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**NON-
FICTION**

BIOGRAPHY



Plutarch
**Greek
Lives**

**Lycurgus
Themistocles
Pericles
Alcibiades
Lysander
Alexander
Demosthenes
Pyrrhus**

Read by
Nicholas Farrell
with **Steve Hodson**

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Plutarch: The Greeks

As geographers crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world which they do not know about, adding notes in the margin to the effect, that beyond this lies nothing but sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea, so, in this work of mine, the lives of the greatest men, after passing through those periods which probable reasoning can reach to and real history find a footing in, I might very well say of those that are farther off: Beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables; there is no credit, or certainty any farther... [from **Theseus**]

The Life of Plutarch (c. AD 46-after AD 120)

It is a great loss to posterity that Plutarch, who was so concerned about the accuracy of the 52 lives he chronicled in his *Parallel Lives*, did not record more information about his own. There are brief autobiographical references found in his writings, but the known facts are few.

Plutarch was born around AD 45-50, in the reign of Claudius. He lived most of his life in Chaeronea in Greece where his family had long been established and were of good standing. Plutarch studied in Athens under a philosopher named Ammonius, who may have been an Egyptian, and it is known that Plutarch once visited Egypt. Around AD 90 Plutarch was in Rome on 'public business', probably to do with his home town. Whilst there he won considerable fame for himself as a lecturer on philosophy, his popularity

taking up so much of his time that there was none left to learn Latin, with which he tells us he struggled in later years whilst writing the Roman *Lives*.

Despite gaining a reputation in Rome, however, Plutarch decided not to pursue the philosopher's life and returned to Chaeronea, where he seems to have spent the rest of his life. He does not appear to have felt confined by his provincial environment, as he chose to become a useful public servant, embracing the prosaic day-to-day necessities of running a small town, and putting into practice his personal philosophy that men of intellect should involve themselves in the running of the community.

Plutarch's wife was called Timoxena. The single surviving letter to her from her husband, relating to the death of their young daughter, reveals a tenderness tinged

with the practicality to be expected from a public servant, as he instructs her not to be too extravagant in her mourning. They also had four sons, two of whom seem to have survived into manhood.

He eventually rose to be an *archon*, or principal administrator, of Chaeronea, and for many years was also a Priest of Apollo. From his writings we know that he lived to old age, though his date of death is not certain. He probably lived into the reign of Hadrian and died around AD 120.

His writings

Plutarch's masterpiece is his collection of 52 lives of the great and powerful leaders of Greece and Rome. He wrote them with a twofold intention: to remind the Greeks of their past glories and to remind the Romans that the Greeks had a history to equal their own. His aim was to show that the merging of their two cultures was a mating of eagles and not a conquest, and that their pasts were complementary and not in opposition. To emphasise the point he arranged his *Lives* in a parallel format, each Greek matched by a Roman: thus, for instance, Alexander is paired with Caesar (two conquerors) and Demosthenes with Cicero (two orators). Their similarities and differences are painstakingly examined. It is this close study of the psychology of his subjects that sets him apart as an historian, for he was really

developing the art of biography. Biography did already exist in a set format containing details of the subject's birth, family, education and important events in his life, but it was Plutarch who put the emphasis firmly on the personality of his subject, how it influenced his actions, and the legacy he left behind him. Plutarch expresses his thoughts on being an historian in the opening paragraphs of his *Life of Nicias*:

Such things as are not commonly known, and lie scattered here and there in other men's writings, or are found amongst the old monuments and archives, I shall endeavour to bring together; not collecting mere useless pieces of learning, but adducing what may make his [the subject's] disposition and habit of mind understood.

His desire to make his subject's 'habit of mind understood' dominates all his *Lives*, and makes him more psychologist than historian. Facts and figures take second place to trying to understand the motivation of the great men he studies. By the time he came to write his *Life of Alexander* he made it plain that this approach had become his main reason for writing:

It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us

with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever. Therefore as portrait-painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face in which the character is seen, than in any other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavour by these to portray their lives, may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated of by others.

There is also a moral purpose in Plutarch's writing. By concentrating on his subjects' strengths and weaknesses he aims to show how much a man's disposition and temperament can determine whether he is a force for good or evil. He wants his *Lives* to be an example by which contemporary Greeks and Romans can live out their own lives. As he states in his Life of Pericles:

Every man, if he chooses, has a natural power to turn himself upon all occasions, and to change and shift with the greatest ease to what he shall himself judge desirable. So that it becomes a man's duty to pursue and make after the best and choicest of everything, that he may not only employ his

contemplation, but may also be improved by it... Virtue, by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of the things done and desire to imitate the doers of them... Moral good is a practical stimulus; it is no sooner seen, than it inspires an impulse to practice... And so we have thought fit to spend our time and pains in the writing of the lives of famous persons...

Parallel Lives

It is uncertain how Plutarch originally arranged his *Lives*, whether chronologically or in categories, such as military leaders and political orators. The order as presented to us since they were first published in the Renaissance in 1517 seems arbitrary, as Plutarch himself in the course of his writings refers to other *Lives* which no longer exist or maybe were never completed. With this uncertainty in mind it seemed logical to present the eight Greek lives that were the most significant in forming the culture and history of Classical Greece. Each is a major stepping stone in that development. Thus we begin with **Lycurgus**, who laid down in about 846 BC a systematic series of laws and rules by which a fledgling society (the Spartans) could be stabilised, evolve and extend its influence on the peoples around it. **Themistocles**, a great naval commander, increased the power of Athens by sea and

thus ensured her increased strength and independence. In an age of peace, **Pericles** extended the philosophy of democracy and left a lasting memorial to the architecture of the Classical age by causing to be built the Parthenon and its surrounding temples. **Alcibiades**, a complex politician and commander, won famous victories for Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars, and was the warrior of the Empire. **Lysander** was the Spartan admiral who subdued Athenian democracy and reigned as a tyrant. **Alexander**, the great conqueror, subdued Persia and parts of India, spreading Greek culture in the process. **Demosthenes** represented through his skilful oratory the integrity to be found in Greek politics. And finally **Pyrrhus**, the professional soldier who took on the emerging Roman state, was surprised to discover that the Romans were not barbarians but fought in an ordered and impressive way, thereby signalling the inevitable success of the Roman Empire that would eventually absorb and appropriate the glories of Classical Greece.

Historical writings of the Classical period

In the beginning was Homer. It was to him that the earliest Greek historians, writing around the fifth century BC, looked for information as to the origins of their country and culture. But Homer was a poet, not an historian, and it is impossible in his writings

to distinguish fact from fiction. He was primarily a spinner of myths, and so those early historians had only myths on which to base their writings. Homer was part of an oral tradition passed on from generation to generation, which expanded and elaborated upon whatever kernel of truth had once existed, until the knots became impossible to untie. These 'tales' served the purpose of creating and reinforcing the image of their past which the Greeks wished to perpetuate. **Herodotus** (c. 484–c. 405 BC), known as 'the father of history', with no other material but myths to work with, picked out only what he needed to support his own theories about the past. In so doing he graced these myths with the name of fact, though he made the proviso that he could not vouch for them. He worked on the principle that if the same 'tale' was told by different orators it was very likely to be true, and he was of the opinion that as written documents were few or did not exist, the historian should only record recent events that could depend on eyewitness accounts. Herodotus may indeed have invented the word 'history', which he uses in his writings in the sense of 'enquiry'.

The development of the scientific approach to history, involving critical and objective analysis, began in a small way with **Thucydides** (c. 471-401 BC?), who sought to correct the earlier assumptions of

Herodotus. He saw the business of the historian to record change within a society, concentrating specifically on politics and war. Biography, customs, festivals etc. were not strictly considered by him to constitute history. Neither did philosophy or theology, showing the influence of the Gods on human events, qualify. By attempting to extricate fact from myth he laid the foundation for the scrupulous pursuit of historical accuracy that **Plutarch** thought essential to his *Lives*. Yet for all his diligence, Plutarch was not averse to using a good story or myth if it made a moral point. Both he and Thucydides had the desire to entertain the reader as well as instruct.

The profession of historian was unrecognised in Classical times, and these writers were often considered to be shady characters. Alexander experimented by including an historian on his staff, but later killed him. Indeed it was towering figures like Alexander the Great, and his father Philip of Macedon, who changed the nature of historical writing. With the collapse of the city-states and the rise of sovereign rule, historical reporting became inevitably more closely identified with the individual. It was the historian **Xenophon** (444?-late 350s BC) in his *Hellenika* who centred for the first time on an individual, Philip, and pointed the way towards historical biography, which

Plutarch did so much to develop. It was Xenophon too who introduced another historical genre that is still evident today: he had been a general, and was able to write authoritative eyewitness accounts of his campaigns, thereby creating the military memoir.

As the Romans came to dominate the Greeks, the historian **Polybius** (c. 206-122 BC?) saw the necessity of adapting Greek history to show that the Roman victory was inevitable; thus history, not for the last time, became a tool of propaganda.

The Greek style of writing history, laid down by Thucydides, was accepted by Roman historians, such as Livy, eager to absorb Greek methods. In turn, Renaissance writers accepted unquestioningly the tradition, and so it continued – hence mainstream history up to the twentieth century, as taught in schools, was largely the history of kings and wars.

Notes by David Timson



Nicholas Farrell has worked extensively on both stage and screen. He played Horatio in Branagh's film of *Hamlet* and Antonio in Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. At the RSC and elsewhere in London he has appeared frequently in classical drama, including *Cymbeline*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*, as well as Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters*. His most recent television credits include *The Jury*, *Spooks*, *Reversals* and *Foyles War*. He read the part of Buckingham in *King Richard III* for Naxos AudioBooks and can be heard regularly on radio.



After training at Central School of Speech and Drama, **Steve Hodson** joined Michael Elliot at the Exchange in Manchester for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Peer Gynt* and *Catch my Soul*. The next stop was Yorkshire Television for a three-and-a-half-year stint on *Follyfoot*. This was followed by TV series such as *Angels*, *The Legend of King Arthur* and *All Creatures Great and Small*, all interspersed with hundreds of radio plays. He has directed plays by John Crowen, Schiller and Bulgakov. On stage he has appeared in *Death and the Maiden*, *The Railway Children* and as George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He also read the part of Curan in *King Lear* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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'Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia, Pella 356 BC – Babylon 13.6.323 BC'

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Plutarch

Greek Lives

Lycurgus • Themistocles • Pericles • Alcibiades • Lysander
Alexander • Demosthenes • Pyrrhus

Read by **Nicholas Farrell** with **Steve Hodson**

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