people. If that seems crudely put, then it is a corrective to the often seen, little interrogated idea of 'Graeco-Roman antiquity' as an undifferentiated lump serving as a model. Vasunia offers this explanation for the popularity of Homer in India as opposed to Virgil; the latter is too tied up in British imperial visions, whereas the former can be read in the context of the Indo-European thesis. The broad sketches of the reception history of both Virgil and Homer are useful. However, although Vasunia picks his moments judiciously in the nineteenth century, the first half of the twentieth century is unfortunately compressed and there is more to be said about Auden's waspish poem 'Secondary Epic'. Even less successful for this reviewer is the analysis offered in the following chapter 'Aristophanes' *Wealth* and Dalpatram's *Lakshmi*' (pp. 279-300), which examines the Gujarati poet's project of moral reform via a re-visioning of Aristophanes' play. Whilst the material here is interesting enough, Dalpatram's thinking on history does not appear particularly interesting in and of itself. What is illuminating is the extraordinary friendship between Dalpatram and A.K. Forbes who introduced the Gujarati writer to Greek literature. Why, for example, is Aristophanes a good choice as a marker of Greek literature? This fertile intercultural exchange between the two men begs for further examination. The final chapter, 'Athens in Calcutta: Derozio Dutt and the Bengal Renaissance' (pp. 301-34), is more effective in terms of what it does for Vasunia's overall argument. By juxtaposing the two Bengali writers, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Vasunia can gesture towards the range of relationships and attitudes to Hellenism possible for Indians. Interesting in this context but not addressed here is what status Sanskrit held as an alternative classical tradition for those involved in thinking through a regional Bengali renaissance and a national Indian modernity.

The Epilogue ushers us through to the twentieth century and the last hurrah of Graeco-Roman Classics in India. As is appropriate for a book that argues persuasively for the close relationship between past and present, it ends as it started with Jawaharlal Nehru. Vasunia examines the relationships of Gandhi and Nehru with Classics in their respective projects of nationalism. While Gandhi's translations of Plato and self-styling as a Socrates figure are tantalizing, Vasunia rightly pays more attention to Nehru's more vexed and ambivalent constructions of relationships between the classical past in India and Greece, as well as India's relationship with its own past.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is perhaps its most significant flaw. Vasunia for the most part handles a great range of material well. His style of analysis is nuanced, progressing by close readings and the gradual accumulation of evidence to flesh out moments in the history of an institution or an idea. This goes hand in hand with a tendency to sketch out the 'big picture' of an argument. Sometimes there is too great a gap between the overall 'sketch' of argumentation and the sheer volume of information that the reader, not already acquainted with the main points of orientation (in chronology or institutional history), is required to follow. It would be churlish, however, to turn one's nose up at the difficulties of accessing and synthesizing the archival record.¹ Vasunia expresses throughout the book that he is only scratching the surface. One feels, however, contradictorily both agreement and alarm at these statements.

¹ We might well remind ourselves of the difficulties of researching imperial activity with the recent disclosure of the willful destruction of some of the darkest parts of the colonial archive: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/apr/18/britain-destroyedrecords-colonial-crimes>

As previously noted Vasunia is excellent conceptually. The reader not well equipped with the arsenal of post-colonial criticism would have benefitted from a more explicit orientation of the book in this scholarly field. In the Introduction Vasunia states that he is indebted to the work of Edward Said and indeed his name does crop up here and there. However, a brief but focused discussion of Said might help to explain why Vasunia's analyses lean towards the literary. A second area in which this reviewer would have liked to read more is the role of gender in the various intersectional critiques. Vasunia touches on gender as part of the construction of masculinity in the civilized gentlemanly administrator of the empire, as opposed to the effete Oriental. Leaning further on gender as a conceptual tool in the construction of empire in the context of the 'classical' would have further enriched the analysis.

This omission in respect of the conceptual orientation of the book begged the question for this reviewer of who the intended audience is. Maps could have been appended to help guide those not familiar with the activity of the British in India over the course of two-hundred and fifty years of empire, and could have been an elegant way to visualize other European interests in India too. The same could be said for the inclusion of chronologies. On the other hand, since the Greek and Latin are seldom translated, the intended reader is clearly the Classicist. It seems to this reviewer that the overlap in that Venn diagram of skill sets would be narrow, which is a shame because of the value of the arguments variously and skillfully made here.

Vasunia does the kind of detailed, high-resolution, critical look at institutions and practice that Reception Studies is often accused of lacking. This book ought to be considered as rigorous a part of the critique of the discipline of Classics as the work of scholars such as Christopher Stray and Susanne Marchand. This is patient, broad and deep research that builds up complex arguments and rewards the reader with the volume and density of the analysis presented. It was a pleasure to read this politicized examination of the discipline.

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