The Cyprus Frenzy of 1878 and the British Press

Marinos Pourgouris
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The Cyprus Frenzy was, as Marinos Pourgouris argues, just that: a frenzy in the public and political spheres of the colonial metropolis of Victorian Britain, which erupted in the summer of 1878 upon the news that Cyprus had been acquired by Britain from its Ottoman overlords. Pourgouris, an Associate Professor of Literary Theory and Modern Greek Studies at the University of Cyprus, examines how and why this 'fixation [...] perhaps unprecedented in the history of British colonialism' (6) over Cyprus exploded and not long thereafter why it faded into oblivion (or a 'fiasco,' as it was in some instances described (81)), until the other bookend of Britain's colonisation of Cyprus. Pourgouris' main protagonist is the first British High Commissioner of Cyprus, Sir Garnet Wolseley, and his administration – but this is not a biography or a history book. Instead, building on archival research into the contemporary British press, it analyses the dispatches of six correspondents who travelled to Cyprus to report on the British occupation of the island.

These six special correspondents, who are the focus of chapters 3 to 8, were commissioned by their newspapers to travel to the newly acquired territory of the British Empire and report on what they found there: St. Leger Algernon Herbert was sent by *The Times of London*, Archibald Forbes by *The Daily News*, John Augustus O'Shea by *The London Evening Standard*, Edward Henry Vizetelly by *The Glasgow Herald*, Samuel Pasfield Oliver by *The Illustrated London News*, while Hepworth Dixon worked for various provincial publications. In meticulous detail, Pourgouris denotes their respective backstories and how and why they came to report on the 1878 Cyprus occupation, as well as their lives thereafter. But a central tenet that weaves through this narrative is the interlinkage between the military elite (Wolseley) and these reporters – irrespective of whether these relations were extremely close or contemptuous. Herbert travelled with Wolseley, where he was employed as Wolseley's first private secretary, while retelling Wolseley's colonisation of Cyprus for *The Times*. Forbes, meanwhile, had military experience and had admired Wolseley since their time serving together during the Anglo-Zulu War, and also accompanied Wolseley

on his journey to Cyprus. O'Shea, who also 'had some military experience' and had covered the Franco-Prussian War almost a decade earlier, advocated for the army's role in making the colonisation a success (101). Oliver had graduated from the Royal Military Academy and served in the army for twenty years before resigning his commission to work as a correspondent. Meanwhile, Vizetelly who had considerable experience as a war correspondent and came from a family of publishers and reporters, frequently criticised the British military in their handling of the occupation of Cyprus (106), whereas Dixon's relationship with Wolseley could be characterised as one of mutual contempt (155). However, all six of them were interconnected with the new administration of the island, even if they did not all share a 'deeply intimate alliance' in the positive sense (107).

From the very first chapter, the author sets out this intimate relationship not merely within the 'Wolseley Ring' of soldier-friends and associates of Sir Garnet, but also of the special correspondents. The latter, Pourgouris explains, aspired to the same social class as the military elite (29), and through the battlefield, had got to know each other well. It is important to underscore that this intimacy does not necessarily mean close, friendly or even familial ties, but includes room for disagreements or even animosity (see previous example of Dixon). Instead, the intimacy between soldier/colonial administrator and correspondent means a personal connection through the imperial project, through similar personal experiences.

The colonial power's military officers and the special correspondents reporting back 'to the centre' formed a symbiotic relationship: correspondents needed military connections to get to the 'field' from which they were dispatching their telegrams or letters and in order to obtain information. Today's 'embedded journalist'. Even Wolseley, who disliked journalists and wrote about it, understood that the press was vital in attaining military objectives (52). After all, the Empire needed correspondents to depict acts of heroism, and satiate the Victorian public's imagination of the glorification of the colonial project. Pourgouris in fact underscores this intimacy throughout *The Cyprus Frenzy,* setting this group apart from everyone, the familiar and the foreign, the civilised and the barbaric – which falls within 'colonialism's *ontological* function' (125) as argued by Edward Said in his seminal 1978 *Orientalism*.[85]

The illustrations in chapter 7 reproduced from *The Illustrated Police News* are apt examples of the exaggerations, caricatures and tropes used by Victorian illustrators of the people of Cyprus within the orientalist context. Probably the starkest example

[85] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

is entitled 'Cyprus Illustrated' (128), the composites of which were based on drawings from engravings by a French artist made almost a century earlier called *The Costume of Turkey*, but for the British soldiers (Wolseley et al) in the piece's centre. Thereby both in terms of the era and location from whence the original was produced, 'Cyprus Illustrated' was a fib, or fake news in today's parlance, not least because the editorial note stated that the 'reproductions from water colour drawing, [were] made from the life. There cannot, therefore, be any doubt about their accuracy' (127). Pourgouris uses this image to showcase *orientalisation* of the Cypriot in full. Other depictions from *The Graphic* as well as *The Illustrated London News,* are also included. The latter publication had dispatched Samuel Pasfield Oliver as special artist/correspondent, and Oliver's illustration of the ceremony in which the Union Jack was blessed in a Greek Orthodox liturgy at Kykkos Monastery before being hoisted by clergy (147) contrasts the British coloniser and the colonised (including the Indian troops who were brought in by the British) in illustrated form. The colonisers are set apart from the 'rest' as they are hatless and standing apart and aloof. The colonised however all wear hats (including the Indian soldiers), stand together *en masse*, with their attention on the British flag.

This is a pivotal moment of the early days of the British colonial experience in Cyprus which Pourgouris points out was also reported on by Herbert and O'Shea. This is a trait of the author, who frequently encapsulates moments of the initial period of the occupation and compares each of his six correspondents' retelling of them. But as Pourgouris argues, the importance of illustrations – unlike reports in word form – was that these helped 'even the uneducated masses' have a means of understanding the colonialist project, and fed into Victorian Britain's public perception of 'the mighty British Empire' (136).

The seminal moments of Sir Garnet's arrival and early days in Cyprus were an important and common theme of the correspondents' early dispatches of an island which, erstwhile Ottoman, is now to be British, paving the way for opportunity, for trade, for tourism, for future prospects of a 'civilising mission' (61) and not least 'its significance as a strategic base' (6). A country with ancient Hellenistic ruins, a largely Christian population, a territory that Richard the Lionheart had conquered (which, as chapter 8 depicts, enabled Dixon to construct a narrative whereby Britain thus had a right to possess Cyprus since it was 'stolen from the British through treachery and deceit' by the Lusignans (161)), the setting of Shakespeare's *Othello* was the island that 'could seemingly satisfy practically [the colonial imagery of] everyone who

looked to it for inspiration or gain (political or economic)' (9). The *Cyprus Frenzy* centres on newspapers of the day, advertisements, but also lectures and theatrical performances to depict the fascination of Victorian Britain with its newest colony.

While the aforementioned illustrations – with a picture being worth a thousand words – could be the most immediately striking set of caricatures of the Cypriot reproduced in the book, Pourgouris navigates us through their depiction as it appeared in the British metropolis in the Victorian press. This task would not have been an easy feat, given that early on the author points out that correspondents' by-lines in the Victorian era were not utilised and so matching each dispatch appearing in the British press with its author required considerable archival research.

Vizetelly seemed to be the only one of the reporters dispatched to Cyprus who was highly critical of the occupation army (108) arguably because he didn't share the degree of intimacy and connection of the other correspondents with the military. He also portrayed the newly arrived English immigrants in a bad light, spotlighting their consumption of alcohol and subsequent penchant for fights (110-111). He was disparaging of Greek Cypriots who were 'grumblers and malcontents', and who were but 'miserable shadows' when compared to the Greeks of the mainland (109). Interestingly, his portrayal of the Turks ('bad rulers') comes across as less pejorative, which Pourgouris explains as rooted in Vizetelly's time as a soldier in the Ottoman irregular troops during the Russo-Turkish War.

O'Shea, meanwhile, found that the blessing and hoisting of the British flag by the colonised, the illustration of which Oliver dispatched with a rather neutral write-up, was unnecessary as it could 'beget in the Greeks a delusion that we identify ourselves in sympathy with one race in this island to the contempt of the other, and that other the governing race from whom we got the island' (144). Wolseley's biographer Charles Low is quoted as writing about the 'greed of their race' when describing the Greek Cypriots attending said ceremony (147). Dixon, however, was an exemplar of the colonialist depiction of the subaltern, describing them as 'indolent, careless, and mimetic,' or 'creatures of the lower types [...] holding on by simple animal tenacity' (162). He proclaims that colonisation may 'improve them; but an Oriental race is very slow to change' (163). Forbes would later use a similar element when writing how the colonial project would 'improve Cypriotes out of their existing state of semi-barbarism', while talking of the 'debased Greek patois' of Cyprus, the 'ugly women', and how he would come to 'regard the pig-faced lady as passable' in his final report from the island (after only a month there) (80-81). Herbert, meanwhile, in his

dual capacity as Wolseley's close associate and *The Times of London* correspondent portrayed the Greek Cypriots in how, in his mind, they viewed the British occupiers: the 'Deliverer.' Writing about a state reception in Nicosia on the occasion of the second Bayram, Herbert reflects that the 'subordination of the natives' was solidified on that occasion (54-55).

None of the correspondents share an alliance with the colonised and all fall into executors of colonialism's ontological function. And it is this aspect of Pourgouris' *Frenzy* that is at the core of his thesis. While the diplomatic history of how Cyprus came into Britain's fold has been recounted innumerable times, this targeted deciphering of the reporting of Britain's acquisition of Cyprus adds a novel element to the existing literature. From the methodically researched clippings about Cyprus published in the British press, the insularity and the orientalist gaze of the coloniser is very apparent. Empire was about giving means of opportunity and exploitation to the imperial centre, as well as to these correspondents' readership in Victorian Britain whose imaginations were briefly caught up in Cyprus as it became yet another 'province' painted red on the map of Empire.

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