

Olympics & the Greek reality

Festival

By Hywel Williams 15/8/64 DAWN

"WE Europeans are the children of Hellas." The opening words of Fisher's *History of Europe* make a familiar claim. It is the "democracy, etc" argument which traces the European best to the classical Greek legacy.

Fisher himself, a member of UK prime minister Herbert Asquith's cabinet (Asquith was premier in the run up to and during the first two years of the Great War), was a good example of the English Hellenist — an elite group of liberals keen on Greek values as an escape from modern confusion. And "Hellas", as represented by that brigade, has offered something for most. Classical architecture appeals to those who hate modernity. Plato's fears and Thucydides' strictures are used to show that democracies fall apart unless controlled by educated types. Greek religion, nice and hazy, has proved a useful stick with which to beat nastily dogmatic Christianity. And gay life has always thrilled to the idea of what really went on in the gymnasium. The appeal of Hellas lies in its capacity to be manipulated to suit later purposes.

Now emerging from the Piraeus smog come the Olympic games — the most fraudulent bit of the Hellenic mythologizing. There's always been Greek scepticism about the games, whose historic claims offer an artificial past lifted in isolation from ancient soil, with little relevance to modern Greece. Olympianism, so lofty in ideals, after all had no problems in accommodating itself to the Greece of the colonels. And Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the whole terrible circus, concentrated on France, England and the US — those colonial powers that mattered — when he searched for the sponsors who helped to revive the games in 1896. The contemporary Greek reality didn't enter into the games much except as local heritage backdrop.

Hellenism shows the power of what French historian Marc Bloch called the idol of origins — the temptation to find legitimacy by searching for roots whose tenacious grasp explain all later developments. But the urge to isolate one strand and then ignore everything that happened afterwards is usually done for propagandist reasons; that way back in the past there is a line of descent which is more pure than anything that came subsequently. Just clear away the supposedly irrelevant bits and you will see how, for example, the "origins" of the English parliament lay in the assemblies of the Teutonic warriors, or how African state-collapse is traceable to an ineradicable

tribalism. A similar silliness claims that Greek identity is traceable to its Hellenic origins in Sophocles and all that.

Most visitors to Greece looking for continuity with the classical past are struck by its absence. The evidence is mostly a question of archaeological remains — empty spaces which deepen the sense of a really dead history.

The Slav invasions of the 7th centuries AD played a role in this lacuna — and it's uncertain to what extent the Greeks of the classical age intermarried with the Slavs or retreated inland.

What is uncontested is that when the Greeks revived as a community by the 9th century AD it was two qualities alone which defined them. To be a Hellene meant that you could speak the language and practise the faith of Orthodox Christianity. You could therefore be a Greek even if you lived outside the jurisdiction of the emperor in Constantinople. After the fall of that city to the Turks in 1453, these questions of identity became even more important. This was an assertion of a national spirit in consciousness and customs, as in that other Middle Eastern diaspora — that of the Jews. This way of thinking has persisted long after the founding of the modern Greek state in 1827 and was a triumph of a community which had willed itself into political existence just south of the Balkans.

Greek politics is Balkan in its obsessiveness with roots and identity. But it uses those tools of imagined beginnings in order to distinguish itself from the mess to the north. Even the name Macedonia is a problem. The Greeks' own Macedonia is the territory in the north once ruled by Alexander. But the name's appropriation by the former Yugoslav republic seemed to Greeks to betoken their absorption within a Balkan world. Sensitivity about Macedonia shows how modern Greece has used Hellenism as a tool of differentiation. Like many a modern, insecure nation it wishes to claim a longer history than the evidence suggests. But Christian Orthodoxy, which gave the Greeks their modern cultural identity, is also shared with the Slavs. As a result, modern Greece has more in common with Slavic culture than it does with the Latin west.

The myth of Hellenic-classical continuity has become a weapon in the modern Greek armoury of self-definition. It is a national region too often tempted by a falsifying myth of its own origins. Which makes it an appropriate home for Olympic nonsense. — Dawn/The Guardian News Service