

Occasional Paper 13

Editor: Neni Panourgiá

*In memoriam
William Hardy McNeill.*

1917–2016

William Hardy McNeill was the first editor of the Journal of Modern Greek Studies. Occasional Papers is hosting a two-part memorial on Professor McNeill contributed by John Iatrides and Ioanna Laliotou. In Occasional Paper 13, John Iatrides reviews McNeill's five books on the history of Greece in the two decades of the Second World War and its aftermath. In Occasional Paper 14, historian Ioanna Laliotou gives an assessment of McNeill's contribution to historical science.

*William Hardy McNeill. Pioneer Historian of Postwar Greece
Review Essay*

John O. Iatrides

This is a section of the Journal of Modern Greek Studies hosting occasional papers on current Greek matters. Some of these are interviews, others are short commissioned position papers, yet others are reports on collaborative projects.

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John O. Iatrides received his education in Greece, the Netherlands, and the United States (PhD in International Politics, Clark University, 1962). He served with the Hellenic National Defense General Staff as NATO liaison officer (1955–1956) and the Prime Minister’s press office (1956–1958). He is currently Professor Emeritus in Political Science at Southern Connecticut State University. He has published widely on the Greek civil war, Greek foreign policy, and Greek-American relations. In addition to numerous essays his publications include:

Balkan Triangle: Birth and Decline of an Alliance Across Ideological Boundaries (Mouton, 1968)
Revolt in Athens. The Greek Communist ‘Second Round,’ 1944–1945 (Princeton University Press, 1980)
Ambassador MacVeagh Reports: Greece, 1933–1947 (Princeton University Press, 1980)
Greece in the 1940s. A Nation in Crisis (New England University Press, 1981)
Greece at the Crossroads. The Civil War and its Legacy (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995)

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William Hardy McNeill, the widely acclaimed academic whose creative and challenging interpretations of the human experience, expounded in over thirty books, was instrumental in establishing the teaching of world history as a centerpiece of the discipline in higher education, passed away on 8 July 2016. He was 98. The Robert A. Milikan Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Chicago, he was past president of the American Historical Association and the recipient of many honors and awards in the United States and abroad. He was also the first editor of the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* (1983–1985). In 1987, after forty years of teaching at the University of Chicago, he retired to the family home in Colebrook, Connecticut, where he continued to publish, cultivate his garden, and offer hospitality to friends and scholars from around the world who cherished his company. A gracious man of tireless energy, modesty, and compassion, he gave generously of his time and support to those who sought his counsel.

In his last book, *The Pursuit of Truth. A Historian's Memoir* (2005), he reflected on his professional life and achievements:

As always, the future remains uncertain, but the human past is indeed amazing and we are now able to see it whole, as was not yet the case in my youth. More generally, so conceived, our history as a species has become part of a new evolutionary worldview, uniting physical, biological, and human reality into a single, ever-changing whole. This is the central intellectual accomplishment of the twentieth century, and I am pleased to think I played a small but significant part in constructing it. (156)

The Athens Review of Books dedicated its March 2013 issue to William H. McNeill with contributions by Professors Thanos Veremis, Katerina Gardika, Chrissa Maltezou, and Evanthis Hatzivassiliou. The article below, which also appeared in the same *ARB* issue, has been edited to include comments on McNeill's *The Metamorphosis of Greece since World War II*.

The 1996 recipient of the prestigious Erasmus Prize was William Hardy McNeill, retired Professor of History at the University of Chicago and one of the great historians of modern times. He was honored for his “distinguished contribution to European culture and science,” vividly and elegantly presented in more than thirty scholarly tomes and countless articles. It is doubtful that, in deciding to honor Professor McNeill, the Erasmus Foundation had in mind his contributions to the study of modern Greece, which represent a very small part of his monumental scholarly output. Yet his accounts of postwar Greece reveal a uniquely gifted intellect capable of dissecting some of the larger issues regarding the human experience. Long before he had risen to prominence as a world historian, McNeill had proven himself a pioneer chronicler of contemporary Greece.

In early 1944, as Nazi troops prepared to retreat from the Balkans, the American ambassador to the exiled Greek government in Cairo, Lincoln MacVeagh, sought to re-staff his small embassy before returning to Athens. To his dismay, the State Department granted him only his request for an assistant military attaché: on 1 April, Capt. William H. McNeill, US Army, arrived in Cairo and assumed his duties.

Born in Canada in 1917, McNeill (WHM) had completed his graduate studies in history at Cornell University and was working on his dissertation under Professor Philip Mosely, a prominent specialist in Russia and Eastern Europe, when he was drafted. He served as artillery officer in Puerto Rico, where he met Mosely, now a State Department official returning from a conference in Moscow. Months later, when MacVeagh's request for an assistant military attaché reached the Department, Mosely nominated his student for the post. After training in diplomatic protocol and cryptography, WHM was sent to Cairo to join MacVeagh's embassy. He and his army jeep landed in Piraeus on 10 November, one day after the Greek Third Brigade arrived from Italy to bolster Prime Minister George Papandreou's embattled National Unity government.

WHM's principal assignment was to report to the War Department on military and security matters. Instead, surrounded by devastation, political instability, and economic collapse, he busied himself reporting on virtually every facet of Greek life. His sources included Greek and British officials, OSS agents, local and foreign journalists, and countless ordinary Greeks. He crisscrossed the country, alone or with a driver-interpreter, gathering information and impressions, occasionally in guerrilla-held areas. His dispatches represent the first contemporaneous and comprehensive accounts by an American official of conditions in post-liberation Greece. MacVeagh sent copies of WHM's reports

to the State Department and occasionally quoted from them in his personal letters to President Roosevelt.

While stationed in Greece, WHM met and soon married Elizabeth Darbishire, whose father, a friend of the prominent British historian Arnold Toynbee, had taught English at Athens College. Fluent in Modern Greek, French, and German (as well as speaking simple Turkish), Elizabeth worked for the Office of War Information and joined the US Information Service in Greece. She became his life's companion, research collaborator, translator, critic, and proofreader, raising their four children, in his words, "with wisdom and success" (2005, 53).

WHM observed at close range the *Dekemvriana*, the fighting in Athens in December 1944, and the defeat and disarming of the communist-led insurgents by British troops. His analysis of the upheaval, one of the most informed and objective accounts of the crisis, apportions responsibility among the Greek Left and Right, the British, and Papandreou; it also assesses its impact on the nation's psyche and on the widening new *dibasmos* between the communist-controlled Left and the nationalists. He remained in Greece long enough to witness and report on the March 1946 elections, the ensuing Right-wing extremism, and the beginning of full scale civil war.

In June 1946, preparing to return home, WHM collected documents and statistical data, interviewed scores of Greeks of every political stripe, and traveled once more to remote areas of the country still beyond government control. He incorporated his research and personal observations in his first book: *The Greek Dilemma: War and Aftermath* (1947). Beyond war-related devastation and violence, he blames Greece's problems on overpopulation, lack of natural resources, primitive agriculture and little industry, scarcity of capital and foreign investment, and inadequate infrastructure. One of his central themes attributes traditional brigandage and guerrilla activity to vast disparities in the availability of food between poor mountain villages and prosperous villages in the plains. In short, WHM suggests that hunger and deprivation constituted the driving force behind the organized violence that eventually escalated into civil war.

WHM's theory helps explain the earliest manifestations of guerrilla activity, about which he was well informed, but overlooks key facets of the communist insurgency as documented by recent scholarship (Marantzidis 2010; Marantzidis and Tsivos 2012). Specifically, if the majority of guerrillas were poor and ignorant peasants, their *kapetanioi* and political commissars, who often had life-and-death power over them, were hardened communists with largely urban backgrounds. After 1946, many new recruits, including women and teenagers, became guerrillas at gun point, while a large percentage were Slavophones whose motives were unrelated to poverty and food shortages. In fairness, most of what is now known about the insurgents' motives, strategy, and tactics, as well as of the Soviet bloc's involvement in the civil war, surfaced long after WHM had turned his scholarly attention to other subjects.

On the political side, *The Greek Dilemma* stresses the corrosive impact of nepotism and patronage, the absence of a moderate center, the bureaucracy's subordination to politics, and the disruptive effects of foreign intervention. Regarding the new *dibasmos*, WHM's conclusion, written in mid-1946, is prescient: "The issues and memories which divide Left from Right are too deeply fraught with emotion to permit either side ever to admit defeat until physically crushed by superior force" (270). As for the foreign factor,

In the world contest for power, the good or ill of a small state like Greece counts for little. Neither Great Britain nor Russia directs its policy toward the benefit of the Greeks. If Greece benefits, it is only incidentally; if Greece suffers, equally it is incidental. Yet the fate of Greece in very large part has come inescapably to depend on the remorseless action of the Russian millstone grinding heavily against the Anglo-American. It is a sad and anguishing position for a proud people. (280)

In no uncertain terms, and before the Truman administration had arrived at the same conclusion, WHM linked the Greek crisis directly to what would soon be called the Cold War:

The [Greek] story, I believe, is interesting in itself. It takes a larger interest from the light which events in Greece can throw on the pattern of world politics which seems so rapidly to be dividing all the nations of the world into two great rival camps. Greece has become a bone of contention between Russia and Great Britain. The struggle between Left and Right which is now going on within the country reflects and adds in part to, the forces which divide Russia from the West. Consequently, the fate of Greece is inextricably tangled with world politics. . . . It is even possible that the fate of the world may take a decisive turn from future events in Greece, for the conflict is more naked and direct there than in almost any other country. (7)

In February 1947, the Twentieth Century Fund chose Frank Smothers, a foreign correspondent and old “China hand,” and William and Elizabeth McNeill to visit Greece and write a book about the country and its people. As political violence intensified and Washington appeared poised to intervene, the team was commissioned to explain to Americans the problems confronting that small and distant country and why the United States might wish to offer its assistance to the Athens government. The result, *Report on the Greeks* (1948), is a snap-shot of Greece in mid-1947, when the civil war was in its infancy and the Truman Doctrine was mostly a president’s speech to the American congress. It describes a country still ravaged by war and bitterly divided, languishing under an inept and repressive government. It contains useful facts and observations, as well as snippets of conversations with ordinary Greeks. On many issues, WHM disagreed with Smothers, who, as the senior collaborator, usually had the final say. In particular, Smothers, an admirer of Mao and his “rural reformers,” saw the National Liberation Front (EAM) as a populist movement struggling against domestic and foreign reactionaries. For his part, WHM regarded EAM a communist front bent on imposing one-party rule by revolutionary means. As he later lamented, the book “harbored a distressing number of footnotes and counter-footnotes in which Smothers and I aired our differences. I resolved never again to write a book in collaboration with another person” (2005: 57).¹

WHM returned again to the subject of the Dekemvriana in an article in the *American Slavic and East European Review* (1949), responding to one by the leftist historian L. S. Stavrianos appearing in the same issue. Insisting that neither side wanted to fight, WHM describes EAM as attempting to gain “effective monopoly of power” (154) over most of the country until the government could be brought under leftist control by political means. The British were similarly convinced that EAM’s ultimate goal was communist dictatorship, which they were determined to prevent. Violence was sparked by a “mutual misunderstanding on the part of EAM and the British of each other’s resolution and military potential” (161). While stressing that Moscow was not directly involved

¹ WHM co-authored with his historian son, J.R. McNeill, *The Human Web. A Bird’s-Eye View of World History* (2003), which WHM regarded as the high point of his career as a historian.

(WHM knew the senior Soviet representative in Athens, Col. Gregori Popov), he concludes that “the fighting was . . . in fact a disguised clash between British and Russian influences, a clash in which, ironically, the Russians abstained from supporting their champions from considerations of larger strategy.” In the end, “EAM, through the military reverse it suffered, lost the peculiarly favorable tactical position which had been built up through the war years, for in the months following the disbandment of the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS) Greece went through a period of counter-revolution, and EAM’s hope of achieving power through parliamentary electoral success was effectively blocked” (161). After the Dekemvriana, the communists could seize power only by force of arms and, parenthetically, only with foreign assistance.

A year later WHM found himself chronicling the wartime “Grand Alliance” and early signs of the East-West confrontation in which Greece had briefly played a part. In 1950, Toynbee, then Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, invited WHM to write *America, Britain and Russia. Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941–1946* (1952). Written without the benefit of government records, on the basis of publicly available sources, it is the first major history of the Cold War to attribute the conflict less to the aggressive behavior of either side than to a dangerously unstable international system in which any power move caused misperceptions, hostility, and counter-moves. It represents a seminal contribution to the school of “realism,” later championed by Hans Morgenthau and now espoused by many Western scholars. Sixty years later, with mountains of documents and other primary sources now available, *America, Britain and Russia* remains a balanced and persuasive account of the origins of the Cold War.

As concerns Greece, WHM augments his earlier analysis of the civil war and holds Moscow partially responsible. Following elections in March 1946 and the king’s return,

The Government’s policy toward the Communists was certainly oppressive, and the economic hardships which faced the population were disheartening. These facts prepared the ground for a revival of Communist-led guerrilla action in the summer of 1946; but there is every reason to suppose that the guerrilla movement did not start a second time spontaneously. Rather, international Communism, and ultimately the Russian Communist Party and Government, made use of the explosive human material available to them in Greece to start civil war. . . . With the Truman Doctrine a new and far more definite phase of the ‘cold war’ opened and the fate of Europe took a new turn. (736–737)

WHM recounted his experiences in postwar Greece again, in *Witnesses to the Origins of the Cold War* (1982). In addition to providing more details on the background and course of the Dekemvriana, the essay offers insights into the evolving American perceptions of developments in Greece. His discussion of the March 1946 elections is particularly interesting in view of his assertion that Washington officials had hoped that they might serve as a model for elections in other Eastern European countries. He argues that in their rigid attachment to democratic formalities Americans ignored the fact that conditions for fair elections, and for victory by a “moderate, middle-of-the-road politician,” did not exist in Greece: “It took no imagination at all to recognize that free elections were not an adequate cure for situations in which the loss of political power meant the loss of personal security and, not infrequently, of life itself. But no American had anything else to suggest as a way to legitimize government and get a country back on its feet.” In Washington’s “missionary urge to show the British and the Russians how to be really democratic,” American uniformed “observers” sought to insure the fairness of the elections by asking Greeks how they intended to vote.

Greeks reacted by telling each such formidable interlocutor whatever they figured he wanted to hear. . . . On the spot, such antics seemed as ridiculous as they turned out to be, since Greek voters, characteristically, looked upon politics as an affair of the mighty, their personal pursuit of the good life. In most situations a wise man dissembled and voted for whomever had the power already and was thus destined to win.

WHM is no less critical of American official advisers: “These newcomers, unacquainted with the peculiarities of Greek society, came suddenly into positions of key importance, and characteristically plunged ahead, often unaware of and indifferent to the larger consequences of their actions and advice” (119–121).

In 1956, the Twentieth Century Fund invited WHM to return to Greece to assess the impact of American assistance on efforts to combat poverty and improve social stability. The result, *Greece. American Aid in Action, 1947–1956* (1957), is an informative, comprehensive, and balanced evaluation of the country’s economic performance since the civil war. It identifies areas of significant progress, for which American assistance and advice deserve considerable credit. But it also offers a sobering picture of socioeconomic deficiencies, government ineptness, and institutional dysfunction that continued to inhibit modernization and economic growth. Identifying sharp contrasts between old and new, traditional and modern, urban and rural, WHM portrays Greece as still overpopulated, predominantly agrarian, and deficient in resources and industrial development. Despite improvements in infrastructure, energy, basic social services, and living standards, life remained hard, especially in villages and particularly for women.

The book traces the shifting focus of American assistance, initially intended primarily for reconstruction, to defeating the insurgency and, after 1950, to promoting democratic government and improving public administration. After giving American advisers credit for bolstering local government and urging officials to act as “public servants rather than public masters,” WHM concedes that

The ordinary private citizen in Greece is prone to look upon government as his natural enemy. . . . It follows that almost any device to foil the agents of the government is considered legitimate—deceit, lying, bribery or just the exertion of “influence.”

On the burning issue of economic development, moreover, WHM questions the prevailing emphasis on industrialization:

it is a moot point whether large-scale industry can really be made to flourish in Greece without far-reaching changes in the psychological and social patterns of the nation, not to speak of the technical problems presented by raw material shortages and the relatively high cost even of domestically produced power. (213)

Instead, WHM favors improving agricultural production through farm cooperatives. On the political front, he notes that the strength shown by the leftist EDA party in the 1956 elections serves as a reminder that “the Communist problem has not been really solved” (201). Nevertheless, he expresses the hope that, if current trends continue, Greece “may enter upon a period of internal social stability such as the people have not known for more than a generation. . . . [A] real beginning has been made” (205).

Ten years later, his cautious optimism appeared to be largely justified. Following another visit to Greece in 1966, WHM wrote that “nearly all the projects and dreams of 1956 had become physical reality” (1967, 306) particularly in agriculture, as well as in industrial development. He was especially impressed by changes affecting the rural population: “The villagers were better off in very tangible, direct and materials ways. Urban styles and tastes had advanced everywhere and local peasant culture had retreated. Widened horizons, new possessions, enhanced incomes: all had modified the old poverty, and even though some individuals had profited more than others, the rising standard of living had spread so widely that no distinct class or region had been left out.” Industrialization was equally remarkable: “Never before had Greece seen so many large and technologically up-to-date enterprises. If these plants flourish as expected and help propagate their own kind in the Greek landscape, it will surely be correct to date Greece’s full scale entry into the modern industrial world from this vintage year of 1966” (306).

Having praised modernization’s achievements, WHM turns to its “costs and strains.” He fears that “the abrupt break-up of traditional peasant customs surely entails the risk of creating a population of a-moralists,” with potentially dangerous consequences: “An oversupply of rootless, ruthless egoists, scant on scruple and long on appetite, may prove politically troublesome” (313). Ultimately, the future of the nation’s democratic institutions is at stake: “can government by consent survive in a society that has so suddenly rejected so much of its own local past without having had time to work out a new code of conduct, applicable to personal and public behavior, and sustained by internal as well as by external sanctions and values?” Industrial growth is no less disturbing. Virtually all new factories were “high-cost producers, whose goods could not compete even on the Greek market with foreign products” without state subsidies or protectionism. In years past, such misguided growth was paid for by American funds. Now the new industrialists, aligned with the ruling elites, were obstructing plans to redirect agriculture and industry so as to make them more efficient, productive, and competitive. After referring obliquely to the “tangled and disturbed state of Greek politics,” WHM concludes his 1966 observations with a disturbing question: “How . . . can the policies required for rapid development remain within the politics of consent? Or is authoritarian government the only way to continue for much longer the rapid pace of recent Greek economic development?” (316).

WHM presented these observations at an international conference in Madison, Wisconsin, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Truman Doctrine. After the keynote speaker, Gen. James Van Fleet, head of the US military mission in Greece during the civil war, observed that Greece still faced a domestic communist threat, WHM rose to suggest that the threat to democratic government in Athens came not from the Left but from the Right. The date of the conference where these remarks were made was 12 April 1967. Nine days later Greece was under military dictatorship.

The last and most ambitious of WHM’s contributions to the historical literature on modern Greece is *The Metamorphosis of Greece since World War II*. Written in 1976–1977 and published in 1978, this slender volume employs the author’s powerful analytical skills to explore the evolution of the Greeks from antiquity to the postwar era, their paths and obstacles to modernization and social progress. Much of his discussion of rural conditions is based on personal observations in six villages which he visited repeatedly since he first arrived in late 1944. In brief but boldly insightful paragraphs, he reviews the principal elements of Greek identity: the land and people, language, religion, culture, historical experience, local attitudes, values and traditions, politics and patronage, state institutions,

agricultural practices, urbanization, and economic development. In the process, he comments on patterns of continuity and change which have been occurring with increasing speed within the span of a lifetime. His findings are basically positive and encouraging:

If satisfaction of human wants and aspirations is taken as the criterion, then the development of Greece across the last thirty years must be viewed as an extraordinary success story. Things that seemed impossible in 1945 have in fact come true for millions of individual Greeks, and for nearly all of the people involved, whatever has been lost or thrust to the margins of life, while sometimes regretted, does not begin to counterbalance the gains. (247)

Anticipating scholarly skepticism concerning his employment of broad universalist concepts of modernization to interpret the Greek experience WHM concludes:

The Greek metamorphosis during the past generation ought to command respect. Those who study it ought also to recognize how new technical and market opportunities interacted with age-old traditional patterns of behavior to make a blend not duplicated elsewhere. The assumption that modernization is an essentially identical worldwide process seems patently false. . . . Cultural pluralism is as old as humanity and it seems likely to survive the homogenizing force of modern communications, however great that may be. . . . Judicious interplay between the universal and the unique characterizes all intellectual discourse. How well it has here been achieved is for the reader to judge. (251)

With the publication of *The Metamorphosis of Greece*, WHM, the pioneer historian of modern Greece, returned to his principal intellectual pursuit: world history. His next book, *Human Migration: Patterns and Policies*, appeared the same year as *The Metamorphosis*, followed in rapid succession by *The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View* (1980), *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since A.D. 1000*. (1982), and fifteen volumes—for a total of thirty-five major books and countless articles—on an astoundingly broad range of scholarly subjects. His last book, published in 2005, was *The Pursuit of Truth. A Historian's Memoir*.

Long after he stopped writing, WHM remained very interested in Greece and enjoyed reminiscing about his many experiences in that country and his pleasure in chronicling its troubled path to modernization.

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