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Compton Mackenzie, *Marathon and Salamis: The Battles That Defined the Western World*. 1934; rpt. Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2010. Pp. 169. ISBN 978-1-59416-115-1.

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Westholme is a classy little publisher of attractively turned out, sturdily bound, and reasonably priced books. Its offerings in military history are selective but of high general quality,<sup>1</sup> comprising mostly new works, but also reissues of worthy older ones.<sup>2</sup> Among the latter is Compton Mackenzie's *Marathon and Salamis*. I will show why this seventy-six-year-old book on the Greco-Persian Wars was and was not a good candidate for reprinting.

To start, the subtitle (added for this edition) and the publisher's back-cover promotions trot out threadbare pieties about the Glory That Was Greece: the battles fought during the war "continue to be a source of fascination ... their significance in the history of the West... The Greek city-states began their complex but unfettered development into ... a 'classical period,' with an unparalleled explosion of intellectual advancement ... backbone of Western civilization and ideals ... Greek and ... Roman power would shape the future of the continent ...," and so on. A contemporary reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* writes: "Mr. Mackenzie has two major qualifications, his love of Herodotus and his own experience in Greece during the late War.... A compact and moving little book." From the scholarly *Journal of Hellenic Studies* comes the promise of "a straightforward narrative, pleasantly written."<sup>3</sup> Typical stuff.

This is not a book worth reprinting and reading because it broke new ground or changed the course of future work on its topic—unlike, say, John Keegan's hugely influential *The Face of Battle*.<sup>4</sup> Mackenzie mostly provides a concise (in content, not expression) 169-page rearming of some exciting bits of Herodotus: besides accounts of the battles featured in the book's title, we get sketches of the Ionian Revolt and the battles at Thermopylae, Artemisium, Plataea, and even Mycale. On these and other matters, Mackenzie is a faithful retailer. He expends, for example, five pages on Herodotus's story (3.129–38) of the double-dealing Greek surgeon, Democedes, and his relations with King Darius, as contrasted with the actions of the patriotic Gillus, then draws broad moralizing conclusions about "the Hellenic passion for liberty," the Greeks' "love of gain, their pre-eminence in science" (37), on the one hand, and the "high regard paid by [the Persians] to honour and truth," on the other.

Clearly, as the *TLS* reviewer put it, Mackenzie loved Herodotus. But so have and so do many more recent and better informed writers. *Pace* John Lennon, love is neither all you need nor sufficient reason for this book. For *Marathon and Salamis* fails as a reliable history. Its author swallows whole many dubious statements in Herodotus. While we need not join the "Father of Lies" anti-Herodotus faction, the ancient historian must be read with caution, notably when it comes to (grossly inflated) numbers. Mackenzie does revise some of these downward, but still blithely endorses logistical and physical impossibilities: the hoplites at Marathon (in their sixty to seventy pounds of armor) covered a whole mile at the double to meet the Persian battle line; then, on the same day, they must have marched twenty-six miles back to Athens, because "the nine Muses cry out from their dedications against the notion that in writing 'with all possible

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1. See Westholme's online catalogue <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1012.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1012.htm)> and Gervase Phillips' recent review of Louis DiMarco's *War Horse* at *MWSR* 2010.08.04 <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1013.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1013.htm)>.

2. E.g., Sewell Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne* [1935], rpt. 2007 and Ladaslas Farago, *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph* [1964], rpt. 2005.

3. Words carefully selected from one sentence in the notice by "A.M.W." [Arthur Maurice Woodward]: "A straightforward piece of narrative, pleasantly written, but containing no important new points of view," *JHS* 54 (1934) 220.

4. NY: Vintage, 1976.

speed,' Herodotus meant the next day" (84).<sup>5</sup> Mackenzie gives Xerxes a 1-million-man army that, yes, drank rivers dry; he believes that Mardonius commanded a rump-army at Plataea of about 150,000 men (133) against an allied Greek muster of 118,000 (137). He calls Greece (50,944 sq. mi.) "a sea-girt, mountainous country not so big as Scotland [30,414 sq. mi.]" (30). But enough.

On higher-level matters, Mackenzie says that, even before the fifth century, "a theoretical hegemony over Hellas seems from time to time accorded to [Sparta]" (22), but specifies neither when nor by whom. And to speak of "the moral superiority with which [Sparta's] political constitution and unrelenting conservatism endowed her" (42) requires a blind eye to "her" routinely brutal exploitation of some 200,000 state-owned slaves (i.e., helots). Mackenzie also anachronistically detects a threat from Athens' "growing maritime power" and "imperialistic ambitions" (43) in the late sixth century. Moreover, he adopts some quirky positions of J.A.R. Munro<sup>6</sup> on, for example, the date of Marathon (491 instead of 490) and the allocation of Persian forces between Eretria and Marathon during the critical days of the campaign, among other oddities. He is also capable of writing that a pre-Salamis Greek council of war is "so vividly narrated by Herodotus that the essential truth of his narrative compels acceptance" (12). By this criterion, *The Red Badge of Courage* or the Harry Potter books are histories, not fictions.

Now, it may be unfair, even churlish, to expect standards of technical scholarship in a belletristic book<sup>7</sup> meant to be pleasant reading for a (now nearly extinct) literate general audience. But no special merits of style warrant the persistence of *Marathon and Salamis* in print—by contrast with, say, Bruce Catton's luminous *Army of the Potomac* trilogy.<sup>8</sup> Compton Mackenzie, it is true, was a proficient author of nearly one hundred other books. While I cannot speak to their qualities, I can say that, overall, stylistic felicity does not commend the present book: "It may be put forward as a tentative hypothesis, which would explain much that is obscure in the course of events during the second half of the reign of Darius, that there was a dread of the Greeks' encouraging Scythian aggression against Persia" (63)—he means "Darius likely acted from fear that the Greeks would persuade the Scythians to attack Persians."<sup>9</sup> Readers will need a high tolerance for genteelly turgid prose.

Nonetheless, *Marathon and Salamis* is worth reading—not especially for what Mackenzie has to say about its subject, but for what he reveals about his own life and the climate of his cultural moment as they shaped his vision of an iconic war of classical antiquity.

Some unfortunate attitudes of his time are evident in specific words and phrases that border on racism. "Oriental," "Barbarian" (capitalized, as if denoting a racial category), "The Turk," and "Semitic" appear pejoratively and distressingly often: "The reputed oriental tendencies of the Greeks settled in Asia Minor were due as much to the luxurious life attainable in such rich and fertile surroundings as to their more direct exposure to oriental manners. The Mongolian defilement of Europe was still remote. The unhallowed crescent would not rise for many hundreds of years" (16). Mackenzie accepts Homeric evidence that the Phrygians were not prone to "the bloody horrors that stain the tale of Semitic conquest in Nineveh or Carthage or Judaea" (17). We also learn that "When the fair Dorian invaders came down from the north they bound the original inhabitants to the soil and, served by these dark Helots, devoted themselves exclusively to military perfection" (22). "Dark Helots"? Persia is "that great centralizing oriental despotism [a redundancy in

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5. See Holoka, "Marathon and the Myth of the Same-Day March," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 38 (1997) 329–53 <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1014.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1014.htm)>. So too, in the lead-up to Plataea, Mackenzie has the Spartans covering c. 85 miles (Sparta to the Isthmus) "during the night" (135).

6. See "Some Observations on the Persian War, 1. The Campaign of Marathon," *JHS* 19 (1899) 185–97 and "The Battle and After" in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 4 (1926).

7. Originally part of the "Great Occasions" series from P. Davies Ltd. (London).

8. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951–52–53; rpt. NY: Random House, 1988.

9. Another specimen: "Sparta [was] a city-state of warriors equal in military ability and potential victoriousness to his [Cyrus's] own Persians" (22)—he means "Spartan warriors were as good as Persian warriors." (Not true, of course: both they and the Athenians showed more than once that they were, man for man, superior to the Persians.) Though not an outright solecism, "victoriousness" belongs to George Orwell's category of the "avoidably ugly." So, too, "inviolableness" for "sanctity" on 146.

Mackenzie's lexicon] which was threatening the new [viz., democratic] political ideas of Hellas ..." (44). Never mind that the majority of Greek poleis in the classical period did not possess democratic constitutions.<sup>10</sup> And even if "Semitic" and "Oriental" are taken as innocent ethnic designations, Eurocentric overtones are audible: at the battle of Himera in 480, "Syracuse averted for many years the menace of a Semitic domination of Europe, which was finally to be destroyed by Rome" (101); the bronze serpentine column commemorating Greek victory against Persia was later moved from Delphi to Constantinople, where it still "seems to set a limit to oriental conquest" (144); Zoroastrianism was "unmarked by the blood and cruelty of all Semitic religion" (157). Mackenzie was affected, like many others,<sup>11</sup> by the *Rassenkunde* ("race science") polluting the intellectual air of the 1920s and 30s; hence the choice of words and phrases that set (most) teeth on edge in our own day.

More edifying and more significant are Mackenzie's allusions to his experiences in Greece during and after the First World War. He served as a staff officer at Gallipoli and as an intelligence official for the Aegean region. The first indication that his own war will inform his account of the Greco-Persian Wars comes with his assertion that "the complete orientalization of Asia Minor was one of the major achievements of the Great War of 1914-18" (16). Commenting on the intricate factional motives behind the Ionian Revolt, he remarks tantalizingly that "except in a suppressed narrative of [the present writer's], no accurate record of what happened in Greece in 1916 exists in the world to-day ..." (41). This sounds an early note of war-inspired disillusionment, heard again in his mention of ancient Greek commanders' "geographical vagueness worthy of the leaders of the Great War" (102). Elsewhere we learn that the shelter offered by the Cynosura promontory near Marathon "was often used by Austrian and German submarines during the Great War" (75). So, too, the valuable information brought by the diver Scyllias to the Greeks at Artemisium in 480 (Hdt. 8.8) "takes its place with some of the submarine intelligence received from the Gulf of Volo by the present writer during the Great War" (116).

Lost on most readers coming to this book so many years on will be the pathos of a foreshadowing passage on the expedition of Xerxes: "Next morning at the break of day the order was given for the army to cross the two bridges at the Hellespont. The sun rose above the peaks of Asia to shine upon an outspread loveliness of sea and land, just as on another April morning two thousand four hundred years later it would be rising for the landing at Cape Helles" (97) at the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula, where British forces were to sustain 6500 casualties—a disaster still painfully fresh in the memory in 1934.

The point of referring to Gallipoli and World War I generally in a book on the Greco-Persian Wars emerges in a final chapter, entitled "Liberty." Mackenzie sees the ancient war as a kind of loose allegory of his own, but not in a merely simplistic way. Greek victory ensured the liberty of the city-states, to be sure, but it also "secured to the world the certainty of continuous war for centuries by affirming the value of national freedom and individual liberty at whatever the cost to material progress" (154). And Greek leaders, like most leaders in most wars, were subject to vanity, greed, vengeance, and other failings; this in contrast to Darius—"he was just, patient, and generous" (157)—though not to the "degenerate" Xerxes. Persian victory might have brought "the greatest material good for the greatest number" (154), but only at the hands of bureaucrats who "might have stifled even the genius of Hellas if the despotism they served had been triumphant" (159).

Mackenzie laments that, while a supreme sense of duty drove the soldiers of 1914-18 just as it had Leonidas and his Three Hundred, they did not share with their ancient counterparts "any animating inspiration except duty" (164); hence the profound disillusionment prevalent after the war. He fears, too, that Europe may have so exhausted itself as to concede the future to emerging totalitarian states. The "deliberate wrecking" of the Dardanelles Expedition "by politicians and generals" (161) would then be seen as having so protracted the war as to fatally enfeeble its victors. The neglect of Gallipoli's significance that he sees in 1934 is

10. See Mogens H. Hansen, *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) 112.

11. E.g., the great Swedish philologist and historian of Greek religion, Martin P. Nilsson, wrote a book, *Imperial Rome* (Swedish ed. 1921; Eng. trans. 1926; rpt. NY: Schocken, 1962), with a final chapter on "The Population Problem" that is hair-raisingly shot through with pseudoscientific race theory.

clearly a sore point for Mackenzie, but that does not invalidate the correlations he detects between “Great Occasions” in warfare that shared the historic landscape he knew so well.

So ... for a good, popular work on “The Battles That Defined the West,” look elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> For the sincere effort of a classically educated veteran and prolific author to find in Herodotus the meaning of his own ordeal and Europe’s in World War I, this is the book to read. A book better entitled *Marathon, Salamis, Gallipoli*.

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12. E.g., to Peter Green, *The Greco-Persian Wars* (1970; rev. ed. Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1996).