

## Exploring the papers of the Scottish Philhellene Thomas Gordon (1788-1841)

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This paper concerns the Greek War of Independence (1821-1828) and Thomas Gordon of Cairness. My account will take us from Buchan, in the north-east of Scotland, to Southern Greece and it will revolve round the papers of Thomas Gordon, a Scottish laird who appears to have been interested in intellectual pursuits as much as in action. An ardent, though critical and informed Philhellene, he was active in The Cause (as the Philhellenes termed it at the time) both in the field and from his beloved Buchan estate. Twice he went to Greece during the war, in 1821 and in 1826-27, taking part in two major military operations. After the liberation and until his death Gordon divided his time between Scotland and Greece. In Greece he systematically collected written documents and oral information from eye-witnesses about the war, and later on served in the army in various capacities. In Scotland he wrote his fine *History of the Greek Revolution*,<sup>1</sup> and it was also in Scotland that he died in 1841.

Gordon is not one of the best-known Philhellenes; surprisingly, he is not one of the best-known historians of the War of Independence either. I myself had only a vague recollection of Θωμάς Γόρδων from old-fashioned history textbooks. I was therefore intrigued when I heard that the Manuscript Collection of the Aberdeen University Library accommodates the papers of the Aberdeenshire Philhellene, and considerably excited when I realised that the material remains largely unknown and unexplored. It is hoped that this will

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Gordon, *A History of the Greek Revolution*, 2 vols, Edinburgh 1832.

change once the descriptive catalogue of the collection which I have undertaken to prepare is ready.<sup>2</sup>

Thus it came about that some three years ago I began a systematic, if part-time, investigation of the Gordon papers and, by implication, of the period and events covered by them.<sup>3</sup> As I was soon to realise, despite the formidable mass of printed works on the War of Independence, there is a dearth of systematic and exhaustive studies that would allow a clear and consistent picture of facts and participants to emerge. Contemporary accounts tend to leave many gaps and are all too often heavily biased. Gordon's own judgement (in the preface to his history) is that momentary public interest "induced a number of persons hastily to publish what they had seen or heard in Greece" and that:

of the forty authors whom the struggle in Greece has called forth, three or four alone have any claims to accuracy, and their labours were confined to short and isolated periods, and detached scenes of the war; neither are they always free from the influence of strong prejudices.

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<sup>2</sup> Selective use of the archive has been made by William St Clair, *That Greece might still be free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence*, London 1972, whom I thank for giving me a typescript of his unpublished "Thomas Gordon: *History of the Greek Revolution*, Introduction" [1970] and for an illuminating discussion we had on the subject. The material has also been consulted by F. Rosen, *Benson, Byron, and Greece: constitutionalism, nationalism and early liberal political thought*, Oxford 1992. Introductions to the collection have been written by Margaret Chapman, "Thomas Gordon of Cairness", *The Aberdeen University Review* 47 (1977-8) 238-48 (dealing with only the Greek papers) and by Aglaia E. Kasdagli, "The Papers of Thomas Gordon of Cairness (1788-1841)", *Northern Scotland* 14 (1994) 109-12. The preparation of the catalogue, which will make the material accessible to every interested scholar, was assisted in the early stages by the London Hellenic Foundation, and subsequently generously funded by the Bodosakis Foundation, Athens.

<sup>3</sup> My personal research has been facilitated by two research grants, one from the Alexander S. Onassis Foundation and one from the Ionian University. I am grateful to the Aberdeen University Library, and in particular to Mr Colin McLaren, Head of the Special Collections and University Archivist, for kind permission to quote from the Gordon papers and to all staff of the Special Collections for unstinted help.

Since then a huge corpus has been built up, of newly published primary material, monographs and more composite studies (of uneven quality). So much so that one cannot help sympathising with the remark made by a modern authority, of "a labyrinth from which one manages to emerge with great difficulty, if ever" and his complaint that "a scholar [of the period], while in the process of collecting, classifying, and re-working the material, and while attempting a synthesis of it, is often overcome by giddiness, fatigue and a sense of despair."<sup>4</sup>

After this gloomy preamble I had better attempt to conduct a guided tour of this new maze of primary sources. The archive of Thomas Gordon consists, roughly speaking, of two categories of documents. First – and most importantly – is correspondence and related documents, that is some of his own letters to various people and a much larger number (about seven hundred of them) addressed to him or to James Robertson, his friend and secretary of many years. By far the greatest part of the surviving correspondence is closely concerned with the affairs of Greece. The bulk of it is in English but there are also many letters in French, quite a few in Greek and some in Italian. Their senders include such well-known names as Mavrokordatos, Kolokotronis and Makriyannis, Philhellenes such as Frank Abney Hastings and the historian George Finlay, and many others whose involvement in The Cause is attested from other sources. Much of this material has an intrinsic interest in that it is raw, imparting the immediate reactions and impressions of people who participated in the events or at least observed them closely. In addition, one must always be on the look-out for a hitherto unknown detail about the period, which will add another missing piece to the jigsaw and revive some of its faded colour.

This is equally true for the second category of documents, consisting of sources that Gordon preserved or deliberately collected to use in the compilation of his *History*. It is an assortment of papers, ranging from circulars and orders issued by the Greek Provisional Government, to accounts of battles by eye-witnesses and log-books of vessels that took part in various naval campaigns. There are undoubtedly some treasures in the

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<sup>4</sup> A. E. Vakalopoulos, *Ιστορία του Νέου Ελληνισμού*, Thessaloniki 1980, V, p. 16.

pile but it will take some time to list the material individually, compare it with published sources (some documents are copies and have already been published) and assess its value.<sup>5</sup>

One way to go through the archive is by relating the facts of Gordon's life as they are generally known and illuminating some of them with insights gleaned from his papers.

General Thomas Gordon was born (in 1788) on his father's estate of Cairness, some forty miles to the north of Aberdeen. He was the first and only surviving child of a family of long standing in the area, with substantial property in both Aberdeenshire and Jamaica. The family's local and overseas concerns are of interest in themselves and there is a mass of information about them in the collection of family manuscripts, spanning three centuries, of which Thomas's correspondence and documents concerning Greece are but a small part. These family papers too remain largely unexplored, but the brief examination I have made of them shows that they contain some information about Thomas's involvement in land-owning activities in Scotland, reflected, for example, in three sets of regulations for his tenants laid down in print by him. Nevertheless, legal and business documents concerning Georgia – the Jamaican estate – are for some reason very few for the specific period of Thomas's ownership, though it is obvious that, financially, the concern was very important to him: an indication of this are the frequent references to the fluctuating yields and prices of sugar from Georgia in the letters of Gordon's secretary.

I have been intrigued by the, to us, paradoxical phenomenon (which is, however, by no means confined to Gordon) of a man who would so generously support the struggle of the enslaved Greeks with money largely extracted through Jamaican slave labour. The only indication I have so far found that he was not insensible to the evils of slavery is in a letter – a model of theological cant – from Charles Gibbon, a close friend of his youth and at the time a newly-appointed minister:

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<sup>5</sup> An example of a hitherto unknown text from Gordon's papers is Miaoulis's biography, published by Aglaia Kasdagli, "Ο Ανδρέας Μιαούλης βιογραφούμενος από τον γιο του", *Μνήμων* 17 (1995) 163-74.

At present you must not encourage those speculations respecting the emancipation of your slaves in the West Indies for many reasons. In an imperfect state like this there are many *irregularities* over which individual *public* virtue is of no avail [...] Providence has suffered things to be in such a state and our Saviour has been silent where in this *we* would consult his commands – but we are called upon to be kind and benevolent to those that are in *servitude* to us. – Order that your slaves be well treated and made as comfortable as possible [...] Avail yourself of a favourable change in the regulations of the legislature to give a greater compass to your benevolent desires...<sup>6</sup>

At the age of twelve the young Gordon was sent to Eton. His earliest surviving letter dates from that time and is addressed to this same friend Charles Gibbon, an Aberdeen merchant's son. His very first impressions on arriving at the new school make amusing reading:

I have had two battles, in both of which I was victorious. One with a boy bigger than myself whom I easily licked; the other with a boy who first challenged me and then refused to fight. But I attacked and licked him. I like Eton very much [...] There are certain bounds which if any boy passes he is flogged. They are not flogged in the manner we supposed but kneel on a block. There is no caning. The rod is made of little twigs.<sup>7</sup>

There are several such letters to Gibbon, who apparently returned them to his friend in later years. From them we learn that the young Thomas was an avid reader and had already developed a deep interest in history: "I study [...] most part of the day and sometimes till late at night. I am reading Gibbon's Roman history. I am getting on with my own history and am collecting books for it."<sup>8</sup> He knew, however, how to enjoy a good life too. As Gibbon wrote when Thomas was still at school, "Indeed what with your fox hounds, hunting, leaping, laming

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<sup>6</sup> MS 1160/21, 9 Aug. 1810.

<sup>7</sup> MS 1160/21, 27 Nov. [1800].

<sup>8</sup> MS 1160/21, Aug. 1804.

blood-mares, I expect you will become an improved second edition of Squire Western."<sup>9</sup>

Eton was followed by a year at the Marischal College, Aberdeen, and then Oxford. University education, however, was not particularly demanding at the time, and Gordon soon found the opportunity to go abroad for the first time. Displaying a typically adventurous spirit, he went as far as Russia, travelling through Lithuania, Prussia, Poland and northern Germany. On his return to Oxford he had just completed his eighteenth year. Having been left an orphan at an early age and an heir to great wealth, he was nevertheless still dependent on his guardians for an allowance. "I can't say that I am stinted," he wrote to Charles Gibbon. "There are two or three points which I am a little anxious about, the principal of which are that I wish to go down to Scotland at Easter, and to go abroad next summer [...] I also want to buy another horse. I have no doubt that I shall carry all these points" – a statement he could undoubtedly have repeated many times in the course of his life.<sup>10</sup>

In the meantime he was very pleased with himself: "I have furnished myself with a French servant and an English hunter besides [...] and my library is pretty well stocked [...] I have begun to apply myself to the ancient authors by myself, knowing what pleasures the knowledge of them confers."<sup>11</sup> An inventory of his books, compiled soon after his death, shows that by the end of his life his library was indeed well stocked and that it contained not only a very good selection of Greek and Latin authors but also a great number of volumes that exhibit a characteristically wide variety of interests.<sup>12</sup> In addition to books concerning Greece and the War of Independence, Scotland and England, there are histories of Rome and the Ottoman Empire, of America, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Switzerland and Belgium, accounts of the French Revolution and the campaigns of

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<sup>9</sup> MS 1160/21, 17 Dec. 1805. Squire Western: a character in Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749).

<sup>10</sup> MS 1160/21, 25 Dec. 1806.

<sup>11</sup> MS 1160/21, 25 Dec. 1806.

<sup>12</sup> MS 1160/16/40, c. 1848, Catalogue of "Books in Library at Cairness House".

Napoleon and so on. He also displayed an interest in Byzantium rather unusual for his time.

His library further includes travel books, religious tracts and moral works, biographies, memoirs and letters. Literature is represented by, among others, Shakespeare, Cowper, Pope, Robert Burns and the collective works of Byron, twenty three volumes by Walter Scott and eleven by Swift. Finally, there is a miscellany of works, from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of the Nation* to philosophy, mechanics and astronomy. The telescope he established at Cairness later on and the diaries in which he recorded meticulous daily meteorological observations for years bear further evidence to the scientific turn of his mind.

For the time being, however, he was only nineteen and finding that study was not enough. He needed action too and after two years at Oxford he left to join the army as a cornet of the dragoons. He served in Edinburgh and Ireland (which he hated, finding the inhabitants vulgar and disagreeable) and briefly in England. Interesting information about this period of his life is gathered from letters sent to him by Mary Burnett, eldest daughter of an Aberdeenshire baronet, to whom Gordon was for a while secretly engaged. Her letters are long and full of solicitous care for Gordon's well-being and happiness; in one there is even a lock of sandy hair, but the tone is a model of propriety throughout.

Mary Burnett appears to have been a model young lady, but her all too conventional ideas were not calculated to appeal to a man like Gordon, constantly on the look-out for adventure and change. It seems likely that her solid advice, in true Jane Austen style, annoyed him rather than pleased him:

Consider how much more usefully and happily you might pass your life in this country, where you would certainly have it in your power to do a great deal more good than fagging about with a regiment. It is a question worthy of consideration if a young man of property can be so properly employed in any situation than living on his own estate at least a part of the year!

She was unable to sympathise with Gordon's frustration at not being able to take part in warfare, then raging on the Continent, and teased him for craving the "honour of opposing the French in

Portugal", adding the dubious comfort: "I think you are much better vegetating in Ireland."<sup>13</sup>

Mary would undoubtedly have disapproved when twelve years later Gordon plunged into his Greek adventure, and, in view of that, it is perhaps just as well that the affair did not last long. Its end is noted by Gordon in his brief diary entries for the year 1809, from which we also learn something about the comforts and amusements that seem to have been an integral part of life at Cairness: shooting, fox-hunting, dining and drinking sessions with friends and riding excursions to Aberdeen, with more visiting, dining and dancing. A few penitent sentences sum up the upshot of all this:

I begin to repent greatly of the affair which has happened between me and M.B. I fear it has produced great unhappiness to one party, and that certainly the party by far the least deserving it [...] I set up my heart on a pursuit which it would have been better for me either to have failed in or never to have attempted. I unfortunately succeeded.<sup>14</sup>

We do not know Mary's side of the story but the fact is that she died (at the age of seventy) unmarried.

For our present purposes the main interest of the correspondence lies in the light it throws on Gordon's character and early life. Through Mary's letters (and similar views echoed in the few contemporary letters by Charles Gibbon) we can form a pretty good idea of the conventions and ideology followed by the young members of "good society" in Aberdeen at the time and how untypical Gordon must have been. Notwithstanding this, however, he was never openly rebellious, partly because of his temperament and partly because a man of his independent means could afford to "carry his point" without being rebellious. In fact, he appears to have fitted well and to have been contented in the position he occupied and was well liked by all who came into contact with him, regardless of their situation or class. It is in this context that we should view the systematic attempts of members of the British establishment of

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<sup>13</sup> MS 1160/21, 4 May 1808 and 23 Sept. 1808.

<sup>14</sup> MS 1160/20/2, entries for Dec. 1809.



a later date to dissociate Gordon from what they considered sordid aspects of the Greek Revolution; or the comment of one of his friends that "nobody could be less of a revolutionary than Gordon." Revolutionary or not, he seems to have been in sympathy with the liberal movements of his time, of which the Greek war was one instance and the Spanish constitutional rebellion another. His views and actions were quite often outside the norms of his time and class, and he was systematic and persistent in the pursuit of these views.

The main obstacle to the fulfilment of Gordon's wish to go abroad was removed in December 1809, when the young man came of age. Shortly afterwards, he resigned his commission and started on his foreign travels that were to last for almost four years. Following a route similar to that taken by Byron a few months earlier, he travelled through the Mediterranean, stopping at Gibraltar, Malta, the Ionian Islands and the court of Ali Pasha in Yannina. From there he proceeded to Athens, where in October 1810 Byron also resided. There is no record of the two men having ever met and this is a little mystery (bringing to mind the similar case of Solomos and Kalvos), given that their paths ran parallel – apparently without ever crossing – on several occasions. They were born in the same year and both spent their childhood in Aberdeenshire. Nevertheless, Byron left for England when he was only ten; subsequently, whereas Gordon went to Eton and Oxford, Byron attended Harrow and Cambridge. In later years, when both men were closely involved in the Greek Revolution, they were never found in the country at the same time. Nevertheless it would have been almost impossible for two British travellers to miss each other in such a small place as Athens was in 1810 and it is very plausible that the encounter simply remained unrecorded because neither of them thought much of it at the time. The fame that *Childe Harold* brought to Byron was still to come, and it is probable that the "vulgar young man" travelling in grand style (as Lady Hester Stanhope uncharitably described Gordon when she met him in Asia Minor the following year<sup>15</sup>) had no appeal for the impecunious nobleman.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by St Clair in his "Introduction"; see n. 2.

From Athens Gordon made his way to Constantinople. While there, he successfully accomplished a mission entrusted to him by the British envoy: he carried vital intelligence to the Russians (then at war with the Ottoman Empire), crossing the Turkish lines in Turkish dress. In the course of his travels he had learned several Eastern languages – at least Russian, Turkish and Greek. His knowledge of Greek is rather difficult to assess but his use of original Greek sources shows a good command of the language.

During his two last years abroad Gordon took part in the campaigns against Napoleon, serving as an officer first in the Russian and then in the Hanoverian Army. By mid-1814 he was back in Scotland, but just twelve months later he was once more on the road, while war on the Continent was about to break out again. Gordon's desire of joining Wellington's army did not materialise, but even though the story told by Persat years later has no foundation, it is nevertheless suggestive of how people viewed Gordon – and how myths are created. According to Persat – a former Bonapartist soldier who had early decided to go to Greece – Gordon,

a generous Philhellene [...] was a high-ranking officer of an English regiment of dragoons which my regiment had cut to pieces at Waterloo; but Colonel Gordon was not a man to bear a grudge; besides, the tide turned on that fatal day, and thus he was keen on offering me free passage to Greece.<sup>16</sup>

It is possible that Persat (who is in general factually accurate though wildly prejudiced) may simply have been alluding to Gordon's *former* regiment; but the story has been taken literally by later historians, and the battle of Waterloo often figures prominently in Gordon's life story.

The disappointed Gordon continued his travels further afield. He visited Vienna, Bucharest and Constantinople, where in 1816 he married Barbara Hanna, a young girl of Levantine origin, whose father was some sort of merchant or businessman in the City.

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<sup>16</sup> G. Schlumberger (ed.), *Mémoires du Commandant Persat, 1806 à 1844*, Paris 1910, p. 77.

For the next few years to the eve of the War of Independence little is known about Gordon's life, and for some reason hardly any letters survive from that period. We know almost nothing about his family life, apart from the fact that the couple did not produce any children (even though Gordon fathered an acknowledged illegitimate son by a local girl, who eventually succeeded him). Barbara evidently came from a cosmopolitan, if not educated, background; her father corresponded with Gordon in French and a later account claims that in preparation for her marriage she had been sent to school in England. However that may be, the two surviving early letters of hers to her husband are written in fluent English; they express conventional wifely sentiments, but even so one can discern that she rather resented being left alone in Scotland and that on such occasions she found winters at Cairness very dreary. When Gordon went to Greece in 1826-27 she accompanied him as far as the Ionian Islands and stayed there awaiting his return. From the accounts of her given by James Robertson, the loyal secretary who had also remained in Zakynthos, we get an uneasy feeling of frustration and of a marriage that had become conventional if not unhappy. Robertson's letters include almost formulaic reports on Mrs Gordon's pursuits – focusing on her poultry yard – and frequent headaches, invariably followed by news of Gordon's horse and hounds. A much later source, a woman who had known Barbara's niece and had inherited from her two miniatures of the Gordons as a young couple, says unequivocally that the marriage was not a happy one.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Gordon seems to have been uniformly liberal towards Barbara too, and this is confirmed in the generous settlement he made her in his will.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Greek Revolution we find Gordon in Marseilles, ready to embark for Greece. In fact, he was one of the very first Europeans to volunteer his services. In his memoirs – discovered and published fifty years after his death – Persat describes how Gordon, at his own expense, chartered a ship, bought six pieces of cannon, arms and ammunition, took with him James Robertson, who had some expertise in artillery, and offered free passage to a number of Greek and foreign volunteers (p. 78).

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<sup>17</sup> MS 1160/21, [16 June] 1936. Marie Lyster to Charles Gordon.

Gordon's definite objective was to join Dimitrios Ypsilandis, then leader of the insurgent Greeks. He eventually found him outside Tripolitsa (present-day Tripoli) in the central Morea. The town of Tripolitsa was the most important fortress of the entire region and its siege by the Greeks had already been under way for some weeks. William Humphreys, another early British Philhellene, described Gordon's arrival in his journal as follows:

The day after my arrival I was told there was a "Mylord Inglese" with a great number of Franks coming to the camp, and a general discharge of musketry soon after announced the arrival of the reinforcement. The Prince [Ypsilandis] sent one of his aides-de-camp and a horse to meet him. The "Mylord Inglese" I found to be a Mr Gordon [...] As the transactions in the Morea have been of so cruel and barbarous a nature as to call in question the character of those at all connected with them, I feel pleasure in having it in my power to assert the character of that gentleman to be that of the most humane. The liberal supplies of arms he brought with him [...] the example he himself gave of subordination, in which the Greeks were so lamentably deficient, his generosity and disinterestedness to them merited their gratitude, and it is only to be lamented they should have proved themselves so unworthy of his support and the enthusiasm he displayed for the cause of an oppressed nation, once so noble though now debased by slavery.<sup>18</sup>

I have quoted this passage at some length because it not only gives us a contemporary's view of Gordon, but also provides a typical sample of philhellenic (or so-called philhellenic) writing of the period. Every stereotype is there – and undoubtedly stereotypes usually do have a point: the insubordination and lack of discipline of the Greek irregulars, the stigma of ingratitude attached to the Greeks, the eagerness to absolve the Europeans of having participated in or condoned war atrocities (in particular those committed at Tripolitsa), and the association of the debased Greek character with tyranny and long oppression.

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<sup>18</sup> S. Linnér (ed.), *W.H. Humphreys' First Journal of the Greek War of Independence, July 1821-February 1822*, Stockholm 1967, pp. 33-4.

Gordon became Ypsilandis's Chief-of-Staff, and as such accompanied him on his futile march towards Patra, just at the moment that the imminent fall of Tripolitsa was certain. As Gordon says in his *History*, "in spite of the remonstrances of his friends, [Ypsilanti] persisted in so impolitic [...] a design" (I, p. 241). From the accounts of other Philhellenes present we know that the friendly remonstrances came from Gordon himself. This strictly neutral and detached way of presenting facts is a hallmark of his historical narrative throughout. As St Clair observes, "seldom has an author – particularly a soldier – been so self-effacing in describing events with which he was personally concerned."

His unacknowledged presence as an eye-witness is sometimes apparent in descriptions in which he lingers on detail and the assumed thoughts of those present. A typical example is the scene of Ypsilandis's (and his staff's) entry to Tripolitsa some days after the fall of the town:

When, in the middle of October, Demetrius Ypsilanti, returning from his useless excursion to the north of the Morea, drew near Tripolitsa, he was saluted by discharges of cannon and small arms; and Colocotroni, and most of the other chiefs, mounted on fine steeds and decked out in gaudy apparel, which had lately belonged to the Turks, met and conducted him into the town [...] The streets presented a deplorable spectacle of half-burnt houses and dead bodies in a state of putrefaction, and as Ypsilanti rode slowly along, he encountered a striking example of the instability of worldly grandeur in the person of Kyamil Bey of Corinth, who, before the revolution one of the richest grandees of the empire, and distinguished by a noble and imposing form, now bowed before the Prince, a miserable captive, and implored his protection (I, p. 289).

Gordon left the Morea shortly after the fall of Tripolitsa, but, contrary to what was widely reported at the time and regularly repeated since, the reason that prompted him to go does not seem to have been his disgust with the atrocities committed by the Greeks, shocked though he had undoubtedly been by their intensity. Humphreys for one, who shared the adventure surrounding Gordon's departure and wrote about it soon

afterwards and who moreover was not particularly anxious to protect the good name of the Greeks, is categorical on this point:

...As it was necessary for Mr Gordon to go to Zante respecting his own affairs (for we were entirely cut off from any regular communication with the rest of Europe), his departure was at length resolved on. [...His] intended departure was much lamented by all the foreign officers as he was everything to us (p. 71).

It should be added that Humphreys remained in close contact with Gordon and always looked up to him, so it must be assumed that he offered the version of events that Gordon wished to make public.

Humphreys accompanied Gordon to the coast to bring back his horses. On the way the two men suffered a severe attack of fever; their condition deteriorated to such a degree that Humphreys too had to continue to Zante and eventually both convalescents returned to England.

The fall of Tripolitsa and the frenetic massacre and looting that followed had grievous implications for the Greek cause. Even leaving aside the passions that the incident unleashed within the army and among the leaders, there remains the impact that it had on public opinion abroad. The Greek Revolution had its fair share of acts of revenge and unspeakable cruelty by both sides, of reprisals and counter-reprisals, starting from the initial reaction of the Ottoman Government and the Muslim populace as the news of the insurrection spread and terminating only with the conclusion of the war. Such occurrences have always been the by-product of war by and large, and at the same time they have always been – and still are – powerful instruments of propaganda. Ordinary people can no more suppress their aversion to those specific atrocities brandished before their eyes than the perpetrators can control themselves; to be stirred, however, the genuine horror of public opinion still needs a vivid description, an eye-witness account (or, nowadays, televised coverage).

In the Greek War of Independence one such shock-trigger, which worked in favour of the Greeks, was the massacre of Chios (1822). Before that, and working towards the opposite

direction, was the capture of Tripolitsa and its aftermath. The copious literature that both produced provides fascinating material for the investigation of issues such as government politics, propaganda and humanitarianism; phenomena such as nationalism and patriotism, racial prejudice, religious fanaticism and cant; notions such as legitimacy, freedom and oppression. This material can teach us something about how one society judges other societies, how it sees itself and what is the interaction between self-image and the outside world.

These issues, focused on the case of Thomas Gordon – an outsider who was a close observer of the drama enacted – have interested me greatly for some time, and I propose to investigate them in some depth at a later stage. At present there is no sufficient hard evidence to present fully Gordon's attitude and actions and this means that conclusions about his reactions and how they might have changed over time are far from clear-cut. Gordon himself was remarkably reticent on this count and his alleged views were consciously manipulated for public consumption by friends and foes of the Greek struggle alike. He must have been under considerable pressure from both sides, and the fact that he allowed himself to be manipulated implies ambivalence on the matter. There are, however, examples of the way he chose to express his views in public. One instance from the war years appears in the proceedings of a "Meeting in Aid of Greece" which took place in Aberdeen in June 1823 and was reported in a London newspaper, where we read:

Mr Gordon said, he would have here concluded, if he had not heard it said in certain quarters that the Greeks were as bad as the Turks, and that they had been guilty of many acts of perfidy and cruelty [...] But [...] it must be well known (said he) that, in a war of that description, when a whole country is attempted to be put to the sword, that the war cannot be carried on according to those nice feelings of honour which have always distinguished the troops and inhabitants of this country. [...The Greeks] were no common or ordinary sufferers [and] were [...] justly enraged at the conduct of the Turks, in putting to death, impaling, and burning their friends and relatives [...] Mr Gordon sat down amidst immense applaud.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, London, 30 June 1823.

An appropriate conclusion to this particular discussion is to quote (in a rough translation of mine) some extracts of the sober account of the sack of Tripolitsa written by another contemporary historian – the Greek Spiridon Trikoupis, whose *History of the Greek Revolution* appeared some forty years after the events described here:

A people throwing off a long-standing, heavy yoke always attacks its master in a savage manner. The armed people of Greece were even more unrestrained during those days, because there was no government, neither was pay given or provisions regularly distributed, nor did there seem to be any prospects for a secure future; there was neither punishment for indiscipline nor reward for restraint. For these reasons the day of the capture of the capital of the Peloponnese was a day of destruction, fire, looting and bloodshed. Men, women and children died indiscriminately, some of them being murdered, others thrown into the fires that appeared in the town, and others crushed under the roofs and floors of the burning houses; the thirst of revenge silenced the voice of nature. In the streets, in the squares, everywhere nothing was heard but the sound of sword and shootings, the noise made by houses collapsing into the flames, cries of rage and wails of the dying. In one word, the ground was strewn with bodies and those going about either on foot or on horseback could not help trodding on the dying or the dead. It seemed as if the Greeks wanted in a single day to take revenge for the injustices of four centuries. Within Tripolitsa there were also Jews, all of whom, on account of the maltreatment that the Christians of Constantinople and other places had suffered in the hands of their co-religionists, perished under the sword or the fire. [...]

We do not intend to justify the Greek atrocities as deeds perpetrated by fellow-countrymen; we simply wish to point out that the history of all peoples, even the most civilised ones, includes acts of atrocity. Even in our times, when Jaffa was captured by the French, it was given to plundering and slaughtering for thirty hours, and all captives, of whom there were thousands, were put to the sword. More than that, in Jaffa these acts were perpetrated neither by subjected people against their oppressors, as was the case in Greece, nor against the leaders' will, as in Tripolitsa; they were implemented by order of



Napoleon himself who, according to Thiers, admitted that "in barbaric places one does as the barbarians do".<sup>20</sup>

Gordon returned to Scotland at the end of 1821 and did not go back to Greece until the middle of 1826, an occurrence for which we must be grateful today. Even a cursory look at his surviving correspondence from those years will convince the most sceptical reader that his interest in the fate of Greece was unwavering. And, luckily for us, it was constantly fed through a wide network of contacts, spreading through the insurgent regions of Greece, the Ionian Islands, France and England. Some of these people had received financial help from Gordon; many were invited to visit him in Scotland and stay with him at his magnificent mansion at Cairness, with its Egyptian-style billiard room, impressive library and extensive grounds. It is a high compliment to Gordon's hospitality and the comforts of his residence that one of his guests later referred to the "laughing" image of Cairness, a description one would not normally associate with the north-east of Scotland.<sup>21</sup>

The guest in question was a certain Dr Koutzofskis. His case, minor and inconsequential in itself, typifies some of the problems that a student of the period has to face and some basic weaknesses of the way that scholarship has developed; not least, it highlights the importance of going back to archival sources and examining them closely.

Koutzofskis was a Greek doctor living in Paris, where he was an active agent for the Greek cause. According to Persat, he was one of the eight young Greeks to whom Gordon had offered free passage on his way out to Greece. He is mentioned in contemporary accounts as one of the doctors fighting the epidemic that ravaged the Morea after the fall of Tripolitsa, and that was about all that was known about him up to now. He has been labelled a Polish Philhellene, even though none of his contemporaries seems to have made such a claim, while we have Persat's explicit evidence that he was a Greek, a fact confirmed in his own letters to Gordon. Without a shred of evidence, some-

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<sup>20</sup> Sp. Trikoupis, *Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Επανάστασης*, 4 vols, London 1854, II, pp. 100-2.

<sup>21</sup> MS 1160/21, 20 June 1824, Koutzofskis to Robertson.

body must have been carried away by his un-Greek name and decided he was a Pole. The unfounded supposition was taken up by later historians and the myth of the Polish doctor was firmly established.

In March 1823 the Greek Committee in aid of the insurgents (of which Gordon was a founding member) was founded in London. Some three months later its less famous counterpart was established in Aberdeen, Gordon being its leading spirit. According to the press report already mentioned,

the resolutions set forth that the Greeks were now engaged in the third year of a war for the recovery of their liberty – that it was the duty of every Christian community to promote their success – and that a Committee be appointed to communicate with the London Committee, and to promote subscriptions.

Gordon had his own views about what the war effort needed most, and in the course of time devised various schemes aiming at the creation of a regular army and a corps of artillery force. On the latter plan he spent much time and thought and was quite willing to spend a great deal of money too, but his offer was overruled by the London Greek Committee. Nevertheless he donated to the Committee the equipment he had already bought and continued to have consultations with William Parry, the artillery expert whom he had engaged to organise the proposed corps. In the meantime he was also very near to accepting the command of the new expedition to Greece. But in the end, the command was rejected, the principal objections advanced by Gordon being the unwillingness of Greek fighters to accept any system of military organisation and follow European discipline and tactics, and the expulsion of Mavrokordatos's government, with which Gordon had been negotiating. A further obstruction was Gordon's suspicion of the war chiefs who dominated the scene; even so, there is evidence that a few months earlier he had tried to establish contact with Kolokotronis. In a letter (or rather an English translation of it) found among his papers, Gordon advises Kolokotronis to send deputies to England to communicate their wants and consult together and concludes:

You will find me ready to serve you, and I only wait to receive your communications to contribute all my might towards it. Having no other desire than [...] to serve this sacred cause [...] I remain with all friendship, Your well-wisher and admirer.<sup>22</sup>

As already suggested, Gordon was not an unqualified admirer of Kolokotronis, but he was in a position to recognise his good points and was enough of a pragmatist to realise that the war chieftains held more real power than Mavrokordatos's ineffectual government.

The command that Gordon refused was accepted by Byron. William Parry – Gordon's protégé, who was to become Byron's closest companion in the poet's last days – has left a record of the high esteem in which Byron held not only Gordon's rejected plan for the artillery force, but also Gordon himself. Parry quotes Byron as saying:

Gordon was a much wiser and more practical man than Stanhope [agent of the Greek Committee]. [...] He] has been in Greece, and expended a large sum of money here. He bought his experience and knows the country. His plan was the one to have acted on; but his noble offer seems so far to have surpassed the notions and expectations of the Committee, that it staggered them. [...] If Mr Gordon's offer had been acted on, as it ought to have been [...] his exertions and mine would have effected everything, would have restored union here and have encouraged the friends of Greece at home.<sup>23</sup>

For his part, Gordon was not likely to bear with a man like Byron who (as his friend Trelawny said referring to exactly this period) "exhausted himself in planning, projecting, beginning, wishing, intending, postponing, regretting, and doing nothing."<sup>24</sup> In his *History*, Gordon's impatient comment is that "his lordship had finally determined on visiting Messalonghi [sic], but it was never easy to induce him to commence a journey, and he still delayed" (II, p. 105). Nevertheless, Gordon was equally quick in

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<sup>22</sup> MS 1160/21, [5 March 1823].

<sup>23</sup> William Parry, *The Last Days of Lord Byron*, London 1825, pp. 192-3.

<sup>24</sup> [E.J. Trelawny], *Trelawny's Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, London 1906, p. 104.

acknowledging Byron's virtues and talents. The following passage says as much about the writer as about his subject; in fact, Gordon might have very well written it about himself:

With admiral clearness of vision, [Byron] saw at once the delicacy of his position, the character of the people he was amongst, and the nature of their most urgent wants. Conceiving that the essential point was emancipating them from the Turks, and that this was to be done by promoting concord and improving their military organisation, he employed for those purposes all the influence of his name, talents and riches, and no crosses could make him swerve from the path he had marked out for himself (II, pp 107-108).

Gordon eventually reached Greece in May 1826. The description of his mission in his *History* is one of the very few occasions on which he felt obliged to refer to himself – and it is a cryptic reference, worth quoting: "The deputies of London having entrusted to an English Philhellene a sum of L.14,000 (the last sweepings of the second loan) with uncontrolled power of disposing of it, he arrived at Nauplia in May" (II, p. 299). It is just as well that this is not our only source for the period, or we would have remained forever in the dark with regard to the anonymous Philhellene.

Gordon arrived in Greece at a time that, following a disastrous civil war, Ibrahim's invasion and the fall of Mesolonghi, the Revolution had reached its most critical stage. Under the circumstances, his arrival was a real godsend. The fact that he was the bearer of a large sum of money, coupled with the fact of his personal wealth and generosity – well-known and appreciated in Greece – colours most of the correspondence of the period. For example, there were Mavrokordatos's proposals for Gordon to finance (and lead) an expedition for the recapturing of Mesolonghi; appeals – to all of which Gordon responded favourably – by Colonel Fabvier, for the support of the regular troops, Kolokotronis, for the provisioning of the Peloponnesian camp, and the Provisional Administration of Crete, for the upkeep of the Grambousa fortress. There were also petitions by needy individuals, from the persecuted family of Odysseas Androutsos to people asking

for help in order to send their children to study abroad. Many of these letters shed further light on well-known personalities or events of the war, while others give us a glimpse of the daily reactions and problems of ordinary people, such as the universal eagerness with which the arrival of Lord Cochrane had been anticipated, an eagerness that was to be repeatedly dampened before his eventual arrival in April 1827.

In the meantime, Gordon had become directly involved in the war – an event which inevitably covers an important section of his correspondence. At the beginning of 1827 he had been given the command of the Faliro expedition, whose purpose was the relief of the besieged citadel of Athens. This is perhaps the most rewarding part of the archive, even if fraught with chronological (due mostly to the indiscriminate use of the Julian and Gregorian calendars) and palaeographical difficulties.

Gordon's own account of his participation in the campaign of 1827 is, once more, self-effacing to the point of obscuring historical accuracy:

[...] the corps of John Notaras, that of Makriyanni, the regulars and foreign auxiliaries, should land at port Phalerus, under the nose of Reshid Pasha: the latter delicate operation the Executive committed to a Philhellene, who received the temporary rank of brigadier (II, p. 378).

The contrast with Makriyannis's graphic description of the same episode is striking:

At that time I met Gropius, the consul of Austria – he was my friend – and he says: "Where are you going Makriyannis, without any means of war against so great a Turkish force? [...] Now there's an Englishman called Gordon," says he, "who'll get you the stores for whatever it costs. If he puts down the money, would you have him as leader of this expedition?" "Go and tell this man," say I to Gropius, "that for the love of my country, whoever puts down the money can not only be the leader, but whenever he pees he can give me his pee to drink".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The translation is based on Lidderdale: *The memoirs of General Makriyannis, 1797-1864*, ed. and transl. H.A. Lidderdale, foreword by C.M. Woodhouse, London 1966, pp. 120-1.

Just before starting on this new and dangerous venture, Gordon wrote to James Robertson a letter moving in its reserve on the prospect of accepting high responsibility and possibly death:

On this expedition depends Athens! [...] I resign myself into the hands of God, on whom alone victory depends. All my worldly affairs are settled, and you and Mrs Gordon know all my wishes and intentions. I wish at times that you were with me, as I bear a heavy burthen and have no confidential friend; but it is perhaps better as it is [...] Adieu my dear Robertson; may God bless you.<sup>26</sup>

In the event his leadership did not last long. In a surviving letter to Makriyannis, Gordon explains that he resigned despite the good co-operation that the two had enjoyed, because his experience had been ignored and his advice had not been acted upon by their superiors.<sup>27</sup> Even though he returned to action for a while, in April 1827 he withdrew permanently because of his disagreement with Cochrane and Church, the new commanders-in-chief, with whom he was by no means the only one to be deeply dissatisfied. Hastings, for one, readily sympathised with Gordon and in his letters he is much more explicitly critical, making ironic comments on Cochrane's reputed genius which did not fit with the Admiral's inactivity in Greece, and being even more censorious with regard to Church, about whom he wrote: "I find the man such an insufferable, vain coxcomb person, made up every bit of him of gold lace, mustachios and froth, that I cannot live on terms with him."<sup>28</sup>

Gordon might well have been justified in his complaints against the two leaders, but it is likely that George Finlay was equally right in his assessment of Gordon's own leadership abilities. Though able to pay tribute to his strong points ("he knew the country, the people and the irregular troops as well as any man in Greece") Finlay's final verdict was that "Gordon was firm and sagacious, but he did not possess the activity and decision of character necessary to obtain commanding influence in

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<sup>26</sup> MS 1160/21, 16 Jan. 1827.

<sup>27</sup> I. Vlachoyannis (ed.), *Αρχείον του Στρατηγού Ιωάννου Μακρυγιάννη*, Athens 1907, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> MS 1160/21, 12 Jan. 1828.

council, or to initiate daring measures in the field."<sup>29</sup> Be that as it may, the Faliro expedition was Gordon's last direct involvement in the war and soon afterwards he returned to Scotland.

With this, the second part of Gordon's correspondence (1821-1827, the years of the Revolution) also comes to an end. The third part, which covers the period up to his death (1828-1841), is much smaller, probably because he spent much of that time in Greece. From 1828 to 1831 he lived mainly in Argos and it was during this period that he did systematic research for his book and also devoted himself to archaeology, conducting a topographical investigation at Thermopylae, building up a collection of antiquities and excavating a site in Argos. At the time Gordon apparently planned to settle in that town, conveniently situated near Nafplion, capital of the young Greek state, and built a house there, mentioned with admiration by contemporary visitors and miraculously surviving to this day.

In 1831-3 Gordon was back at Cairness writing his *History of the Greek Revolution*, universally praised for its accuracy, objectivity and solid historical analysis. The letters from those years are not numerous and fall into two distinct categories. First, there are those dealing with Gordon's current concerns in Greece – which had taken a new form, that of investment: we see him looking for properties to buy, actually buying land in the Morea and on the outskirts of Athens and also becoming involved in money-lending activities. Secondly, there are letters dealing with news of Greek affairs, notably the policies and subsequently the assassination of President Kapodistrias. Most of these reports were written by George Finlay and Henry Robinson, Gordon's business agent in Patra. Like Gordon himself, both men belonged to the "English faction", accused of having actively supported opposition to Kapodistrias, if not fostered intrigues for his assassination. Their letters openly expose their views. Finlay was the more explicit of the two in his criticisms and had more than one sarcastic nickname for the President. On one occasion he described Kapodistrias's reactions as follows:

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<sup>29</sup> G. Finlay, *History of the Greek Revolution*, 2 vols, Edinburgh and London 1861, II, pp. 129 and 353.

Grasset [a French Philhellene] has recovered [from] his keen encounter with the Pilot. [...] The Pilot, on Grasset's arriving at Poros, asked him the news from Egina [...] "None – but that all the people seem anxiously to look forward to the National Assembly." The Pilot became pea green and said "Very well, you [were] told to tell me so, I suppose you are quite right to do your duty and I'll try to do mine."<sup>30</sup>

In another letter, addressed to James Robertson, Finlay, who was very keen to obtain Greek citizenship, writes:

The Prodrornos is here – they say he is down in the mouth. [...] The constitution of Troezen made him what he is and gives me the right to be a Greek citizen. And yet the Jackanapes told me he did not think the nation had the power to make that law.<sup>31</sup>

Gordon returned to Greece in 1833 and for the next six years had a regular commission in the Greek army. He became general-in-chief of the Peloponnese and in 1835 he commanded a successful expedition to clear Northern Greece of brigands. When he resigned from the army he held the rank of major-general. In 1840 he visited Greece for the last time and the following year, shortly after his return to Cairness, he died of kidney failure at the age of 52.

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An appropriate conclusion to this account of Thomas Gordon's life would be a discussion of his personality. At present, however, there is insufficient evidence for a full portrait of the man. Having said that, I may add that my current investigations appear to be confirming in general terms the impression that his own writings and contemporary accounts convey: that he was a self-confident and practical man who stood on solid ground, who had strong views and the will to put them into practice; a measured and equitable person, generous and amiable but always restrained.

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<sup>30</sup> MS 1160/21, 18 Oct. [1828]. The nickname "Pilot" must be an allusion to Kapodistrias's title of "Κυβερνήτης".

<sup>31</sup> MS 1160/21, 24 Jan. 1830.



Finally, similar caution is needed for another interesting point of inquiry, regarding the complex motives behind Gordon's lifelong support for Greece and an accurate assessment of the role he played in the affairs of the country. Some Greek historians have been too ready to label him a spy, basing their allegations on no more damning evidence than the fact of his British origin and loyalties, sometimes compounded by reports of his horror at war atrocities. Something has already been said about his stance on this matter, but, before any hypothesis of this type can be profitably discussed, we need a great deal more hard evidence, and this entails laborious archival research and painstaking collation of all available information concerning Gordon's activities, contacts and writings.

For the time being, this tentative, selective and far from exhaustive presentation will have fulfilled its limited scope if it has offered some idea of this remarkable man, the exciting period in which he lived and what a mine of information his archive is. It will have achieved something more if it has also imparted something of my feeling that if historiography in the making is a safer and more comfortable option than history in the making, it can nevertheless be almost as challenging and fascinating.

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