

Land and Revolution in Modern Greece, 1800-81

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When Otho of Bavaria, the young king-designate of newly independent Greece, first stepped on Greek soil at Nauplion in early February 1833, he met a heartwarming spectacle. Against the background of the Argolid hills stretching toward ancient Mycenae and Epidaurus, beneath the stout ramparts of Palamidhi fortress, the leaders of the heroic Greek war of independence were gathered to greet the prince and his regents.[\(1\)](#)

William McGrew chooses Nauplion, the first Greek capital, as the first location of his book. The opening of the book captures all the excitement, complexity and challenging nature of his topic. Expectation, colour, and the morphology of the Greek landscape in those few lines become one. In the mind of the reader they compose a strong visual image, a symbol for the book itself. It is a great privilege to be offering this retrospective essay on McGrew's *Land and Revolution in Modern Greece, 1800-81. The Transition in the Tenure and Exploitation of Land from Ottoman Rule to Independence*, arguably the most important monograph on the early modern history of the Peloponnesus, Euboea, and Roumeli, and the most ardent work of scholarship regarding modern Greece. This book presents obliquely the entire history of the birth of the modern Greek nation by examining thoroughly one important aspect of it, that of land reform. Through this, a fine portrait of the newly-emerged Greek nation is offered, which includes ideology and nationhood, class tensions, the role of minorities, including transhumance, Western perceptions of Greece, the role of war veterans (and the dependents of the fallen) in the new Greek state, and the problem of Greeks from without the borders, including refugees. The book falls in two parts, the first dealing with the land issue before 1833 and the second presenting the evolution of land reforms between 1833, the year the young prince Otho [\(2\)](#) of

Bavaria arrived to Greece with his regents as the new king, and 1881, when Thessaly and the district of Arta were added to the Greek state. Of course the addition of those lands caused a discrepancy, as the older parts of liberated Greece had already undergone the difficult processes of land reform studied in this monograph.

The importance of agriculture for the economy of the young Greek nation was vital and therefore the difficult problem of land ownership with its complex legacy was a matter of high priority for the country. The author sets up the scene by listing and explaining the Ottoman terms of land holdings with their subtle meanings and legacies. These terms are relevant for the entirety of the study and therefore important for the reader to become familiar with at the start. The frequent references to the Ottoman system show how embedded both early Ottoman and the more benevolent later custom law had become in the conscience of the Greek population. The Greek government had to work with the expectations and attitudes that the existing situation had borne. Requests for abrupt change were more often than not ignored. Due to a mixture of conflicting interests, social ideals and adverse circumstances, the system that eventually evolved favoured small free-holds and discouraged large investment and absentee landlords. This was a mixed blessing for the development of Greek farming, which was in subsequent generations abandoned by those who could make a better living in the city or go abroad. The pursuit of social equality was costly and earning a living from the land remained frowned upon. This study reveals this slow progression.

The young Greek state found itself in an interesting situation, having inherited the Ottoman system of land ownership and tenure with which it had to work, yet desiring to erase the memory of Ottoman government by the creation of a new, Western system of land ownership and taxation. This latter import of Western models was partly due to the influence of the three Western powers as well as leading European-educated Greeks of the time but the new regime also had certain sympathies with the poor. At the same time there was a shift in the patterns of land occupancy itself, with a tentative and gradual movement of much of the population from the harsh but secure highlands to the more promising lowlands, which despite their potential were still plagued with disease from marshlands and from the oppression of local archons and tax-farmers. The continued local corruption and oppression made land tenants distrust the state and its new measures and generally resist reform. During Ottoman rule the fertile plains were uncultivated, while intensive labour had been put by the Greek (and Turkish) peasantry into making small patches of resistant highland profitable. The history of land reform in modern Greece is partly one of the gradual reversal of this paradox. As already mentioned, the complex Ottoman system with its various categories of single and shared ownership (including religious institutions) is explained in detail in *Land and Revolution*; so are the added complexities of the re-introduction in 1835 of Byzantine law as typified in the *Hexabiblos* of Constantine Armenopoulos (3), supplemented by custom law. The Kapodistrian legacy regarding the land is also given its due attention. Prior to his assassination, President Ioannes Kapodistrias had made land reform one of his major priorities, having drawn up an extensive land distribution plan that he was not able to put into practice. His Bavarian successors, the regents of Othon, largely failed to grasp the realities of Greek life as it was and rather hoped to superimpose theoretical models of land exploitation and revenue that they brought from their homeland. What is more, they insisted in wanting immediate financial returns from a land that needed significant investment to produce good returns and therefore alienated local residents who continued to feel insecure in their land and homes. The terms were often so unfavourable, that the tentative conditions of tenancy or squatting were often preferable for land labourers to the heavy debt attached to a land mortgage. Another mistake of the Bavarian regency in several cases was to reverse custom law for the letter of Ottoman legislation that had long fallen out of use. This measure was particularly unwelcome by the people. Further, radical or enlightened reform in the young Greek state was for long held back by a desire of dissassociation with other contemporary revolutionary movements in Europe. Greek representatives were eager to show that the Greek Uprising was national and not social / radical, and therefore were careful not to pursue a land policy that could have revolutionary connotations.

A forgotten chapter in the history of modern Greece in respect of the land issue is the abolition of three quarters of the monasteries, and the confiscation of their properties. The author explains the different categories of monastic establishments, i.e. *stauropegiaka*, *enoriaka*, *ktetorika*, and *metochia*. The abolition was connected to the declaration of the Autocephalus (Independent) Greek Church in 1833: many

monasteries were directly linked to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which was thought to compromise their position within the Greek state. Allegations of corruption and malpractice in monasteries were also used to bring their downfall. Nunneries, though only very few at the time, were heavily affected too. In terms of benefit to the economy, McGrew regards the appropriation of monastic property by the state largely unsuccessful, and it seems that mostly powerful and dubious individuals profited from such lands rather than the Greek state. The original recommendation of the Holy Synod, which was implemented, that the monastic assets be used for the maintenance of the clergy and churches and the advancement of education proved far from practicable. An interesting sideline to the confiscation of the monastic properties is that through the intervention of the French government the Roman Catholic monasteries on the islands of Syros, Naxos and Thera (Santorini) were exempt from this measure. What is more, a protocol was signed (1830) protecting the religious liberty and property rights of Catholic persons.

Many technical problems had to be overcome in the course of this study, such as the absence of uniform measures in the era under discussion. That means not only that for the modern researcher estimating units of land is a considerable challenge but also that one has to be prepared to encounter significant regional differences in contemporary measurements. The author deals with such issues with great skill and succeeds in presenting his material in an uninterrupted and elegant manner. Where necessary, tables have been prepared to assist the reader with statistical or other detailed information. Another specific problem is this of the identification of the *chiftliks* or holdings of local tyrants such as Ali Pasha, who had reduced the traditional privileges of many *kefalochoria* by force. Should these (after his violent death) count as state-owned or should their previous inhabitants be restored to their rights? And how does the Greek state disentangle the true rights of ownership? These are only a couple of examples of the complex details the author had to content with in the course of his research. The exact outcomes of some of these issues are still unknown to us, partly due to insufficiently kept or destroyed records.

A word now on this work's implications. Exemplary in its methodology, bibliography and authorship, and insightful in its discussion of identity, *Land and Revolution* has served and stimulated future scholarship – it is a model for the use of source materials relating to other regions of the Greek lands in the same period. Further, the author's prose is direct, robust, and flexible: rarely a passion for the historical record is matched with such expressive power. The author's narrative, gradually built through the presentation of extensive documentation and archival evidence, is underpinned by his personal acquaintance with the realities of modern Greek affairs, personal and collective motives and notions of loyalty. A long-term resident of Thessalonica, the author mainly worked in Greek Archives in Athens and other parts of Southern Greece for the completion of his study. He also utilized his impressive command of historical geography and agricultural history. Without his intimate knowledge of Greek geography, morphology and terrain, this study could not have been written. The detailed examples of land reform in towns and villages in every corner of what was then Greece both give a regional flavour to the study and show the complexity of the undertaking not only for the land reformers but also for the historian. Regarding place names, contemporary names are given but when necessary the author helpfully supplies their modern equivalents (e.g. Salona – Amphissa). Throughout the book, evocative and well-selected references to contemporary authorities such as William Martin Leake add both depth and character to this literary masterpiece. Similarly, the author's close acquaintance with the history of the Greek Revolution allows him to weave into his narrative the names and activities of the major war heroes that the student of Modern Greece would know and expect to read about. This quality of the book of relating the specific to the general makes it a great pleasure to read.

The auxiliary materials that accompany this monograph are in themselves significant assets to the student of Greece's history. There are two excellent modern maps showing Greece between 1832 and 1881 and a reproduction of a morphological map produced by the French expedition to the Morea in 1833. The chronology (c. 1400–1881) and glossary of Greek and Turkish terms are useful tools not only for the beginner but also for the advanced and experienced researcher. As for the bibliography, which extends to almost 30 pages, it is an open invitation to future researchers to engage with the wealth of material available to us. Largely annotated, it guides the reader towards further intensive study. The author's preface, too, is richly suggestive of future research possibilities and of untapped historical treasures; it also declares the

author's empirical methodological approach. The difficult issues of Greek name spelling, place names with their multiple variants (as in the example given above), and Greek dating (including an explanation of calendars) are discussed in an assertive and engaging manner. The future researcher may also want to seek out the original doctoral thesis from which this work stems, awarded by the University of Cincinnati (1980). There, an even fuller bibliography and more detailed and discursive footnotes will reward the reader who might like to follow up particular strands of this study. At the same time, students of Mediterranean history who come to this book with a more panoramic view will find in the bibliography and notes all that they need to immerse themselves in the history of the Greek independence or to follow particular lines of enquiry while building on its comparative methodology. Finally, it is regrettable that this beautifully produced and excellently written monograph is currently out of print and only available through second-hand outlets. A possible fresh edition of *Land and Revolution* would be of great service to scholarship, in areas of growing interest such as economic history, agricultural history and husbandry are. More widely known as an educationalist, in *Land and Revolution* William McGrew has given not only to the historical profession but also to Greece a lasting legacy: *ktema es aiei*.

Notes

1. William W. McGrew, *Land and Revolution in Modern Greece, 1800–81. The Transition in the Tenure and Exploitation of Land from Ottoman Rule to Independence*, (Kent OH, 1992; first edition 1985), p. 1.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Or the Greek version of his name, Othon; he adopted this upon his arrival to Greece. The new king did learn the Greek language, which he continued to speak in exile with his Queen, Amalia. His love of Greece is generally asserted by historians.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Constantine Armenopoulos, *Procheiron Nomon i Exavivlos (The Hexabiblos)*, ed. K. G. Pitsakis (Athens, 1971).[Back to \(3\)](#)

Also see by the same author:

William Ward McGrew, 'Land and revolution in modern Greece, 1821 to 1871' [microform], PhD thesis, (University of Cincinnati, 1980), Microfiche (Ann Arbor, Mich, 1984).

—— 'The Greek "National Estates": Disposition of Former Turkish Properties During the War of Independence', Master's Thesis, University of Cincinnati (1971).

—— 'Stewards of the Land: the American Farm School and Greece in the Twentieth Century (review)', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 16, 3 (2005), 166–9.

Further in-depth studies recommended by the author:

John Christos Alexander, 'Toward a History of Post-Byzantine Greece: The Ottoman "Kanunnames" for the Greek Lands, Circa 1500–Circa 1600', PhD thesis (Columbia University, 1974).

Stanley E. Aschenbrenner, 'A Study of Ritual Sponsorship in a Greek Village', PhD thesis (University of Minnesota, 1971).

Nikiforos P. Diamandouros, 'Political Modernization, Social Conflict and Cultural Cleavage in the Formation of the Modern Greek State: 1821–1828', PhD thesis (Columbia University, 1972).

Adamantios A. Pepelasis, 'Socio-cultural Barriers to the Economic Development of Greece', PhD thesis (University of California at Berkeley, 1954).

Muriel D. Schein, 'Change and Continuity in a Greek Mountain Village', PhD thesis (Columbia University, 1970).

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