

Durrell's Cyprus— Tainted Observations on the Colonial and Postcolonial

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More than fifty years have passed since Lawrence Durrell harvested the social landscape of the British Crown colony of Cyprus, taught in its prestigious Pancyprian Gymnasium, and served the British propaganda machine as a colonial mouthpiece.

An Anglo child of British India, Durrell lived in Greece, Egypt, and Serbia, and became fluent in Greek as well as a Philhellene.¹ Were his observations of the 1950's colonial climate and of the colonized peoples of Cyprus—predominantly Greek and Turkish—tainted? Did he enjoy any special insight into colonial Cyprus because of his linguistic or literary skills or did his milieu, his fears and failures, and his personal ambitions corrupt him? Did he contribute original social commentary or did he recycle the hackneyed ethnic baggage that surrounded him at the time? Regardless, his 1957 *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*,² still perhaps the most widely known book about the island and its inhabitants, remains on sale at Larnaca Airport's departure lounge bookshop.

Referring to the 50's Greek Cypriot 'Enosis' uprising against British rule, Durrell writes in *Bitter Lemons*, “. . . and to the nauseating foulness of the street-murder of soldiers and policemen was added the disgusting, and typically Balkan, murder of civilians suspected of being traitors” (*Lemons* 231).

Durrell, who confesses in *Bitter Lemons* that he knew little of Turkish culture and language, nevertheless asserts that “. . . the Turks, perhaps through lack of a definite cultural pattern of their own, or of one worth imposing on the Greeks, left them [the Greeks] freedom of religion, language and even local government . . .” (*Lemons* 125).

The English are effete. Greeks are geniuses. Turks are barbarians. Persuasive literature has the capacity to brainwash the colonial/postcolonial citizen into accepting stereotypes, stereotypes of the oppressed and/or stereotypes of the oppressor. For example, in his 1941 *The Colossus of Maroussi*,³ Henry Miller writes, "The goat has now become the national enemy. He will be dislodged as the Turk was dislodged, in time" (*Colossus* 51). "I have seen Greeks walking about in the most ludicrous and abominable garb imaginable . . . and yet, I say it sincerely and deliberately, I would a thousand times rather be that poor Greek than an American millionaire" (*Colossus* 53).

What did Miller know that poor Greeks of his time didn't?

In exploring whether Durrell's 1953-1956 observations of Cyprus might have been tainted, and how his Anglo-colonial filter might have distorted them, I draw on eleven years of living in Cyprus; on the *Cyprus Mail* and the *Times of Cyprus* archives; and on on-location interviews with Cypriots, Greek and Turkish, and from all walks of life. I draw on research for my novel *Barbed Wire in Aphrodite's Garden*⁴ about Cyprus, and my creation of an English character inspired by Durrell.

I would like to anchor Durrell's assertions about Cyprus and the Enosis crisis through a sample of diverse quotations that shaped world opinion in the 50's. Winston Churchill is quoted⁵ as saying in 1907, "I think it is only natural that the Cypriot people who are of Greek descent, should regard their incorporation with what may be called their mother country as an ideal to be earnestly, devoutly and fervently cherished . . ."

Henry Hopkinson, British Minister of State for Colonial Affairs, House of Commons, London, July 28, 1954, on the question of "NEVER": "It has always been understood and agreed that there are certain territories in the Commonwealth which, owing to their particular circumstances, can never expect to be fully independent."

According to the *Cyprus Mail*, May 18, 1955, Archbishop Makarios denounced the British government for “throwing Cyprus patriots fighting for freedom into jail as common criminals on the basis of illegal laws . . . Cyprus’s rulers must know that it is the unshakeable decision of the Cyprus people to free Cyprus of the shame of slavery.”

In “A Temporary Solution for Cyprus,” New York Times, April 24, 1957, C.L. Sulzberger writes, “The Turkish minority of 20 percent would be moved to one section of Cyprus and placed under Ankara. The Greek majority could be cleared out of that area and made subject to Athens.” In today’s mantra—ethnic cleansing. This did indeed happen in Cyprus following the 1974 Turkish invasion (as the Greeks refer to it) or the Turkish intervention (as Turkey prefers to define it).

Based on my study of *Bitter Lemons* and my knowledge and research on Cyprus, I believe that Durrell set and baited his own traps, then fell prey to them. Take, for example, his observations of the popular seaside town of Kyrenia shortly upon his arrival in pre-uprising 1953 Cyprus. “The outskirts of the walls had begun to bristle with cheap little villas and tarmac roads on the pattern of Wimbledon” (*Lemons* 22). The properties that characterize his Wimbledon benchmark, Durrell doesn’t explain. He must have left that task to his prospective UK readership. What might a more highly traveled Durrell say of the multistory neon-flashing casinos that today mutilate Kyrenia’s Turkish-controlled coast?

Durrell goes on, “. . . as far as I could judge the townsman’s standard of living [in Kyrenia] roughly corresponded to that of a Manchester suburb.” Why Manchester? London has many candidate suburbs besides Wimbledon for a writer’s rough comparison. Remaining steadfast to bias, Durrell says, “No Greek [presumably, every Greek Cypriot] can sit still without fidgeting, . . .” Durrell further asserts that, “The Turk [presumably, every Turkish Cypriot] . . . has an air of reptilian concentration . . .” (*Lemons* 39). In short, Greeks fidget, Turks are snakes.

“To disarm a Greek,” Durrell recommends to the suburban readers of *Bitter Lemons*, “you only have to embrace him” (*Lemons* 80). I’m not sure whether Durrell ever committed himself as to how a British suburbanite might disarm a reptilian Turk. Yet Durrell admits that, “. . . the British saw a one-dimensional figure in the Cypriot” (*Lemons* 26). “Every factor,” observes Durrell in one of many political digressions “was favorable to us [meaning the British]. We [the British] were known and loved; belief in our fair-mindedness and political honesty was unshakeable; . . .” (*Lemons* 121). He concedes with pride that Greeks see the British as phileleftheri—freedom-lovers.

In referring to broad issues such as the Greek Cypriots’ desire for union with Greece, for the Greek Cypriots’ urge to redress their ‘feelings’ of alienation in their own country, and to unshackle themselves from foreign ‘tutelage’, Durrell concludes as follows (*Lemons* 140). “Surely it was all founded in a childish bad dream from which they would awaken one day and realize that they could enjoy perfect Greek freedom within the Commonwealth—enjoying the best of both worlds? Was it not all due to a lack of education?” Henry Miller’s own view of education seems well-exemplified by the following comments on astronomers and the science of astronomy, following a pre-World-War-II visit with Durrell to the astronomical observatory in Athens. “For Durrell and myself reality lay wholly beyond the reach of their [the astronomers’] puny instruments . . . their circumscribed imagination locked forever in the hypothetical prison of logic” (*Colossus* 105).

Like so many of Durrell’s own generic observations, the following example at best fills space on a blank page. Quote: “The youth of the little island [Cyprus] was bursting with brains, talent, and an industry honestly comparable to that of the Germans or Italians” (*Lemons* 140).

It would have been more flattering for Durrell to have simply noted that the youth of Cyprus was bursting with brains, talent, and energy. Instead, Durrell elevates himself through

his redundant reference to “the little island”. He apparently also needs to convince a skeptical British reader that the Cypriot youth's industry was “honestly” comparable to something else. To the industry of the English, or the French? No. The Cypriot youth's industry was “honestly” comparable to that of Britain's recent enemies—the Germans and the Italians. Once again, Durrell distances himself from the Greek Cypriot, this time by allowing the notion ‘fascist’ to seep into the reader's mind.

If Durrell's fictional characters had given voice to the full spectrum of Durrell's apparently personal opinions, readers might have marveled at the author's powers of journalistic observation of the social landscape, even of the ‘spirit of place’. Perhaps, in late 50's England, Durrell might have actually impressed those of his Wimbledon or Manchester suburbanite readership still puzzled as to why Britain's colonial wogs insisted on revolt. In representing the beliefs of the author himself, however, Durrell's sentiments in *Bitter Lemons* reveal sensitivity to differing ethnicities about as deep as noting that even non-Europeans start life with limbs that grow symmetrically in pairs.

“In a sense,” Durrell writes, “it was our failure to project the British ethos” (*Lemons* 140). Miller, on the other hand, back in 1941, asserts the following. “No wonder Durrell wanted to fight with the Greeks. Who wouldn't prefer to fight beside a Bouboulina, for example, than with a gang of sickly, effeminate recruits from Oxford or Cambridge.” Miller concedes that “There are a thousand ways of talking and words don't help if the spirit is absent” and goes on to admit that, “I made no English friends in Greece” (*Colossus* 44).

Referring to the English literati in Athens, Henry Miller writes, (*Colossus* 110) “An evening with these buttery mouthed jakes left me in a suicidal mood. . . . Nobody really hated them—they were simply insufferable.” “They were one and all like animated cartoons from his *Black Book* (Durrell's novel).”

Miller seemed to care less whether the English liked him or not than Durrell did. Not surprisingly, then, Durrell's paternalism towards the Cypriot subjects of the British Crown—his acquiescence to his colonial heritage—mark him as victim of his time, environment and his personal circumstances, if not his childhood background in British India. Many of the ethnic sentiments captured in *Bitter Lemons* are worthy of the extant colonial cocktail banter—on which occasions he might indeed have picked up much of his material—or worthy of a mid-twentieth-century British potboiler, or of correspondence with crony Henry Miller, whose professed love of Greeks and second-hand hatred of Turks out-elbowed Durrell's.

The stridency of Miller's 1941 *The Colossus of Maroussi* makes Durrell's 1957 *Bitter Lemons* feel timid and apologetic. Miller might have foreseen Durrell's Cyprus dilemma when he wrote, "Newspapers engender lies, hatred, greed, envy, suspicion, fear, malice. We don't need the truth as it is dished up to us in the daily papers" (*Colossus* 46).

This begs the question: are we better off with the truth as dished out either by Miller himself or by Durrell? Referring to British colonial officials, Durrell said, "for they lived by the central colonial proposition which, as a conservative, I fully understand, namely: 'If you have an Empire, you just can't give away bits of it as soon as asked' " (*Lemons* 166).

Once commissioned by the Governor of Cyprus to be the mouthpiece for the Public Information Office, Durrell appears to have stumbled across the following essential difference between the British colonial government engineering the Cypriot's compliance to colonial rule, and the governed Cypriot committing insurrection to colonial rule. In Durrell's words—the truth according to Durrell—"The difference is between a fly-fisherman and someone who dynamites from a rowing boat" (*Lemons* 151). At the height of the Cypriot uprising, however, Durrell's Whitehall had ordered close to 40,000 fully armed, disciplined and coordinated 'fly-fishermen'

to Cyprus in furtherance of its colonial rule, while Cyprus's EOKA organization boasted only about 2,000 dynamite-tossing terrorists.

Durrell describes his side's troops as "patient taciturn soldiers" (*Lemons* 196). "If we had been Russians or Germans," he explains, "the Enosis problem would have been solved in half an hour . . ." (*Lemons* 213).

How many years should it take of living among Greeks (or any other community) to reach the conclusion that: "no Greek can interpret policy in anything but personal terms" (*Lemons* 172). "Who ever heard of a revolution by schoolchildren?" (*Lemons* 173). According to Durrell, these schoolchildren-terrorists misdirected their attention at "a bewildering succession of pointless targets" (*Lemons* 196). Perhaps this is explained in Durrell's own words, "It is, of course, not easy for youths raised in a Christian society, to turn themselves into terrorists overnight" (*Lemons* 213).

Wrong. It is easy for youths raised in a Christian society to turn themselves into terrorists overnight. Germany's SS probably enjoyed plenty of youthful volunteers, each doubtless exploding with brains and talent. What about Durrell's reference to a "succession of pointless targets"? Revolutionary or otherwise, schoolchildren endowed with brains, talent, and a penchant for hard work would hardly have squandered their energy on pointless targets.

About the colonial status quo, Durrell writes, "The present structure was containable indefinitely by force, of course, even if it grew worse" (*Lemons* 205). But *Bitter Lemons* leaves the last self-congratulatory lines to the eloquent taxi-driver who shunts Durrell to Nicosia's airport: " 'yes, even Dighenis [the EOKA leader], though he fights the British, really loves them. But he will have to go on killing them with regret, even with affection' " (*Lemons* 271).

A seemingly levelheaded Henry Miller said, "The enemy of man is not germs, but man himself, his pride, his prejudices, his stupidity, his arrogance" (*Colossus* 86). This piece of self-

evaluation is no less applicable to Durrell himself. As Miller has observed, “Every man contributes his bit to keeping the carnage going, even those who seem to be staying aloof” (*Colossus* 87).

I would like to digress for a brief comparison with today's Iraq, which no less than Cyprus, has enjoyed centuries of domination. Terrorists in Durrell's Cyprus set home-made bombs, planted dynamite, and shot civilians in the back. A twenty-first century Arabic-speaking Durrell working for the US embassy in Baghdad would note that today's insurgents relied on IED's and the derivative VBIED's—Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Devices—once collectively called car bombs, truck bombs, roadside bombs, etc.

Nowadays, an American Durrell's arsenal of social commentary would hardly include observations on one Iraqi sect prone to fidgeting like Greeks (*Lemons* 39), or another posing with reptilian concentration like Turks (*Lemons* 39), or indeed those specific sects that melted under his embrace (*Lemons* 80). He would hardly gain mileage in cocktail parties in Baghdad's Green Zone by noting that Iraq's youth seemed to him to be bursting with talent, a surprising level of grey matter, “and an industry honestly comparable to that of the Germans or Italians.”

However, today's suicide bombings offer ample enough opportunities for cultural stereotyping.

But today's Durrell, like the original Durrell, might be correct in lamenting that “the state of the police force was deplorable: underpaid, inefficiently equipped, inadequate in size, it was totally unprepared . . .” (*Lemons* 164).

Today's terrorists, our contemporary Durrell might speculate, built their IED's in caves, dugouts, and cockroach-infested workshops. In response to today's socially sensitized audience, Durrell might debate filmmaker Michael Moore on the Larry King show on the state of Al Qaeda's health plan. Of course, contemporary security forces, peace-bringers, and standard-

bearers of democracy—the good guys—don't 'use' bombs the way armies used to, namely, to terrorize or kill as many people as possible. Nowadays, they 'deploy' 'precision weapons' to 'take out' 'high-value' targets. In the process, they don't murder innocents—the local population they were perhaps commandeered to protect, or with whom they profess no quarrel—these days, they (and we) actively 'lose' innocents through 'collateral damage' or passively through standing by during a well-publicized session of ethnic cleansing.

Our Iraq-stationed Durrell might recall the ratio 10:1—that in Cyprus there were about ten British-loving Greek Cypriots for every British soldier, and far more than ten soldiers for every terrorist combatant. On this scale, it would require at least four million American soldiers to subdue the America-hating Iraqis. United States' General Eric Shinseki once advised Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that Iraq required something in the order of several hundred thousand troops. If Shinseki had proposed a million troops, instead of just being fired, he might have been locked up in an institution.

A 21st century Henry Miller would still denounce American-made bombs, regardless of whether they were of the precision variety, guaranteed to perform according to specifications—if used as directed, that is. Even a socially re-sensitized Miller wouldn't be derailed by a claim that today's bombs were assembled by equal opportunity subcontractors to bid-winning Defense Department prime contractors who collectively offer great health plans, pension plans, perhaps even daycare centers.

In *The Colossus of Maroussi* Henry Miller writes the following about a certain Greek man imprisoned for murder: “. . . I would prefer to be the prison keeper, even without the additional three cents. I would take the twenty years in jail too, as part of the bargain. I would prefer to be a murderer with a clear conscience, walking about in tatters and waiting for next year's crop of corn, than the president of the most successful industrial corporation in America. .

. . the Greek killed only one man in righteous anger, whereas the successful American businessman is murdering thousands of innocent men, women and children in his sleep every day of his life” (*Colossus* 54).

Consider CNN, June 20, 2007: the Cafferty File. “There are only ten people in the United States embassy in Baghdad who speak and write fluent Arabic,” Jack Cafferty reported. Jack Cafferty’s conclusion: “only ten [people] can order lunch in Iraq.” As long ago as in 1941, Miller wrote, “I can’t stand this idea, which is rooted in the minds of little peoples, that America is the hope of the world” (*Colossus* 134). “. . . wherever we breathe, we poison and destroy” (*Colossus* 130-131). However, just as Durrell fled to England when EOKA fighters started stepping on his toes, Henry Miller abandoned his beloved Greeks to wartime Athens, and opted for the safe haven of California.

What about the language issue in Cyprus in 1953? Durrell writes, “I was astonished to find how few Cypriots knew good English, and how few Englishmen the dozen words of Greek which cement friendships. . . . In revolutionary situations they [these things] can become the most powerful political determinant” (*Lemons* 26).

In October 1956, from the safe haven of England’s green and pleasant land, and after beating a hasty exit from mid-turmoil Cyprus, Durrell wrote the following piece to Henry Miller. “Cyprus is so tragic it doesn’t bear talking about. Clearly we can’t go on being a great power if our political grasp is so elementary. Russia can do it because she shoots to kill. But we can neither shoot nor think it seems. Never mind. I’m well out of that lot.

“Meanwhile October is all sunshine and green grass and smoke from cottage chimneys. Nothing has changed. The Englishman still laughs without removing his pipe; his wife wears a hat and carries a lap dog. Everything is serene and bland as suet” (*Durrell and Miller* 306).⁶

Bland as suet. After devouring Henry Miller's *The Colossus of Maroussi*, that's how a reread of Durrell's *Bitter Lemons* strikes me. Durrell might be credited with the romantic notion that an artist like himself is determined by the place in which he finds himself—the artist's sensitivity to the 'spirit of place'—but I rather lean towards Durrell's life and art being determined by time, social environment, fiscal circumstances, but above all, by his upbringing, and his revolt against it, or his acceptance of it.

In the recent words of my colleague, John Vlachopoulos, Professor of Chemical Engineering at McMaster University, “ ‘Four hundred years under the Turks’ is a frequently heard cliché in Greece about all of Greece's ills, whether it is the standard of living, impolite behavior, bad driving, frequent strikes, or poor hospital care.” Like their Greek mainland counterparts, Cypriot Greeks have survived centuries of imperial subjugation by the Ottomans. Britain's legacy in Cyprus is fifteen years of post-independence, inter-communal strife culminating in the forced partition of the island by Turkey in 1974.

Male literati, perhaps no less than anyone else driven by 'the selfish gene,' and particularly those who have built their careers out of being dispossessed—Durrell and Miller fill this category well—are bound to fall in love with 'exotic' foreign landscapes and 'exotic' foreign women. Such infatuations seem almost prerequisite to their art. Their loves, egos, fears, and obsessions, however, wouldn't gain literary toeholds if the artists hadn't first cast off the shackles of reason. Henry Miller tells us that, “The Greek woman, even when she is cultured, is first and foremost a woman” (*Colossus* 110). I'm sure Durrell himself believed that about Greek women too, if not just about every other woman he ever set eyes on.

Given the revelations of his biographers, it seems reasonable to assume that the dysfunctional fictional relationships Durrell created mirrored his state of mind and gave play to demons that nipped at the edges of his family life. A lyrical Durrell strides confidently center-

stage through the alleys, the taverns, the classrooms, the beaches, the colonial hallways, and upper-crust tea parties of *Bitter Lemons*, alas with scant backdrop credits to either his mother or his child, and none to his then wife. Like Henry Miller, Durrell invoked the comfortable known even if only to hammer it. In retrospect, Durrell's tale smacks of a reverse honey trap, of a love-starved male's effort to woo a mistress through a hastily-prepared slide-show of expurgated family snapshots.

No wonder the small, ill-equipped band of EOKA fighters brought the once mighty British Empire to its knees.

Those who wonder how or why the creator of *The Alexandria Quartet* could have sunk into the tawdry morass suggested by his *Bitter Lemons*—might recall that his acclaimed mega-novel hadn't yet reached the English bookshelves. By the mid 50's, this dispossessed, but self-possessed, intellectual hadn't risen beyond occasional schoolteacher and itinerant civil servant. His second marriage had collapsed; his apparently troubled second wife, like his first wife, had taken off with their offspring; and the Greeks of Cyprus yielded neither to his charm, nor to his preconceived brand of Philhellenism, and certainly not to his salary-backed notion of Empire. And circumstances, once again, forced him to uproot himself. Bitter lemons, indeed.

Over their life-spans, Durrell and Miller have perhaps served up groundbreaking aesthetic diversions for the Western elite, in part because the science of simple logic probably held little sway with them. Simple logic alone, though, might have unshackled them from their self-serving stereotype and propaganda. James Gifford argues⁷ that "Durrell goes to great lengths [in the *Alexandria Quartet*] to throw the reader back upon his own resources." Perhaps. But Durrell also goes to great lengths to strap the readers of *Bitter Lemons* into Durrell's own colonial straightjacket.

Notes

1. Ian MacNiven, *Lawrence Durrell A Biography*. London, England: Faber and Faber, 1998.
2. Lawrence Durrell, *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*, 1957. London, England: Faber and Faber, 2000 (reset paperback edition).
3. Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*, 1941. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967.
4. John Bandler, *Barbed Wire in Aphrodite's Garden*. 2007 (unpublished).
5. Museum of Fighters: EOKA (the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters), Nicosia, Cyprus, 2003.
6. George Wickes, Ed., *Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller A Private Correspondence*. London, England: Faber and Faber, 1962.
7. James Gifford, "Reevaluating postcolonial theory in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*," *Literary Studies and Global Culture*, University of Victoria, Department of English, Mar. 16-17, 2001.