

Full Circle – How the classical world came back to us Ferdinand Mount

This book is thoroughly entertaining, wonderful for broadening what an educated American considers an already broad vocabulary, and displays an encyclopedic knowledge of his extraordinarily broad subject matter. In this instance the puffery on the book's dust jacket stands up. It is a wonderful read by almost every measure.

Ferdinand Mount distinguishes himself as a model British gentleman, erudite, effortlessly witty, and amazingly well-informed. He has taken an almost impossibly broad topic, the history of morals and mores over the past three millennia, and made it hang together beautifully. You might call it the sandwich of Christianity, with the meat of two millennia during which man was regarded as primarily spiritual bookended by the modern era and classical eras during which the pleasures of this life have been the uppermost or even the only considerations.

He comments on many fascinating events in classical times to which us moderns, lacking a both and educations in the classics and sufficient interest to acquire same. He draws parallels between our own cults of the body, the bath and food and those of the Greeks and Romans, and even more interesting, on the parallels between the manner of thinking of moderns and ancients in the realms of science, religion, art, and celebrity. His treatments of the cults of Jade Goody and Hadrian's gay lover Antinous I found absolutely engrossing.

Mount is that kind of old-school British writer who does not spare his reader a bit of work with the Oxford English dictionary. Some small part of the difficulty is that usages vary across the Atlantic, but the larger issue is simply that he is extraordinarily facile with words. In every paragraph there is at least one sentence in which his unexpected but delicious selection of words stands out like the herb which you cannot identify in your soufflé, but which makes all the difference.

My favorite part of the book concerns the "anti-God botherers" such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett who are so strident in their attacks on religion. Why? Mount suspects, as I do, that it is more than the litany of historical crimes which may be credited to various tyrants who called themselves believers. He notes that the bloodiest wars in history, those of the 20th century, had nothing to do with religion.

Mount asks for a more nuanced view than the anti-God botherers seem capable of sustaining, namely that religion and science belong to different realms. He points out that every science, including mathematics, the most pure, bases itself on a prioris, axioms which cannot be proven. In his closing chapter he cites, as is his wont, an obscure but highly pertinent philosopher, Vaihinger, an interpreter of Immanuel Kant who pursues the philosophy of "what if?" Given that the tools of logic cannot irrefutably establish anything, scientific or Christian or whatever, why not accept some credo which satisfies the needs of the individual for a foundation to order one's life, and which appears to satisfy Kant's criterion that it can be generalized without leading to contradictions? Mount would advocate giving Christianity some consideration. Consider, if not believing, behaving as if you do. Why? The recent reissue of "Family and Civilization," by Prof. Zimmerman, examines what happens when we don't.