

Shane Brennan, *In the Tracks of the Ten Thousand: A Journey on Foot Through Turkey, Syria and Iraq* (London: Robert Hale, 2005), ISBN 0709078854

During the first spring of the new millennium, Shane Brennan, a PhD candidate in the University of Exeter's Department of Classics and Ancient History, arrived in Sardis, the ancient capital of Lydia, in what is now western Turkey. He began what can only be described as an epic journey. His ambitious aim was to retrace, on foot, the steps of Cyrus the Younger who, desiring to usurp his brother Artaxerxes for the throne of Persia, hired and then bribed, bullied and bamboozled an army of 14 000 Greek mercenaries (eventually becoming the Ten Thousand) to march to Babylon, 2 500 kilometres away. The ill-fated expedition ended for Cyrus in defeat and death at the Battle of Kounaxa in 401 BC, but continued for the remainder of the Ten Thousand who fled north to the Black Sea and then west back to Greece along its coast. The journey was chronicled by one of their number, the Athenian Xenophon, in his *Anabasis*. In *In the Tracks of the Ten Thousand* juxtaposes Brennan's tribulations with those of the Ten Thousand and, every once in a while, it is difficult to determine whose expedition was more taxing.

Brennan's engaging book operates effectively on many levels. In one sense, it is an introduction into the history, archaeology and topography of the *Anabasis*, an attempt to follow not only in the footsteps of the Ten Thousand, but also to come to grips with the details of Xenophon's account in a painstakingly tangible way. In this way, it is an ideal introduction to a student of more recent history to the story of the Ten Thousand. Brennan not only compares Xenophon's depiction of river crossings, ancient cities and landmarks with what he can see with his own eyes, he also illustrates how religion, geography and politics have both changed and immortalized many aspects of the lands through which Cyrus' army, and many others, have marched. As he walks through the breadth of Turkey, Syria and Iraq, Brennan demonstrates how history, both ancient and all too familiar, is not only etched into monuments and landscapes, but also into the words, actions and sentiments of the people he meets.

More than just a palimpsest of one of the oldest travel narratives, however, *In the Tracks of the Ten Thousand* is ultimately a stirring piece of contemporary travel literature itself. Brennan's tale does what compelling travel literature should do: it sketches for us an

author's interpretations of a place at a particular time in history, and in so doing, paints an enduring portrait of the author as well - often at his/her most intimate. The best travel literature is not only about extraordinary places, but also about the people who journey there. Bill Bryson's descriptions of sleepy English villages and cookie-cutter American towns would not sell so well if they did not reveal any of Bryson's own humour, frustration, bewilderment and insights about Western society. Similarly, Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* is not so much about her trek on camel through Australia's Western Desert as it is about her own, equally torturous, emotional journey.

Indeed, Brennan's intelligence, courage, determination, humanity and, at times, stubbornness and irritability shine through his interactions with mentally unbalanced hotel owners, supercilious border guards, generous farmers, and countless aggressive dogs. In Brennan's *Tracks*, poignancy is also a recurring feature, especially as he heads into Iraq, towards Cyrus' doom and into a nation on the brink of catastrophe. It is almost immediately apparent to Brennan that in Iraq, and especially in the xenophobic Anbar region, the hospitality he received in Turkey and Syria will be harder, though not impossible, to find. Here, as Brennan's safety grows precarious, the intensity of his experiences begin to overshadow that of Cyrus and the Ten Thousand. He finds a landscape and a people scarred by war and tyranny, but also continually finds allies who aid him on his quest. Knowing what was on the horizon for Iraq, we cannot help but wonder what has become of them in the years since. Brennan's own concern drives him to lengths that even the most hardened and conscientious traveller would find inconceivable, but his humility in describing these events almost tricks us into thinking that we might have done the same. We almost believe Robyn Davidson's idealistic hope 'that anyone could do anything'.

As fellow travel writer Tim Mackintosh-Smith states in his Foreword to Brennan's book, 'Cyrus' Ten Thousand are now Bush's Three Hundred Thousand', although, as the years go by, perhaps Homer's *Odyssey* will be even more appropriate. It is fairly likely that George W. Bush did not read *Anabasis* before his invasion and it is a pity he has not read *In the Tracks of the Ten Thousand* since; both might have given him some insight into the folly of Babylonian adventures. Brennan's own adventure, though hazardous, is surely no folly, and highlights the contemporary challenges facing Turkey, Syria and Iraq today, demonstrating how, at the root of these obstacles, are the same human faults that

undermined Cyrus 2400 years ago: greed, hubris, vengeance, excessive ambition and dishonesty.

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