



*It's not hard to see why Prousos Monastery, in western mainland Greece, is a popular tourist attraction.*

## THE ULTIMATE TRAVEL WRITER

**David Ricks**

*revisits the Brousos of Alexander Pallis, an unparalleled travel book that takes him back a century into the heart of Greece*

The remote and historic monastery of Prousos is listed by TripAdvisor as the #1 attraction in Karpenisi, in Evrytania in western mainland Greece, and rightly so. More surprisingly, perhaps – and this will be known by few pilgrims or tourists – the place supplied the title of one of modern Greece's liveliest pieces of travel writing, Alexander Pallis' *Brousos*. This late work, first published serially in the journal *Noumas* between February and November 1921, and in book form in 1923, gave a distinctive form to its author's idiosyncratic stance and is still vivid a century on.

Pallis was a long-term resident of Britain and its empire, yet a fierce

partisan in Greek politics; well read in English literature and in sympathy with modern thought, he was also committed, intellectually and philanthropically, to the 'hirsute' idiom of extreme demotic Greek; he was a liberal anti-monarchist with a domineering streak. A man whose whole career places him at the intersection of two cultures, Pallis (1851–1935) can be seen as both proudly Greek and an exemplar of a characteristically Western disappointment with the actuality of Greece. Firing salvos on all sides, *Brousos* – ostensibly an innocent travelogue – still rewards attention, not least for the questions it poses about Greek identity and especially Greek Diaspora identity. With Brexit, but

not Brexit, seemingly averted, a centennial glance at this rough, tough little volume of a hundred or so pages may be timely.

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry by Richard Witt identifies Pallis with a knowing zeugma as 'cotton merchant and translator'. Dr Witt's vivid short biography – I hope the full-length one he has been preparing will one day appear – makes an excellent starting point for encountering Pallis, but for those unfamiliar with his presence in Greek and British life, I give some essential information here.

Born of Epirot (and Albanian-speaking) antecedents in Piraeus in 1851 (he often used the jesting pen name Lekas the Arvanitis), Pallis

was one of many intellectually gifted members of the Greek Diaspora to be drawn away from university studies to commercial life overseas. In a career that extended from Manchester to Bombay with Ralli Brothers and culminated in a palatial Liverpool mansion, now sadly demolished, Pallis amassed considerable wealth and experience of the world. Concurrently, he devoted attention and acumen to language reform, as manifested particularly in his translations of (and commentaries on parts of) the *Iliad* and the Gospels (the Foyle Special Collections at King's College London houses copies of these important works with his own annotations). His translation of the epic into an often compelling Greek folk-song idiom was a *tour de force*; in 1901 his Gospel translation provoked riots in Athens with a death toll of eight.

In addition to cultivating the Greek *dēmotikē* as a literary artist, Pallis dug deep in his pocket to support the distribution of demotic texts among children of the unredeemed Greeks of the Balkans. (I remember with pleasure and gratitude perusing the relevant correspondence lent to me by Pallis' grandson Dr Alexis Vlasto.) But it is important to point out that Pallis was very much a man of the British establishment, taking citizenship after the disastrous Graeco-Turkish war of 1897, sending his sons to Eton, where he endowed bursaries for boys lacking means, and firing off pamphlets and more extended works in English. His Greek is a highly coloured version of demotic with drastically reformed spelling.

So when, late in life, Pallis published a travel book, *Brousos*, one would expect it to have interest as a document of its time – and in particular as a contrast with two more familiar types of travel writing. The first, ably surveyed by Edmund Keeley, David Roessel, David Wills and others, is Anglo-American writing about Greece; the second – less common than one would expect – is travelogues by Greek writers such as Nikos Kazantzakis, Kostas

Ouranis and Stratis Myrivilis. Pallis' stance as a Greek of the commercial diaspora is different, neither seeking novelty nor – at least on the face of it – engaged in a search for the authentically *völkisch*. Like the protagonist of the folk song known as *The Exile's Return*, most famous from the version published in 1914 by N.G. Politis – in a volume funded by Pallis himself – the returning traveller, like Odysseus before him, peruses the landscape and his wife for marks (*semadia*) of authenticity. Is he really home? And, if he is, will his wife recognize him as her own?

Yet *Brousos* makes an odd sort of *nostos*. From its title, one would expect it to revolve around a pilgrimage to the remote but famous monastery in Evrytania: the tale of a prodigal son, perhaps, seeking his roots in Greek life and the Orthodox faith in lands where St Paul preached. Yet Pallis was not the Diaspora Greek in whom nostalgia provokes religious piety, and his Anglophilia came with a leaning to what used to be called modern churchmanship.

The narrative of the journey begins on 18 November 1920 (while Greece is at war in Asia Minor), starting at the Peloponnese railway station in Athens, arriving finally at Prousos, leaving there on 26 November and returning to Athens by Christmas. It is, though not entirely lacking in descriptions, a winding course, with none of the topographical precision of a Colonel Leake or of other English travel writers on whom Pallis draws copiously. Instead, it is a pretext for a Diaspora Greek with a large emotional stake in Greece as a going concern to let off steam about politics and life in general, rolling into his *causeries* memories from a dozen or so visits to Greek-speaking lands over the years. But what gives the work the classic status which has led to its republication in a series of modern Greek classics?

Much of the praise for the book in its time came from those who shared its linguistic predilections and Venizelist allegiances. It is worth

pointing out that the trigger for the journey, which begins only on page 11, is the election of 1 November 1920 which saw Venizelos' defeat. The opening pages dwell bitterly on the fate of those great men to whom 'the free kingdom', as Pallis mordantly refers to it in general (compare the sardonic Irish use of 'the Free State'), has been ungrateful: Venizelos, and before that King Otto, and before that Capodistria. None of them born in mainland Greece, all rejected by her, they stand in opposition to the antitype of Theodore Kolokotronis: Pallis was not the first Greek or the last to lay the country's ills at the door of the Peloponnesians. And he positions his book provocatively by quoting the realist philhellene and historian George Finlay on its very first page. But if there is a key precursor to *Brousos*, it may lie in a work of exactly a century earlier never mentioned in the text: William Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, serialized in 1821–1826, published in book form in 1830 and a classic ever since. Armed with a strong constitution and strong opinions, Cobbett returned from exile in the United States in 1817–1819, still full of animus against the governing regime, and traversed the English south and midlands with an eye to injustice and abuse, wrapped up in a disarming diary form.

The twists and turns of *Brousos* can only be taken in fully by reading the work itself – and, sadly, a work of such a marked linguistic idiom, with so many in-jokes, is unlikely ever to find a translator. But let me pluck out what I see as those elements which most clearly mark a view of Greece as seen from the Diaspora, then and perhaps now, a century on. A Greek who has made good will often contribute to the old country through philanthropy, and Pallis' material contribution cannot be gainsaid, in his patronage of authors, Kostis Palamas among them, who made central contributions to modern Greece's sense of itself. But what Pallis intended to contribute through *Brousos* was more specific: a vein of Greek self-criticism.

If it is true that ‘violence is as American as apple pie’, then it is also true that self-laceration is as Greek as *tyropita*: how else can we explain the more than 30 editions of Nikos Dimou’s *The Unhappiness of Being Greek* since 1975? And it is important to note that Pallis’ wide-ranging strictures against Greek *mores* come fuelled by knowledge of the wider world but animated by a sense of solidarity or complicity with other Greeks: an early reviewer spoke of ‘self-criticism’ here. And the nature of that self-criticism has particular contours shaped by history as well as individual sensibility.

The role of history is at its most evident when we note the small but significant changes which the text saw between serial publication in 1921 and book form in 1923: in between, ‘one third of Hellenism had been uprooted’, as Pallis tersely and bitterly notes, and the nature of the Greek Diaspora, with the loss of Asia Minor, was forever changed. That makes his comments about the small-mindedness of the Greek state the more poignant. But it also changes the nature of the identity of the people he describes. It was not out of place for one early reviewer to

write of Pallis’ ‘fine perception of the Romaic soul’, or for another to speak of his ‘overview of *Romiosini*’. ‘And what should they know of England, who only England know?’ Rudyard Kipling’s question from 1891 has an analogy in Pallis, who in effect asks, ‘And what should they know of *Romiosini*, who only the *romeïko* [a disparaging Greek word for the Greek state] know?’ Yet Pallis, undeterred, pressed ahead with the book version – encouraged by a favourable reception – rather than discarding it as a period piece now perhaps rendered out of date by events. And the revisions he made to the text, though of interest as tending to sharpen the political polarization, are fewer than might have been expected.

Where, then, does Pallis bring the perspective of a Diaspora Greek, of a distinctly Anglophile and Liberal stripe, to his encounter with Greece? This raconteur frequently divagates well beyond any conventional travelogue so as to reflect the journey of a whole life, a life spent for more than half a century outside Greece. In addition, Greek travel writing being something of a rarity, the author draws, by necessity as

well as temperament, on foreign and especially English travel writing more than on Greek. But had Pallis ‘gone native’ in England?

To say so would be unfair to an author so distinguished in the sphere of practical life and who had Greece very much to heart. Yet predominant in the book is a strong vein of satire. Among the author’s targets are many which are familiar from the tropes of travel writing by foreign visitors to Greece: litter, neglect of ancient sites, economy with the truth when it comes to directions, uneven culinary standards, cruelty to animals and, of course, defective plumbing. Yet many of Pallis’ criticisms of Greek life concern matters which we would now consider of the highest importance – the degradation of the physical environment, and of Greece’s tree cover in particular, among them. But *Brousos* can be read as a sly sort of para-pilgrimage. As Witt puts it:

*His last visit was a leisurely secular pilgrimage into the Agrafa foothills, written up in Brousos (1921), in which wit, learning, and unsparing criticism of Greek foibles clothe a robustly didactic philosophy of life.*



*Pallis’ final journey was to the foothills of the Agrafa mountains, shown here at night.*

***‘That the Church saved the nation is an old wives’ tale; the historical truth is the converse ... The Church was no mother but a blood-sucking stepmother.’***

Let me briefly endorse but also refine this assessment, coming back at the end to the motif of the exile’s return and its playful literary handling.

The fact that *Brousos* begins with hot news – an election, and in wartime – should not conceal from us the fact that the whole text is saturated in the Bible and contains many references to the Greek Church (here George Borrow’s *The Bible in Spain* is an acknowledged model). Pallis comes out swinging against the Crown on page 1, quoting the Epistle of James 3:8 in the original in a somewhat truncated form: ‘And [their] tongue is a fire, an unrighteous world, set on fire by hell, full of deadly poison.’ He then moves to the Shepherd of Hermas and in turn to St Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy 13, where the strictures made by the Apostle to the Gentiles against gossipy women are attributed by Pallis to his experience of Athens. At many places in the narrative, scripture springs to this traveller’s mind. A free-marketeer, Pallis has a dig against the Workers’ Federation, citing Deuteronomy 32:15: ‘But Jacob ate and had his fill and waxed fat ... and he forsook God who made him.’ He does not hesitate to enlist the English missionary John Hartley in praising Capodistria’s actions against piracy or to enlist the High Anglican layman Athelstan Riley in mild humour at the expense of Athos, while describing Oliver Cromwell as perhaps the greatest of England’s worthies. The religion behind all this is essentially founded on wisdom literature, embracing Proverbs, Exodus and indeed the Talmud, and is at some considerable distance from popular piety.

A passage exactly half way through the textual journey brings this out strongly.

On arrival at what he calls Agrini (present-day Agrinio), Pallis notes that it was known as Vrachori at the time of the Revolution; and one of the things that alienates and disorients this returning exile in contemporary Greece is the pervasive renaming of places to give them a classical ring. The entire page of text in question was inserted after the 1922 Disaster: having criticized the clergy for rapacity and inhumanity towards the sick during the Revolution, Pallis concludes with a biting assessment: ‘That the Church saved the nation is an old wives’ tale; the historical truth is the converse ... The Church was no mother but a bloodsucking stepmother.’

But to end there would be to leave the story half-told. After this burst of indignation, the narration, with all its divagations, takes the narrator on a journey which, though never reverent, is increasingly consoling: descriptions of scenery proliferate as we approach the spectacular setting of Prousos. For all Pallis’ disapprobation of superstition and his incapability of conquering what he sees as his ancestrally authentic anti-clericalism, he finds the abbot of Prousos admirable – the more so because the abbot is out of favour with the obscurantist and populist clergy of Athens. But he does not leave Prousos on this note. Instead, the narration culminates with a double allusion to the two aspects of Greek culture he loves best.

The first is Homer:

*Before I say farewell once and for all to those parts of Brousos, let me say a word about the monastery dog ... When I saw him old but still splendid, a faithful guard in his place, I thought straight away of Odysseus’ Argus.*

And Pallis then quotes in a neat hexameter translation made for the occasion the entire affecting scene from *Odyssey* 17. This might seem a fitting place for his *nostos* to end, but

having mocked so many others, our narrator is ready to conclude with a little self-mockery.

The book’s final scene witnesses a flirtatious stichomythic encounter between the elderly (and married) narrator and a widow of advanced years, Vavoulo, in a clear parody of the question and answer form of the ballad of the exile’s return. Vavoulo eventually vows to send the narrator some sausages for Christmas, in a double-entendre that brings the house down. But the sausages never arrive, prompting the final *cri de coeur*, ‘How can I ever trust woman again?’ Pallis guys himself as a failed Odysseus here. And it is as if Vavoulo personifies the 100-year-old independent Greece which this Diaspora Greek cannot stay away from but which leaves him perpetually exasperated.

#### **Further reading**

Richard Witt’s short life of Pallis in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* is excellent. Of Pallis’ own writings, his two volumes of Homeric commentary contain much good sense and entertainment value – one of his emendations was commended by the editor (and banker) Walter Leaf – likewise his digressive and entertaining notes on New Testament books. *The Twenty-Second Book of the Iliad* (London 1909) and *A Few Notes on the Gospels according to St Mark and St Matthew* (Oxford 1932) are currently available online as print-on-demand editions. For Pallis and the language question, see Peter Mackridge’s invaluable *Language and National Identity in Greece, 1766–1976* (Oxford 1976).

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