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### The Resilience of Corfu

The Greek island of Corfu is far from isolated; its frequent use as a defense fortress in history's military exploits has made this island a favorite battleground for warring countries. Occupied by more than three separate governments since the Venetian's overtook the Genoese in 1401, Corfu has over time developed a multicultural populace, architecture and language. However, this diversity has been, and still is, a source of tension on this beautiful island. These tensions are illustrated in the travel writing of visitors from around the world. I specifically draw three writing samples from the period of 1848 to 2010 that illustrate English and American travelers', or tourists', perspectives of the island. The simple explanation that most of these writers have for traveling to Corfu is to witness the natural splendor of the island. However, the multicultural tensions that exist in the residential populace draw out issues in the writings that reflect dominant colonialist views of the writer's respective periods which, in turn, shape the present-day mass-tourism industry of the island.

Edward Lear's letters, from 1848 to 1877, later compiled by Philip Sherrard in *Edward Lear, The Corfu Years* (1988)<sup>1</sup>, reflect the state of Corfu under British rule through the perspective of an aristocratic artist and poet. Additionally, the introduction and commentary by Sherrard exhibits the more recently popular colonialist ideas of the 1980's. Lear's status as an

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<sup>1</sup> I will parenthetically cite this text based on which author wrote the particular quotation in order to notably separate the ideas and beliefs of Lear in 1848 to 1877 and Sherrard in 1988. For example when I am referring to Lear's letters I will use Lear in the in-text citation; if I am citing the introduction or afterward I will use Sherrard in the in-text citation.

aristocrat deeply affects the type of discourse that is seen in his letters. Primarily his letters start out describing the beauty of the island, frequently noting that “nothing can be more lovely than the views; I [Lear] never saw more enchanting” (Lear 40). The first letters frequently detail his long walks throughout the island and his quests to find beautiful scenes to paint. It is obvious that his primary intention is to enjoy the splendor of nature. However, these scenes become less and less descriptive as his stay progresses until his painting is merely referred to as a source of income.

As Lear becomes more engrained in the daily life of Corfu, he begins to write more about his social agenda, political issues and money. Lear’s agenda displays the type of social hierarchy that exists on the island during the middle to late 1800’s. He is frequently invited to dine or yacht with English royalty or fellow aristocrats, enveloped in what Sherrard calls the British inhabitant’s “endless succession of organized frivolity and distraction” (Sherrard 15). More notably there is very little mention of people outside of Lear’s British community. Despite the “varied and colorful” population consisting of one-third Jews, one-third Turks, Maltese, Italians, and others, and another third Greeks, Lear rarely mentions anyone outside of his own class unless he is referring to his servant or some pheasants he was sketching (Sherrard 15). His letters suggest that he had little contact with the other cultures of the island despite his long walks making him very determined to remain only a tourist.

Although Lear attempts to learn Greek several times throughout his intermittent stay on Corfu, his letters reflect some level of contempt for the Greek inhabitants of the island, some of whom are very wealthy and most of whom are peasants (Sherrard 15). Interestingly, Lear seems to maintain some level of respect and interest in the customs of the natives, “at the end of May there is a great *fiesta* there, and all the peasants come from all the parts of the country, in

beautiful costumes; and I want to be able to prepare in time for a large painting of this scene, which I believe is one of the most remarkable in Greece” (Lear 58). However, as the Greeks push for revolution he describes the Greek population’s attempt to reclaim Corfu with contempt, “the evil that is done [the revolutionary actions] can only be prevented from increasing by very different persons to hold the reins: the Greek, public and official, cannot now be got rid of as a language, but when it is used to speak absolute treason a check might be put on it” (Lear 120). Later he writes that his friend Bowen “will now set to work to abolish one of the two English judgeships... [and] he will be forced to cause every English influence to cease, and he will end by aiding the Greek party in rooting out every good honest man” (Lear 130). Evidently Lear seems to believe that Britain is a force for good on Corfu despite the high levels of poverty for the native Greek residents. Lear’s aristocratic ties to the colonial tradition are made evident in his discussions of the ongoing conflict between Britain and Greece.

Also, the discrepancy between the impoverished Greeks and Lear’s own situation is revealed in Lear’s descriptions of his frequent purchases and his search for a multi-bedroom house for himself. Occasionally Lear will discuss his paintings of the little huts in which many Greek residents reside and the workers out in the olive fields that he sketches but he never notes the great difference between their lives and his own. The tone of his letter writing is very factual, it would seem that the discrepancy in wealth is simply how it should be because he is a British aristocrat and they are *natives*. The political tension that arises from this situation comes as an annoyance to Lear as he reports that “the place is all altered and sad... the angry and violent feeling against everything English is disagreeable” (Lear 218). At the end of the collection of letters Sherrard notes that “the island of whose beauty they [Lear] speak so feelingly... has in recent years been cruelly disfigured...every stretch of it accessible by road or track has been so

butchered and bartered, drawn and quartered, and so immersed and desolated beneath the ferro-concrete hideosity of hotel and boarding-house, discotheque, bar, cafeteria and chop-house” (Sherrard 237). Clearly Sherrard and Lear long for the Corfu of earlier times, unspoiled by either the political turmoil of the middle 1800’s or the tourism and globalization of the 1980’s.

However, the influx of extended-stay tourists and booming development started many years before Sherrard’s brief lamentations were written. In Gerald Durrell’s novel *My Family and Other Animals* (1956) recording his family’s five-year stay in Corfu, the evidence of colonialist attitudes and tourist-centered entertainment development on the island is present. Upon the family’s arrival at the hotel in Corfu, a discussion of the bathroom facilities commences and they are deemed “most insanitary,” by the entire family and the mother notes that ““it really is a *disgusting* way to do things. Quite apart from the mistakes one can make, I should think there’s a danger of getting typhoid”” (Durrell 11). The discussion then leads to the family’s surmises about the awful state of things in the city which leads to their decision to rent out a house in the country area of the island for better quality of life. The hotel industry has started to develop at this point but clearly is not at the level which travelers can see in the present day. The half-hidden insults to the Corfu residents only increase in number from that point, drawing from nearly caricature-like descriptions of their “strange, mentally defective” pheasant neighbor to jokes about their native housekeeping staff (Durrell 29). Further, when it comes time to determine how the children will get their education during their stay, Durrell poses the question, “but where to find this [education] on a remote Greek island?” (40). The question and the passages following it imply that Corfu could not possibly have the standard of education that is required for a young English boy. However, even during Lear’s stay there was a well-respected university in Corfu that is still around today.

Clearly there are options for education but the family ultimately decides to home school the children so that they will get a “grounding in things like mathematics and French” (Durrell 40). The end of the family’s stay at Corfu does not improve their perception of their co-inhabitants. Durrell notes that at one point he meets a murderer who gives the children an albatross as a pet and upon the mothers fearful response to this information, the judicial system is made out to be ridiculous. Durrell claims that “they don’t have the death penalty here for anything except bandits...you get three years for murder and five years if you’re caught dynamiting fish,” and the family accepts this as just the backwards way people are in Corfu (Durrell 251). By posing the system of law in such a manner, the novel puts the society from which the family came at a higher, more sophisticated level than the apparently backwards, uneducated, uncultured area which they now reside. The entire novel is one thinly-veiled insult after another concerning the culture and reputation of the Greek inhabitants of Corfu. Since the island relies heavily on the tourist industry, specifically during this period after technological advances rendered much of the island’s original industry useless, narratives such as this were harmful to the representation of the island and encouraged destructive behaviors by visiting tourists.

The effects of travel accounts, like those of Lear and Durrell, are now being recognized and identified in today’s post-colonial atmosphere. Jim Potts’s *The Ionian Islands and Epirus, A Cultural History* (2010) suggests this changing attitude towards Corfu and identifies the poor behaviors that have shaped the detrimental tourism industry that has crippled the island as much as helped it. Regarding the possibility of Corfu being the island on which Odysseus washed ashore and met Nausicaa, Potts suggests that “it is a tragedy what all-round visual pollution and appallingly ugly cement structures have, relatively recently, been allowed to destroy any

Homeric associations or atmosphere” (11). Although there is still much discussion about which islands play what role in the *Odyssey*, it is clear that the islands bear some historical and/or mythological relevance. Relevance has been a tricky thing for the inhabitants of Corfu. With so many different cultures and different ruling governments it is hard to determine what has significance, Potts writes the views of Henry Jervis-White Jervis (1852), ““a poor Corfiot noble cannot understand that, in France or England, he would find his equals in the many hard-working students of plebeian names; and that his title of Count is not worth that of plain Mister in England”” (113). As seen with the letters from Lear, the permanent inhabitants of the island are not taken seriously; it is easy for the travelling foreigners to dismiss them as they would small children with delusions of grandeur.

In a subsequent chapter titled “The Reality of Corfu” the effects of the post-colonial mass tourism era are drawn to attention. Potts notes that, “in recent times the island managed to arouse the worst appetites of those people interested only in exploitation and in a quick way to make more money, without taking any care at all of the environment, nature, balance and harmony” (126). Since tourism has become the primary means of supporting the local economy, many have been brought out of poverty (Potts 126). However, Potts wonders about “what the once desperate Albanians think, the Greek Roma (Gypsies), some of whom collect scrap metal and sometimes beg for money, or the West Africans touting pirated DVDs and CDs around the coffee-shops” (127). It is clear that the colonial legacy has not entirely disappeared and that mass tourism is good at overlooking such discrepancies between the different cultures of the island. Also, the recent influence of visitors like Mr. Gorbachev who bring with them large fancy hotels and resorts is cause for alarm to many native inhabitants. The Russian tourism industry may very well replace the British tourism that has been declining as of late, however, to the island, both

parties have contributed to its continual destruction. Although the multicultural landscape has always been a part of Corfu, it is the recent influx of temporary tourists who care little for what they leave behind that has created the most tensions between cultures in the island's history.

Corfu's renowned beauty has attracted travelers from around the world and across the ages. The island's resilience in spite of being fought over, bombed, and now ravaged by tourists, is a testimony to the true survivorship of the native inhabitants of the island. The travel texts of Lear, Durrell and Potts showcase different styles of writing, each author conveying their own ideas about the island. Yet, the writing is all common in that it cannot hide the colonialist attitudes that arise from the multicultural background of the island. While Lear and Durrell perpetuate the colonialist notions that were popular during their time, Potts attempts to recognize the damage of these ideas and draw out conclusions about the mass tourism economy that has risen out of these ideas. Ultimately it can be said that the ideas of the "outsider" that have been perpetuated and documented for hundreds of years have deeply, and recently negatively, affected the permanent residents of Corfu.

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