The Grecian History, from the Earliest State to the Death of Alexander the Great

Oliver Goldsmith · *1774 · English original, first edition, 2 vols., London, 1774 (not a later school revision, and not a printing that continues past Alexander's death)*

Goldsmith wrote this Grecian History to complete the plan begun in his Roman History, and it was printed off in the year of his death. The advertisement in the hosted 1774 first edition presents two volumes, from the earliest state of Greece to the death of Alexander the Great. It is a survey for readers, not a plotted novel, and Goldsmith himself refuses to give the fabulous age a place in history.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How can a short survey tell the history of a small country that, in Goldsmith's words, became the instructor of all mankind, without turning its myths into pretended fact?

"The fabulous age, therefore, of Greece must have no place in history"

Chapter I, Of the earliest State of Greece

Goldsmith will not labour to turn the golden fleece into a treasure, or the hydra into a robber, in order to offer fable in the garb of truth. The fabulous age, he says, must have no place in history; it is now too late to separate what may have a real foundation from what owes its existence wholly to the imagination. He begins instead with a Greece divided into petty states, then follows, in two volumes, the familiar public story: the Persian wars, the rivalry of Athens and Sparta, the Peloponnesian war, the age of Socrates and Epaminondas, and the rise of Macedon to Alexander's death.

KEY CHARACTERS

Oliver Goldsmith
the surveyor, completing the plan of his Roman History in the year of his death

The Greek cities
Athens, Sparta, and the other petty states whose wars and laws occupy the first volume

Socrates
the figure with whom the first volume closes, honoured at last with a statue and a chapel

Epaminondas, Philip, and Alexander
the second volume's path from Thebes to Macedon, ending at the death named in the title

Grades 9–12

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01

A Survey, and a Limit

THE ADVERTISEMENT AND THE PLAN

Two volumes, printed off in the year he died, ending at Alexander.

- The hosted book is Oliver Goldsmith's The Grecian History, from the Earliest State to the Death of Alexander the Great, two volumes, London, 1774, the first edition. The source line is careful: this is not a later school revision, and not a printing that adds a continuation past Alexander's death. Name that limit.
- The advertisement says the applause bestowed on his Roman History induced him to complete his plan by writing a history of Greece. The work was printed off when the Republic of Letters was deprived of one of its brightest ornaments. Since the author's decease, it has been perused by several of his learned friends, who think it has an equal claim to the approbation the Roman History received.
- This is a survey in movements, not one plotted life. Read it as Goldsmith's continuous teaching narrative, and do not force it to behave like a tragedy with a single hero from first page to last.

02

The Fabulous Age Has No Place

THE OPENING CHAPTER

Ignorance, poets, and the refusal to make myth look like history.

- The opening chapter, as this printing has it, begins from the earliest notices of every country being fabulous and uncertain: among an unenlightened people every imposture is likely to take place, for ignorance is the parent of credulity. Nothing therefore which the Greeks have transmitted to us concerning their earliest state can be relied on.
- Poets were the first who began to record the actions of their countrymen, and it is a part of their art to strike the imagination even at the expence of probability. In the earliest accounts, Goldsmith says, we are presented with gods and demigods, heroes and giants, monsters and dragons. "Man, plain historical man," seems to have no share in the picture.
- It would be vain, he says, and beside the present purpose, to give an historical air to accounts which were never meant to be transmitted as true. Some writers have undertaken to separate the truth from the fable: instead of a golden fleece, Jason goes in pursuit of a great treasure; instead of an hydra, Hercules overcomes a robber. Goldsmith will not follow them. "The fabulous age, therefore, of Greece must have no place in history; it is now too late to separate these parts which may have a real foundation in nature from those which owe their existence whoily to the imagination," The dews of the morning are past, and it is vain to attempt continuing the chace in meridian splendor.

> *"The fabulous age, therefore, of Greece must have no place in history"*
>
> Chapter I

03

A Narrow Country, and Petty States

THE EARLIEST HISTORICAL GREECE

Territory that looks contemptible, and a people who taught war and peace.

- It will be sufficient, he says, to observe that Greece, like most other countries of whose origin we have any notice, was at first divided into a number of petty states, each commanded by its own sovereign.
- Ancient Greece, now the south part of Turkey in Europe as he describes it to an eighteenth-century reader, was bounded by the Aegean, the Cretan sea, the Ionian sea, and, on the north, Illyria and Thrace. "Of such very narrow extent, and so very contemptible with regard to territory was that country which gave birth to all the arts of war and peace," and which, in his telling, produced the greatest generals, philosophers, poets, painters, architects and statuaries, overcame the most powerful monarchs, and at last became the instructor of all mankind.
- He also mentions the scriptural genealogy that names Javan as father of the nations under the general denomination of Greeks. Keep that as his opening notice, not as the plot of the book. The survey's real business is the public history that can be told after the fabulous age has been set aside.

04

From the Persian Wars to Socrates

VOLUME I

The first volume runs as far as the death of Socrates.

- The first volume, after the earliest state of Greece, carries the survey through the wars with Persia and the great age of the Greek cities. Chapter headings in this edition include the stretch from the death of Miltiades to the retreat that follows that war, and from the victory at Mycale to the beginning of the Peloponnesian war.
- Athens and Sparta, their laws and governments, and the long quarrel that becomes the Peloponnesian war, are the middle of the first volume's work. Goldsmith is writing a continuous school-and-fireside history, not a set of isolated lives.
- The first volume ends after the death of Socrates. The Athenians, not contented with having punished his accusers, cause a statue of brass to be erected to him, of the workmanship of Lysippus, and placed in one of the most conspicuous parts of the city. Their respect and gratitude rise even to a religious veneration; they dedicate a chapel to him, as to a hero and a demi-god, which they call the Chapel of Socrates. Then the printing marks the END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

05

To the Death of Alexander

VOLUME II

Epaminondas, Macedon, and the close the title promised.

- The second volume continues from the death of Socrates to the death of Epaminondas, and then on through the rise of Philip of Macedon and the career of Alexander, which is the term announced on the title page.
- The survey's last movement is the conquest that ends with Alexander's death, and the brief shadow of the men who, after him, sheltered their ambition under the sanction and glory of his name. The hosted edition does not add a later school continuation beyond that close.
- Read the two volumes as one survey with a stated end. Goldsmith has already told you what he will not do: he will not make the fabulous age look historical, and he will not pretend that a small country's story is small. The instructor of mankind, in his telling, is still a set of petty states that learned to fight, to think, and to teach.

A Survey · Fable and History · The Greek Cities · Instruction · A Stated End

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. This is a survey, not a plotted novel. Name that limit. The title itself already names the other limit: from the earliest state to the death of Alexander the Great, in two volumes, the 1774 first edition.
2. Goldsmith's opening refusal is part of the book's method. He will not historicize the golden fleece or the hydra. "The fabulous age, therefore, of Greece must have no place in history."
3. The first volume ends at Socrates; the second carries the survey to Alexander. Keep that joint in view, and do not expect a single hero to occupy every chapter.
4. The hosted text is a transcription of an eighteenth-century printing, with the marks and errors that come with that. Prefer short, clean quotations, and do not lean on a broken line as if it were a sure sentence.

Quotations are verbatim from the English original, first edition, 2 vols., London, 1774 (not a later school revision, and not a printing that continues past Alexander's death), Oliver Goldsmith, The Grecian History, from the Earliest State to the Death of Alexander the Great, 2 vols. (London: J. and F. Rivington et al., 1774), first edition., the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/goldsmith-grecian-history/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.