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RUPERT BROOKE

AND

SKYROS

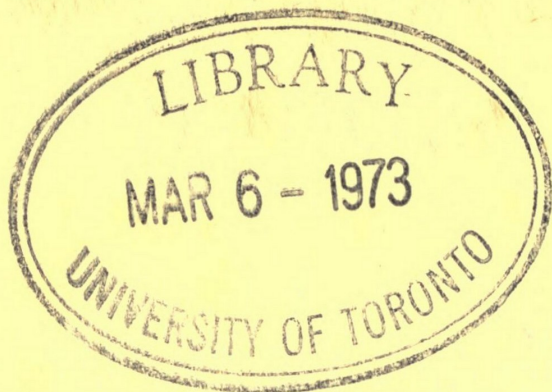
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RUPERT BROOKE
AND
SKYROS

BY
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WITH WOODCUT ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET
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*The woodcut Illustrations are done
from Photographs which I took in
Skyros in April 1920.*

S. C.





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RUPERT BROOKE AND SKYROS



the northern part of the Ægean Sea, almost mid-way between the islands of Eubœa and Chios, lie the twin peaks of Skyros. The storms of history have broken round and near the island, but only spent waves have reached its shores. A few legends, a few of the minor events of Mediterranean history and the records of a few travellers are all that it has to show. And now England, who has never yet figured in its history, must claim a place in its soil and tradition, for in Skyros is the grave and memorial of Rupert Brooke.

A wild and lawless island, inhabited even down to the days when Athens was at the height of its power by half-barbarous peoples, Skyros early became the home of the heroes of legend.

Achilles spent his boyhood on its sands
and cliffs before Troy called him :

He scoured the lonely cliffs and valleys wild,
Hearing the seagulls call to one another,
While far below the great Ægean smiled
(There dwelt the lady of the seas, his mother,



In the old tale). He thought he could descry
Far off amid the clouds those mountains high
The cradle of his race : far other
The isle of Skyros where he lay beneath the sky.*

Theseus was killed by the king of the
island when he fled there from Athens,

* From *Achilles*, by the late R. M. Heath. 1911.

and centuries later his mighty bones, revered as were the bones of Becket, were carried by the Athenian general Cimon to the Athens that had disowned him.

Of these two the name of Achilles still survives in the name of Akhili, which is given to a landlocked bay on the eastern shore, far the loveliest place in the island, whence on the clearest of summer days one can just discern the distant shores of the Troad.

A memorial of Theseus is perhaps found in a small temple site near the old castle high up on the cliffs. It was a small sanctuary, dedicated in all probability to Theseus as a hero, and it was right on the edge of the sea, almost hanging over the water on an escarpment of the main ridge of rock on which the town is built. Other traces of old Hellenism linger on the island. The spring of Niphi, on the western side, preserves the name of the Nymphs, the hill-top Areion that of Ares, and Artemi that of Artemis. None of these names is a revival, as is so often the case in modern Greece. The fact that

all the places bearing these names are far out in the wilder parts of the island, and so removed from the archaistic zeal of the village schoolmasters and antiquaries, makes it all the more probable that the names come down to us in true and authentic descent from antiquity. Niphi is a spring that breaks abruptly from the cliff-side and falls into the sea through a luxuriant grove of fig-trees amongst which cluster a few houses, all in ruins but one. Areion is a bleak summit that rises at the southern end of the island above a valley of olive-trees. Shepherds told me that there were "old ruins" on it, but I was not able to get there. Artemi is just such another peak, rugged and without even the wild thyme and shrubs that one finds elsewhere. In few places on the mainland can one find so many traces of antiquity as here, for Turk, Venetian, and Slav have swept away most of the old place-names in the Peloponnese and in the central provinces.

In antiquity the island was famed mostly for its marble and its flocks. To-

day it produces nothing else but these that the outside world requires. The marble is coloured, veined with rose and yellow, and there is hardly a Roman palace or an Italian church without it. From the milk of its goats and sheep are made the finest cheeses in the Mediterranean, hardly known outside Greece. Other industries it has none. Little changes on the island, and it was famed in Roman times for just those same things that bring it its fame of to-day. Earlier still its flocks were much in repute, and the only coins which are attributed to the island bear a heraldic device of two goats. The old stock must have vanished long ago, but the same herbs, the same shrubs and the same custom of watering the flocks on sea-water as well as fresh produces as fine sheep and goats to-day as two thousand years ago.

The island is divided almost into two parts by a narrow strip of marshy land, to the north and south of which rise the twin peaks. On each are marble quarries; the northern alone is wooded, and contains

the only marble quarries that are still worked. Pefko Bay—the “bay of pines”—is the harbour whence the vast blocks of rose-pink marble are shipped, conveyed by curious engines and with titanic effort down a winding track from the quarries, a full thousand feet above. Near the quarries is the wind-swept house of the quarry-master, open to all the winds of the Ægean. From its windows one sees the whole panorama of Eubœa, and northwards the other islands of the northern Sporades and perhaps—on clear days—Olympus itself — indeed a Homeric dwelling-place on Homer’s “towering crag of Skyros.” The one village of the island is on the eastern side, near no harbour; the reason for it being thus placed on the most inhospitable shore, at first not obvious, is plain to those who know what the terrors of piracy meant, right down to the early nineteenth century, to villagers on the islands. To dwell on a harbour was to invite raids from the pirates or other enemies who sheltered there. From prehistoric times onwards

the founders of island towns knew this danger. Phylakopi the Minoan and Plaka the Hellenic cities of Melos were both remote from the magnificent harbour of the island. The chief city of Lemnos is on its stormiest shore. Kyme, the oldest city in Eubœa, is on the eastern coast, notorious for its tempests, and unapproachable even to-day to modern vessels except in the summer or in the calmest weather of spring and winter; the safer channel of the Euripos is always chosen by coasting steamers in uncertain weather. So it is that the two great harbours of Skyros, Kalamitsa Bay and Tris Boukes Bay, remain desert harbours except for a few houses at the head of the one and some shepherds' huts at the other. It is in a valley off Tris Boukes Bay that the tomb of Rupert Brooke lies—a lonely valley in a lonely bay, with none but shepherds and storm-bound sailors to see it. But the war that created a new piracy found new defences against it, and the irony of time brought it about that the very harbours that of old had

been the refuge of pirates now became a refuge against them; while they were kept to the doubtful comforts of the depths of the sea outside, mighty fleets of transports waited their time in these landlocked bays. So it came about that Rupert Brooke found himself in this desert bay, from which it was not his destiny to depart.

As its name denotes, Tris Boukes Bay is the bay of "Three Mouths." Two small islands lie athwart the entrance, thus forming the three narrow entries. Despoti, the larger of the two, is so called in island legend because it was once the home, and a barren one at that, of a bishop hermit. Plati, the smaller, is a mere rock. The bay itself is fifteen miles from the one village of the island, and the shore has no fresh water, the nearest spring being Niphi, seven miles away.

To this bay early in April of this year, almost five years after his death, it was my privilege to bring the monument that is now placed over Rupert Brooke's grave. After one vain attempt to reach the island



in March, when a storm off Sunium drove us back to the mainland, I finally reached the island at the dawn of a windy day in the first week in April. The rugged outline of the island rose against a grey lashing sea with a red and forbidding sunrise behind it. Away to the west was the sharp peak of Mount Delph in Eubœa, curiously like the Japanese prints of Fujiyama, snow-covered and abrupt. Southwards were the vague outlines of Andros and Tenos. A five hours' walk from the landing-place brought me to the valley in which, two thousand yards from the shore, lay the grave. The wooden crosses still stood undisturbed and intact. The stones over the grave were as when first they were placed there.

The work necessary for the landing of the marble slabs comprising the monument, and for their erection, took the best part of three weeks, for the villagers and masons who carried out the work had to hew a path over the ground to the olive-wood where the grave lies.

Since there were no houses and no

village nearer than fifteen miles, we found quarters with the shepherds of the valley and lodged in their huts.

Simple, sturdy folk such as these shepherds come as a pleasing relief after the banalities of the town-living Greek. There was something almost Homeric about their simplicity. The *mandra*, or shepherd's camp, where I lodged, was the property of one family, its occupants an old patriarch of over eighty (he was not quite certain how much over eighty!) and his six nephews, varying in age from twenty to thirty. The dwelling-house at the *mandra* was built high up above the sea on the side of a rocky peak, a shanty made of rocks and strong olive-poles. Inside was a row of shelves, one above the other, that served as beds, a wide open fireplace, and a few low stools. Every evening at sundown the younger men would drive the sheep and goats back from their pastures to the pen and milk them, while the old uncle busied himself with lighting the fire and preparing the evening meal. Their work



done, all the shepherds would come inside, the door would be closed, for it was cold at nights, and we would eat a meal of bread and milk, cream cheese, and junket in front of the blazing fire. They were not meat-eating men, nor did they take wine or tobacco except on their rare visits to the village. Their active season of work had begun, and they would stay in the *mandra* all the spring, migrating later, after the lambs and kids had been weaned, to the hill-tops with their flocks, and sleeping out at nights in the summer on the open hill-sides covered with their heavy woollen cloaks.

In the hut after nightfall we all sat round the fire discussing subjects that ranged from European politics to the price of cheese. Most of the younger men had seen service in the war—one in Russia with the Greek forces at Odessa, others in Macedonia or Asia Minor. One, I found, had been in the same region as myself in the Struma Valley. Yet the war had not spoiled them, and they were once again island peasants wearing the

island costume, and eating with wooden spoons from wooden basins. The Greek countryman has too much of the unchangeable Oriental in his nature to let new-fangled notions take deep root.

Long before dawn the younger men were up and about, leading their flocks to the pastures.

One night returning to the *mandra* I lost my way and wandered aimlessly and rather hopelessly on the mountain-side. For once shepherds' dogs proved a blessing, for, hearing me stumbling on the hill-side a mile away, they started barking, and so guided me to the home that I could not see and had thought to be in a very different direction. As I approached they ran out barking at me, and were only driven off by the showers of stones that their masters hurled at them to enforce obedience. I remembered the passage in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus, in just such another plight, approached the *mandra* of Eumæus and was saved from attack by a similar expedient on the part of the shepherds.

Many curious customs and stories persist among men such as these shepherds. Their ways of managing their flocks is a study in itself. They control and lead the sheep and goats not with the aid of their dogs, but by a system of cries and shouts which, I was assured, the animals understand, and I was given demonstration of this by one of the shepherds. There is one series of cries for sheep and another for goats, while for horses, mules and dogs there are quite other sounds. The shepherds' dogs are used for guarding the flocks from attack of man or beast, or for retrieving lost lambs and kids, and there their duties end. They differ greatly in type from the shaggy brutes of the mainland, and are lithe and swift, not unlike Welsh collies. The sheep and goats of Skyros are kept together in the same flocks, although there are separate cries used by the shepherds for each. The shepherd can thus, if he wish, separate his animals.

Cheeses are made from the milk of both animals mixed. One shepherd

assured me that a great quantity of milk is lost owing to the snakes which come at night and suck the milk from the udders. This belief is, I think, almost universal in Europe wherever there are snakes in large numbers.

Such are the people in whose remote island valley lies this lonely grave.

Some of these shepherds had seen the actual burial, and all knew vaguely the story of Rupert Brooke and who he was. In anything that concerns them Greeks are not slow to learn.

The villagers of the one village of the island are of much the same stamp. Nearly all wear the island costume—a close-fitting jacket of white wool reaching to the waist, with a blue waistband and breeches and white woollen gaiters.

In the village to this day there survives a dance, unique among the islands or on the mainland of Greece, known as the "Dance of the Old Man." It is a curious primitive beast dance in which shepherds from the hills cover their faces with the skins of hares or martens. They hang



fifty or more sheep-bells round their waists and dance up and down the village until they drop from exhaustion. The dance takes place every day during the week before Lent, and its origin is wrapped in obscurity. It may perhaps have something to do with the old worship of Dionysus in Thrace, whence the present inhabitants are believed to have come some time in the Middle Ages. The villagers themselves have no explanation of the dance, but still keep it up vigorously and enjoy it. Although it comes in the week before Lent it has no religious significance. With the honesty of Pagans they admit it to be a purely pagan custom; they could hardly do otherwise.

Above the village on a pinnacle of rock that stands out like a rampart above the long sandy spit known as "Vampires' Cape" is built the old medieval town on the ruins of its predecessor Hellenic Skyros, the colony of ancient Athens. Round the ruins of this town run the walls, a double gate defending the

entrance. The churches alone remain intact and cared for, and with them the monastery of St George, with its wonder-working eikon. Below the old town lies the modern village, covering a hollow of ground as though poured from a funnel, built in the days when piracy had become less of a menace, and when it was safe to live without walls. The white flat-roofed houses glisten as only island towns can glisten in the Ægean sun.

I wonder how many people will visit this remote island to see the grave. It means long and weary journeying, and will be a real pilgrimage. From the sea, just off Tris Boukes Bay, the monument can just be seen, with its white Pentelic marble showing clear through the olive-trees, the only visible sign of man or his works at this end of the island. But none save coasting steamers and caiques pass close to the island, and few will see the tomb save those who go to see it. It lies in a deserted valley at the deserted end of the island. Greek of old, Imperial



Roman, and the rest, have never made their dwelling hereabouts, for there is no water, and it is barren soil. But by some curious fortune one of the villagers who was with me uncovered an ancient tomb on the shore near where the monument was landed. It was almost on the sea edge, and we could find no trace of other burials. There is no proof as to who it was who was buried here save the fact that it was a Roman, and probably a woman, judging by the glass unguent bottles that were in it with the skeleton. Perhaps it was the grave of someone drowned in the bay, or who had died when some ship had put in here for refuge, even as the ship that brought Rupert Brooke here. I am reminded of many of the epitaphs in the Palatine Anthology that commemorate the graves of men drowned at sea and buried hard by on the seashore in the lonely bays of Greece. One epitaph, more than most, seems almost as though it had come from such a grave as this. It is from the tomb of a sailor drowned in harbour :

The sea is the same sea everywhere; why do we idly blame the island rocks, the swift current of the Straits or the jagged reefs? In vain they have their evil fame; why else did I escape them but to be overwhelmed in the haven of Scarphe?

Pray whoso will for a safe passage home; that the ocean keeps the ways of ocean still, I, Aristagoras, know full well, for I lie buried here.

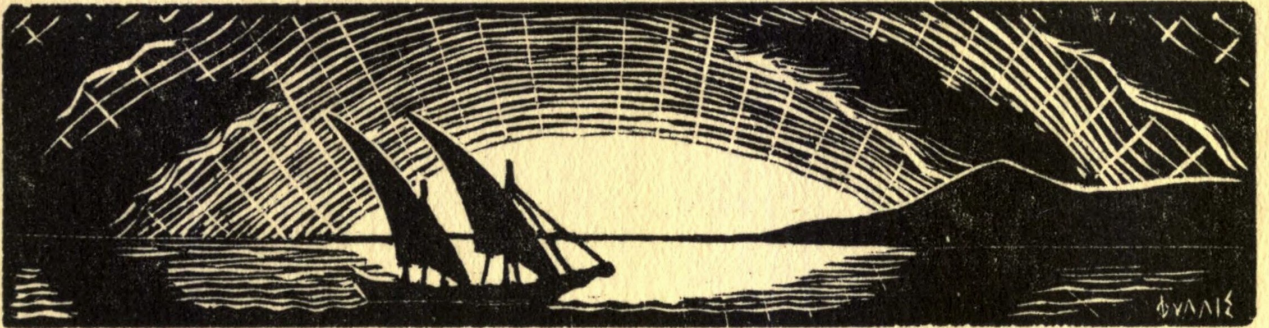
Save for these two graves, the valley is as deserted as when first volcanic forces lifted the marble heads of the islands from the sea. But it is covered with a profusion of wild flowers such as one rarely finds in Greece. Pale blue anemones, orchids, rock hyacinths, and sombre russet fritillaries star the turf, while everywhere is the scent of wild thyme and mint that grows thick between the bushes of wild olive.

The land belongs to the monastery of St George, and one of the monks of the monastery was sent to carry out the ceremony of consecration of the tomb



according to the rites of the Greek Church.

For once St George of Skyros and St George of England have met on common ground.





I have to thank the editor of *The London Mercury* for permission to reprint this essay, which first appeared in that journal in October, 1920. A few minor additions and alterations have been made.

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