

A History of Cyprus - a classic revisited

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Reviewer: Andrekos Varnava

It is rare to review a book that was published nearly 60 years ago. It is also a privilege, because Sir George Hill's last volume in his four-volume *A History of Cyprus* is considered by most historians of Cyprus as the starting point for both students and scholars of the Ottoman and British periods (until 1948) of Cyprus' past. This review will not attempt to provide a comprehensive summary of the contents of the book – this is not what reviews should be about anyway and at 700 pages it would be impossible without taking up too much space. The aim of this review is to discuss the value of the book at the time when it was published and what value the book has today.

More reviews should look into the author of the work they are reviewing so that the influences on the author are understood. This is especially the case with reviews of older books. Sir George Francis Hill was the Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum from 1931–6 and was an expert in Renaissance medals. Hill was born in 1867 in Berhampur, India, where his grandfather, Micaiah Hill, founded the London Missionary Society's outpost and his father, Samuel John Hill, was stationed. He attended Blackheath College (later known as Eltham College) followed by University College, London, and finally Merton College, Oxford, where he studied under Percy Gardner and earned a first class degree in classics. At Oxford he gained an interest in numismatics. Hill joined the British Museum in the Coins and Medals Department in 1893 when the Department was the centre of study for Greek coins only. Hill continued the work of Barclay Head and Reginald Poole and in 1897 published the first of his six-volumed *Catalogue of Greek Coins* titled *Coins of Cyprus*. Hill subsequently produced catalogues on many of the British Museum's collections in his area. In 1912 he became Keeper of the Department. In 1931 he was appointed Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum and two years later was knighted. Both Percy Gardner and, especially, Reginald Poole were intimately connected to archaeological research in Cyprus, and Hill would have been aware of archaeological work undertaken in Cyprus. Much of this work was connected to the British School in Athens. Hill and the other scholars around him belonged to a long era when for Europeans all things with a remote 'Greek' connection were Greek and this became accentuated in an age when nationalism was being institutionalised in the Greek state. Hill also lived at a time when the British Empire was expanding, and part of this expansion included the moment when the British acquired the right to occupy and administer Cyprus in 1878 from the Ottoman Empire. Hill's fascination with Cyprus certainly stems from this idea that the island was the only 'Greek' place to come under British rule.

Hill, however, is not the sole author of *Volume IV*. On the original publication Sir Harry Luke, who had been District Commissioner of Paphos and Famagusta during the First World War, was credited as the editor of the book. Although not credited on the front cover of the digitally printed version, on the side it lists 'Hill & Luke' as the authors. It is uncertain how influential Luke was as 'editor', but what is clear is that Hill died in 1948 and *Volume IV* appeared four years later, plenty of time for Luke to impart his influence, especially since he had retired from the colonial service in 1943, after which he served for three years as Chief Representative of the British Council in the Caribbean, and then worked on the book. I believe Luke must have been very influential on this volume and warrants being considered as the second author, as I believe Cambridge University Press inadvertently included him on the spine, although I have no evidence to support this view. Luke is as fascinating a character as Hill. Sir Harry Luke was born Harry Charles Lukach, to a Hungarian father, and changed his name to Luke in 1919. He first visited Cyprus as part of a 'grand tour' he was making of the Near and Middle East with his friend Harry Pirie-Gordon. He later wrote about his trip in *The Fringe of the East* (1913). He returned to Cyprus in 1911 to serve as the private secretary of the high commissioner, Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams, and in 1912 was also appointed as an assistant secretary to the Government of Cyprus. Luke had an eventful time during the First World War, first when working as an intelligence office, with his friend Pirie-Gordon, on the *Doris* along the Cilician-Syrian coast, and then as 'civil-governor' of Mudros, on Lemnos. After serving as District Commissioner of Paphos and later of Famagusta, he went to the Caucasus on the staff of Admiral J. M. de Robeck, becoming British Chief Commissioner in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, from April-September 1920. He next went to Palestine as assistant governor of Jerusalem under Sir Ronald Storrs from 1920–4. Storrs would later serve as Governor of Cyprus from 1926–32. After appointments as Colonial Secretary of Sierra Leone (1924–8), Chief Secretary of Palestine (1928–30) and Lieutenant-Governor of Malta (1930–8) Luke's last post was as Governor of Fiji and High Commissioner for the Western Pacific (1938–42). A prolific writer, Luke mentions Cyprus in three other publications of his: *Anatolica* (1924); *An Eastern Chequerboard* (1934); and *Cities and Men: An Autobiography* (1951). Meanwhile, he also produced two historical works, the first an account of Cyprus during Ottoman rule, *Cyprus Under the Turks 1571–1878* (London 1921); and later in life *Cyprus: A Portrait and an Appreciation* (London 1957, revised 1965). Cyprus formed a pivotal part in Luke's life, both in relation to his career and his publications. His time in Cyprus was the subject of some controversy when in November 1913 Lewis Harcourt, the Colonial Secretary, sent his private secretary, J. C.

C. Davidson, later Conservative Party chairman, on a secret mission to investigate the ‘weakness in the quality of the administration’, and reported that Hamilton Goold-Adams was not much liked in the island by his officers nor the Greek Cypriot nationalist elites largely because Luke was a constant source of anti-Greek and pro-Turkish influence.

There is no doubt that for its time this book was timely and meticulously researched. One review of the book was very positive.⁽¹⁾ At the time little had been published on Ottoman and British Cyprus. To be sure there had many books, accounts by men serving in the island either as consuls or in the colonial administration ⁽²⁾, attempts at a general history and its current state ⁽³⁾, and another at a history of British rule ⁽⁴⁾, as well as numerous traveller accounts ⁽⁵⁾, but, with the exception of Luke’s *Cyprus under Turkish Rule*, only one serious academic study, and this only on the nature of the initial British occupation.⁽⁶⁾

Hill and Luke are of course products of their own period. Both are from the British imperial golden age and were actors in that epoch: Hill as a discoverer and a facilitator for others to discover the colonial past; Luke as a colonial administrator. Consequently, the book is written from a British imperial perspective: in other words, it does not question the wisdom of the British occupation of Cyprus, although it does question certain policies. It is also a product that reflects the period of nationalism. Although the book is quite balanced and presents an accurate appraisal of the enosis movement, rather than an uncritical, even favourable appraisal, as more recent authors have ⁽⁷⁾, Hill and Luke do accept the Greek Cypriot elite’s nationalist discourse, even if implicitly, by recognising them as Greek and not as Cypriot. Hill and Luke were suspicious of the statements, made in welcoming Wolseley at Larnaca by a Greek Orthodox prelate, that the population accepted the change of government and trusts that Britain will help Cyprus unite with Greece. They conclude that the remarks were made by the Bishop of Kitium, because this was in keeping with his subsequent attitude. It turns out that these words were indeed not said ⁽⁸⁾, and it is most interesting that Hill and Luke did not further question this quote given that *The Times* correspondent, whom they reference, does not mention it, despite his very long report. Hill and Luke use a vast array of English and Greek language sources to put together a most entertaining and, most importantly, a most detailed and relatively accurate appraisal of Ottoman and British rule of Cyprus.

For today’s scholar, the book still holds much value for this reason. Although neither Hill nor Luke consulted Ottoman sources, they present a relatively balanced account of Ottoman rule, which mostly avoids the anachronisms of much literature, even contemporary literature, on the Ottoman Empire’s ‘oppressive rule’ and ‘decay’. On the British period there is much to like and to value, yet the book is of course hampered by a) the prejudices of the authors and b) the unavailability of many sources, both archival and published sources. The section on ‘strategic considerations’ is undoubtedly the weakest. There are countless details and facts that await further exploration, especially relating to the Ottoman period, which has been a most understudied period in Cypriot history, and the inter-war years, especially post-1931 imperial and strategic considerations.

Ultimately, this book remains indispensable today to students and scholars of the Ottoman and British periods of Cypriot history as it was in the 1950s, despite its shortcomings.

Notes

1. Truesdell S. Brown, ‘Review’, *The American Historical Review*, 58, 4 (July 1953), 878–9.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Basil Stewart, *My Experiences of the Island of Cyprus* (London, 1906); Hugh Montgomerie Sinclair, *Camp and Society* (London, 1926); Sir Ronald Storrs, *Orientalisms* (London, 1937).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Hamilton Lang, *Cyprus: Its History, its Present Resources and Future Prospects* (London, 1878); Arthur Evelyn Fyler, *The Development of Cyprus, and Rambles in the Island* (London, 1899); Colonel A. O. Green, *Cyprus: A Short Account of its History & Present State* (Edinburgh, 1914); W. H. Flinn, *Cyprus: A Brief Survey of its History and Development* (Nicosia, 1924).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sir Charles W. J. Orr, *Cyprus Under British Rule* (London, 1918).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Sir Samuel W. Baker, *Cyprus as I Saw it in 1879* (London, 1879); Lady Annie Brassey, *Sunshine and Storm in the East or a Cruise to Cyprus and Constantinople*

- (London, 1880); William Francis Butler, *Far Out: Rovings Retold* (London, 1880); Agnes Smith Lewis, *Through Cyprus* (London, 1887); E. A. M. Lewis, *A Lady's Impressions of Cyprus in 1893*, (London, 1894); W. H. Mallock, *In an Enchanted Island; or a Winter's Retreat in Cyprus* (London, 1889); Rider H. Haggard, *A Winter Pilgrimage in Palestine, Italy and Cyprus* (London, 1901); Olive Murray Chapman, *Across Cyprus* (London, 1937).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Dwight E. Lee, *Great Britain and the Cyprus Convention Policy of 1878* (Cambridge, MA, 1934).
[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Robert Holland and Diana Markides, *The British and the Hellenes: Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean 1850-1960* (Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Rolandos Katsiaounis, *Labour, Society and Politics in Cyprus during the Nineteenth Century* (Nicosia, 1996), pp. 25–28; Andrekos Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915: The Inconsequential Possession* (Manchester, 2009), p. 157–9.[Back to \(8\)](#)

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