



The History of the Byzantine Empire from 765 to 1057

George Finlay

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"I WOULD rather", said a former president of Harvard University, Professor Felton, "be the author of your histories than Prime Minister of England". This was said in a letter to Finlay, reassuring and solacing him in his day of dejection. So Atticus once comforted Cicero; but it is to be feared that Finlay's case was one of another order, less consolable. His misgivings were due to a sense of disillusion over that very cause, the renaissance of a new Greece, to which he had devoted his life with unswerving mind and singleness of purpose. And even that was not all. For his disappointment coincided with the beginning of his own physical decline, and with the apparent signs too, for so he read them, that his services to his day and generation had been in vain.

Now, we who look back along the steadfast line of his achievement, recognise how eminent it was, and how true was the prophecy of his friend Felton, uttered almost fifty years ago. We see the continuing effects of his labour, forty years long, as an historian, and the heroic difficulty of his work as an active and practical Philhellene. To gain an estimate of its force and quality, it is almost enough to read the books of his Byzantine history that follow; but they ought to be read with the radiant hope of Finlay's youth and his first great ardour in the Hellenic cause gleaming upon the page.

Finlay, who died in Athens in 1875, was born at Faversham, Kent, in 1799 ; that is a few months before Macaulay, a very different master of history. His early circumstances were hardly such as to foster his special qualities. He went to no university until he was twenty, and had spent some months in a writer's office at Glasgow; and of his schooldays, three years in a Liverpool boarding-school were, on his own showing, a lost and useless period.

But he was fortunate in having a mother who both loved history herself and had the art of making it alive to the imagination of her boy. When, then, Finlay went from Glasgow to Gottingen to study Roman law, he was better primed than the mere chart of his early years would seem to show. Moreover, he reached Germany at a time when the promise of the new awakening of Greece was bright, and he breathed the air of its revolt in a kind of intellectual ecstasy. He drank in eagerly every word he could of the news of the Greek cause, made friends with the one Greek student at the college; and at length, in the autumn of 1823, very shortly after the news of Lord Byron's departure for Greece had been announced, he too set off thither. He reached Cephalonia in November, and met the poet; went on to Athens, and then to Missolonghi. Probably it was there that he, like Lord Byron, laid the seeds of the fever that afterwards seriously threatened him. It was in April, 1824, that Byron died. Finlay had gone on meanwhile to Italy, where and in Sicily he spent some time, returning to

Scotland to pass his examination in civil law. But that accomplished, he felt the power and the hope of Greece all dominant in his mind. He could not resist the unsated desire he felt to return and be in the very midst of the struggle. He left again for its shores in 1825, there to remain for the rest of his life, nearly half a century in all, with the intermission only of a few visits home. In 1829 Greece was able to declare her independence thanks to the aid of many enthusiastic adherents, who, like Byron and Finlay, had been ready to give all they had to her cause.

Alas! Finlay lost nearly all he possessed, and often felt that he had given his days as well as his wealth in vain in this sacrifice.

But Finlay, if he doubted at times, and felt that all he had done and spent and written had been of no real avail, could never have echoed Byron's plaint in "Childe Harold" for the companion country :

There is the moral of all human tales ;

'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,

First Freedom, and then Glory when that fails,

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