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Imperialism often represented the temporary triumph of hope over reality. The Victorian belief in progress was so profound that progressive expectations of economic or strategic value were invariably wildly overdrawn. This was very much the case with Cyprus. Acquired in a mood of just such enthusiastic aspirations, it soon became apparent that the island was going to deliver neither the commercial nor the geopolitical value expected of it. Seldom has an imperial possession produced so quickly such a declining fall in its reputation for productivity, for its climatic and health properties, and its military advantages. Soon seen as a Tory folly by the Liberals, many politicians came to view it as an unnecessary blot on the imperial landscape. Abandoning it, as with the Ionian Islands earlier in the century, seemed like the best course of action, but the British discovered that they had become deeply implicated in, and had perhaps exacerbated, communal tensions. Cyprus had remained no more than a lease from the Ottoman Empire, but returning it to the Turks was inconceivable and handing it over the Greeks was fraught with difficulties. They were landed with the 'inconsequential possession' until later in the twentieth century, when a violent and messy decolonisation only served to stir up more hostilities and apparently ratchet up the scale of conflict.

Andrekos Varnava's book deals with these issues in illuminating ways. The author rightly demonstrates the manner in which Cyprus played a significant role in the imaginative culture of the British, through the fascination with the ancient world in the nineteenth century, the archaeological developments, which often constituted major news, the new invoking of the medieval crusades and the exaltation of heroes in that period, the philhellene passions of the time, and the various literary manifestations that had kept Cyprus at the forefront of their consciousness. The acquisition of Cyprus in 1878 was, therefore, rooted in romantic predilections, which may well have influenced Disraeli as much as hard-headed practical concerns. But Cyprus was soon overtaken by other events in the Mediterranean, notably the British move into Egypt in 1882 – again theoretically under the aegis of the Ottoman Empire creating the co-called 'veiled protectorate' – a development which seemed swiftly to render Cyprus redundant. It was certainly no longer important on the route to India and its significance in respect of the Aegean and Asia Minor was dubious in respect of the nature and scale of British interests there.

From the point of view of the British search for 'added value' from the island, it was unfortunate that Cyprus was locked into Ottoman debt, that medical and sanitary advances capable of overcoming its health problems had not yet occurred, and that neither the military nor naval establishments could find (despite much debate) anything to recommend it. The great irony is that Cyprus only seemed to offer advantages once air power had entered the equation and once the hostility of nationalist politicians had rendered the British position

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in Egypt untenable. By then, Cyprus was on the verge of becoming, despite its record of communal conflict, a highly significant tourist destination. Now its climatic and physical attractions would come to the forefront of the British consciousness in new ways. Only in modern times have the possibility of resolution and reconciliation become more real, perhaps in association with the European Union.

The author has shifted the historical centre of gravity on the island from the decolonisation years (which have received a great deal of attention) to the earlier era of British rule. He has done this through a remarkably detailed examination of official documents and other sources. He has also looked in detail at the British efforts to hand over Cyprus to the Greeks before and during the First World War, analysing the reasons for the failure of these early attempts at *enosis*. The book greatly increases our understanding of British dispensations and disappointments in respect of Cyprus, setting political and military arrangements into wider cultural and ethnic contexts.

In all of this we should never, of course, forget the people of Cyprus themselves who have been so often caught up in political and diplomatic events beyond their control.

John M. MacKenzie