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Meet the Philosophers of Ancient Greece edited by Patricia F. O’Grady. Ashgate.


Gillian Dooley

Pythagoras believed one should not only not eat beans, but should never cross a bean field. Diogenes made a cult of shamelessness, and did everything in public. And Heraclitus buried himself in cow manure and was eaten alive by dogs. These are some of the snippets of biographical lore (not to be taken as gospel) to be found in Meet the Philosophers of Ancient Greece, edited by Patricia O’Grady of Flinders University. She has assembed fifty academics from all over the world to write seventy chapters – no small organisational feat.

The chapters are brief – few are longer than four pages, and can be easily read in one sitting. In an arguably misguided attempt at fairness, even the greats are squeezed into this restricted schedule, leaving no room for Aristotle’s immensely influential Poetics, for example. On the other hand, the book does show that there were many lesser known thinkers who also played their part in the development of philosophy and science.

The earliest philosophers were mainly preoccupied with the nature of the world, while ethics became the principal theme later on. All is water – all is mind – all is earth: there is an amazing fecundity of imaginative explanations for the nature of things. Aristarchus of Samos decided in the third century BC – against all sensible evidence – that the earth circled the sun. And it is amazing that a millennium before the invention of the microscope there were already people who thought that all matter was composed of atoms.
The title of this book is more restrictive than its subject. Calling Homer a philosopher is probably drawing a rather long bow, and one suspects Sappho is included merely to provide a token woman (there are two others): her chapter does not even try to claim she was a philosopher. The playwrights of Ancient Greece are covered; indeed, the best chapter in the book is Robert Phiddian’s profile of Aristophanes. He alone explains why his subject is included, and writes with a lucidity and verve often lacking elsewhere. Like Greek thought, the book spills out across the ancient world, taking in Rome and Palestine and the Christian desert fathers of Egypt. The section on archaeological sites is sometimes puzzling: the chapter on Corinth seems to have no idea why it’s there at all.

Fascinating as the subject matter is, there are many small ways in which this book could be improved. Apart from a closer attention to proof-reading, I would have appreciated more editorial explanation of why certain subjects have been included. The writing styles, though usually competent, often sacrifice clarity to brevity, while sometimes verging on the patronising, with paranthetical definitions of common words and a rather too free use of the imperative when describing ancient ruins. There’s a glossary and a time-line but no index, a sad lack in a book with so much tightly-packed information.