Sweet and Bitter Island: A History of the British in Cyprus

TABITHA MORGAN
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When I decide to review books on Cyprus published by I.B. Tauris it is with much trepidation because of the inconsistent quality of their publications. Tabitha Morgan's book is an exception.

Journalists have probably written more books on the history of modern Cyprus than scholars, ranging from Nancy Crawshaw, Charles Foley, Robert Stephens, Christopher Hitchens, Ian Craig and Brendan O'Malley. It did not concern me that Morgan was a journalist when she informed me of her plans for a book because of her enthusiasm and willingness to consult widely the archival material. Yet I was concerned by the line in the preface which claims that this book 'makes no claims to be an academic history'. I was unsure whether to read this as an excuse for any inaccuracies and/or omissions, or that Morgan was simply recognising that she is not a professional historian. As it turns out, the book is academic, as well as entertaining. Although not perfect, this is more to do with certain limitations, by way of sources (although Morgan has accessed many primary sources never before used, she has not extensively consulted the widely available secondary sources); and length restrictions, partly the result of the publisher, and partly because Morgan came close to 'biting more off than she could chew'.

In terms of Cypriot historiography, Morgan's book can be situated alongside the best in secondary scholarship for it supports recent challenges to received wisdoms, while it also fills a void with its specific focus. From the first chapter, Morgan establishes that the British 'often felt confused about Cyprus ...' [and] 'uncertainty about the territory, in particular about who their colonial subjects were, provided a leitmotif throughout the British occupation of the island'. She adds in the same paragraph that: 'at the same time the colonists found many aspects of their new territory, particularly its geography and its archaeological and linguistic connections with ancient Greece, reassuringly familiar, in some cases even an extension of home'. This was one of the main arguments of my monograph, and it is reassuring that Morgan agrees, despite such findings being maligned elsewhere, ironically by someone who fails to see that Morgan argues the exact same thing![1]

1 A. Varnava (2010) *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878-1915: The Inconsequential Possession*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; W. Mallinson (2011) 'Spies, Jolly Hockeysticks and Imperialism in Cyprus', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, pp. 263-268.

The other main thrust of Morgan's monograph is that Cyprus was for the most part of British rule a backwater. This argument also supports the contention in my monograph, although I disagree with Morgan's view that Cyprus became a backwater only after the British occupied Egypt.[2] Nevertheless, Morgan's argument that British confusion and often ad hoc policies regarding Cyprus owed itself to Cyprus' status as a backwater is true, although there were times when Cyprus' position as a backwater engendered specific policy decisions.

Before embarking on a critical analysis of Morgan's text, I would like to focus on her wonderful achievement and the new and interesting revelations she offers. I enjoyed Morgan's discussion on how Louisa Wolseley's choice of wallpaper highlighted a traditional and perceived organic pre-industrial vision, which mirrored colonial spaces (p. 9). The opening to chapter 2 is brilliant, with Morgan's discussion of the building of St Paul's Anglican Cathedral and how the destruction of St George's Cathedral, because it had started sinking, reflected the sinking feeling of many British elites in both Cyprus and Britain that Cyprus was the 'Whitest of White Elephants', or as I have put it, the 'Mediterranean El Dorado'. The discussion and theorisation of Biddulph's speech to the Royal Geographical Society in 1889 is ingenious: Morgan sees in this speech the obvious anxiety between the occident and the orient (continued in chapter 3), which many commentators have criticised me for revealing, but goes beyond this argument to also discuss an anxiety between modernisation, especially technical and industrial, and the pre-industrial and highly romanticised vision of rural/country life, which Cyprus offered. This led Morgan into an interesting debate on the Troodos Hill Station, although she should have consulted my article on this subject in volume XVII of *The Cyprus Review* of 2005. In chapter 4 Morgan offers a fascinating exchange on the 'model' government farm five miles outside Old Nicosia at Athalassa, from which the government aimed to provide a 'model' for the Cypriots and for investors, by providing a first-class breeding station, which would loan stud animals in order to create perfect breeds. This section fits nicely with new research that identifies an increase in agricultural production during this period, and the establishment of co-operative banks by the private sector, which the legislative council finally legislated on in 1914.[3] Also impressive is Morgan's discussion of how High Commissioner Hamilton Goold-Adams handled the outbreak of the First World War. Goold-Adams, who claimed that his chief secretary Charles Orr was 'highly strung', proved an incompetent high commissioner, and himself highly strung, suffering a nervous breakdown before being shipped off to the ceremonial post of governor of Queensland. Equally excellent is Morgan's treatment of Malcolm Stevenson's tenure as high commissioner/governor in chapter 7. Important are the occasional comparisons with other parts of the Empire, such as when Morgan reveals that there had been 5,000 prosecutions per year for illegal grazing in Cyprus, while only 130 in the United India Provinces (p. 108). Cyprus' development under Sir Ronald Storrs is well

2 Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, op. cit.*

3 A. Varnava and P. Clarke, 'The Development of Accountancy in Early British Cyprus', under review.

covered, and it was interesting to read how the improvement of Nicosia airfield allowed Jean Batten, then flying solo from England to Australia, to land to refuel, being one of the few truly historical feats to have included Cyprus (pp. 116-117). Morgan expertly and concisely evaluates the evidence on the enlistment in the Cyprus Regiment and the British Army generally during the Second World War and contradicts a recent nationalist approach (ironically also published by I.B. Tauris) that recruitment picked-up only when Greece entered the war,[4] by showing that enlistment was so strong that conscription was rejected (pp. 146-147). An interesting point and one that adds to the questioning of Cyprus' strategic value is Morgan's point that had the German's established themselves in Syria during the Second World War a defence of Cyprus would be hopeless (p. 162). The discourse on espionage during the Second World War is very informative and solid – much more authoritative than recent efforts (in yet another I.B. Tauris book)[5] – even if Morgan did not use the memoir of an intelligence officer, W.E. Benyon-Tinker. I enjoyed immensely Morgan's refreshing framing of chapter 12 around the outstanding Cypriot Dr Mehmet Aziz, whose pivotal and forgotten work eradicated malaria from the island. Equally pleasing is how Morgan succeeded in offering a balanced account of the 'emergency', discussing EOKA's notorious and yet little studied targeting of civilians, with British brutality, while also discussing how some Greek Cypriots protected British friends. Finally, but not least, Morgan makes an important point that the British were marginalised at the point of decolonisation in so many ways, a point I have also made elsewhere,[6] and which needs comparison with other cases. Throughout there are some fascinating pieces of information, such as the fact that one-sixth of Cyprus' forests were felled in the First World War (p. 106), or that people were living in caves in Paphos into the 1920s (p. 108), and that Leontios was draped in the British, Greek and Turkish flags (p. 155), while addressing a crowd in Larnaca in 1940.

Morgan's book offers avenues for serious critical engagement, so important in any academic study. I question the often repeated claim that the insecure British tenure of Cyprus inhibited the development of the island (p. 3), putting this down to its status as a backwater and to the British preferring to recoup the tribute for the defaulted Ottoman Crimean War Loan of 1854 and so not wanting to spend local funds on development.[7] I also question Morgan's support of Clauson over his disagreements with the various military intelligence officers during the First World War (p. 91), especially since in April 1918 Clauson accepted their proposals to upgrade martial law in

4 A. Yiangou (2010) *Cyprus in World War II: Politics and Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean*, London: I.B. Tauris.

5 P. Dimitrakis (2010) *Military Intelligence in Cyprus from the Great War to Middle East Crises*, London: I.B. Tauris; See also my forthcoming review in *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*.

6 A. Varnava (2010) 'Reinterpreting Macmillan's Cyprus Policy, 1957-1960', *The Cyprus Review*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, pp. 79-106.

7 Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus*, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-151.

line with Egypt, indicating a begrudging acceptance for tighter controls.[8] Also, the British ruled Cyprus despotically after 1931 (p. 126), yet Cypriot elites rejected a constitution granting them limited self-government in 1948, so they preferred 'despotic rule' to limited self-government because of their *enosis* obsession.[9] Also incomplete is Morgan's portrayal of the 'Oktovriana' (pp. 126-127) because she did not discuss the agrarian dimension of the disorders. I cannot agree with the claim that the Labour movement was incompatible with Empire (p. 199), since the Fabian Socialists were pro-Empire, justifying their stance by seeing the Empire as fertile ground in which to spread their socialist utopia. I equally could not agree with Morgan's uncritical depiction of the *enosis* 'plebiscite' (p. 205) and its claim to reflect a 'mass movement' (p. 207), because it was conducted undemocratically (an open ballot in churches) and it ignored Turkish Cypriot views. Morgan is generous to describe Grivas' 'X' organisation as shadowy (p. 206) given the overwhelming evidence of its collaboration with the Germans during the occupation. She is harsh on Robert Armitage, a view based on Robert Holland's fine book, and not on the more authoritative monograph by Colin Baker (a splendid I.B. Tauris publication[10]), which asserts that Armitage's dismissal from the Cyprus governorship was harsh because his replacement, Field-Marshal Sir John Harding, adopted many of his ideas.[11] I question that *enosis* and especially EOKA violence had deep-rooted support (p. 218), given that more Greek Cypriots were killed than any other ethnic group, when the supposed targets were British and later Turkish Cypriots, although I agree that British actions (p. 229) pushed some indifferent Greek Cypriots towards EOKA, it also worked the other way around. Finally, there are some minor errors and omissions: in the preface Morgan states that Cyprus became a Crown Colony in 1926 when it was in 1925; in chapter 1 that Wolseley's administration was to be temporary, when in fact it came to a sudden and unplanned end in 1879; that Government House in Nicosia was a military barracks meant for Ceylon, and not for civilian use as claimed; in chapter 2 it is implied that the British occupation of Egypt was intended to be permanent, which it was not, and there were serious proposals to move the British forces from Egypt to Troodos; also in chapter 2 it is claimed that Dr Frederick Heidenstam was the long-awaited government doctor, when he had in fact been in Cyprus before the British occupation; it was also a mistake to claim that the British had imposed the Tribute not believing that the British would retain Cyprus on a long-term basis, since they had secretly agreed to the Russians retaining Ardahan, Kars and Batoum, after promising to return Cyprus to the Sultan if the Russians returned Ardahan, Kars and Batoum; in chapter 3 the claim that Major-

8 A. Varnava (2012) 'British Military Intelligence in Cyprus during the Great War', *War in History*, forthcoming, Vol. XIX, No. 2.

9 In this connection, Richter's claim that the British ruled by decree is wrong, p. 132.

10 A. Varnava (1998) Review of Colin Baker's, *Retreat from Empire: Sir Robert Armitage in Africa and Cyprus*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris, and (2004) *Melbourne Historical Journal*, Vol. XXXII, pp. 83-85.

11 C. Baker (1998) *Retreat from Empire: Sir Robert Armitage in Africa and Cyprus*, New York: I.B. Tauris.

General Sir Robert Biddulph proposed to introduce English as the language of instruction in schools, an often repeated assertion, was not true – the aim was to introduce English alongside the local languages; also erroneous is the claim that the Church of Cyprus thought the teaching of the Greek language was pivotal to the 'survival of Hellenism', when in fact the majority of the Church elites during the nineteenth century did not have a Hellenic identity at all, but considered themselves to have a religious national identity, as Eastern Orthodox Christians of Cyprus; Sir Harry Luke was not a Philhellenist (p. 42), but a Turcophile, and did not succeed Storrs as Oriental Secretary in Egypt (p. 112); Lord Elgin was not the Foreign Secretary (p. 53), but the Colonial Secretary; the Troodos Hill Station served as the capital of the island for six months of the year, not three months (p. 69); Doros Alastos was not a historian (p. 132), but a Cypriot *enosis* lobbyist in London whose real name was Evdoros Ioannides; Richmond Palmer did not succeed Storrs (p. 134), this was Reginald Stubbs; it was decided to move the British Middle East HQ from the Suez Canal Base to Cyprus in 1952 not in 1954 (p. 208); Discussion on the origins of tricondomimum are incorrect (p. 215); use of the term 'inter-communal' violence, an anachronism that panders to the Greek Cypriot position which does not view events as a civil war, as civil war experts do, because they wish to blame Turkish Cypriots for the violence (p. 239); the notion that there was no 'inter-communal' violence before Sir Hugh Foot became governor is contradicted later, when Morgan states that violence started in November 1957, yet Foot arrived the next month (pp. 240, 243-243). Finally, on a few occasions, Morgan fails to provide sources to account for her evidence, such as for the intriguing Fascist Italian map on Cyprus' defences (p. 161) and when General Darling had surrounded Grivas (p. 251).

One of the most positive elements to come from Morgan's book is that she touched upon so many events, developments, and themes that could and indeed should be studied further. For example:

- The reference to Richmond Palmer's governorship as a 'Colonel Blimps regime' (p. 142) was fascinating because it opens the way for further dialogue, in either book or article form, on what the metropolis thought of the periphery in this case;
- The British settlement in Kyrenia (p. 145) certainly needs further study both in relation to quantification and importance to the development of society and business;
- The Breslau broadcasts (p. 150) would make a compelling article;
- The 500-strong Polish community settled in Cyprus in 1940 who were the first compulsory ethnic group evacuated to Egypt (p. 164) would make an interesting article if situated within a wider comparative context;
- Prostitution during the Second World War (pp. 177-178) and a comparison with other colonial possessions would also make a fascinating article;
- A book could be written about the developments in medical treatments in Cyprus from the work of Heidenstam, Ross and Aziz, and a comparison with other colonial possessions;

- Finally, but not least, there is great potential for further research into the impact of EOKA on the English School and the links between youth, political violence, and recruitment.

Also exciting is Morgan's use of archives that have previously not been accessed, especially the material from Rhodes House Oxford, the Imperial War Museum, and the Middle East Centre Archive, at St Anthony's College, Oxford. In particular it was a delight to see Morgan use a number of unpublished memoirs, namely those of William Battershill, Vivian Hart-Davis, Robert Hepburn Wright, Evelyn Newman, Geoff Chapman, Paul Griffin, John Reddaway, and General Sir Kenneth Darling, which I would urge her to consider obtaining the rights to publish.[12]

Morgan's book is a must read, for it is the first to detail the British experience in Cyprus during British rule, and it does so in a richly detailed, mostly accurate, and always perceptive and entertaining account.

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12 For a few cases (i.e. Chapman and Griffin) Morgan did not provide full references for these memoirs to enable others to both access and verify her sources.