Review: "Classical Civilisation and Ancient History in British Secondary Education"

Arlene Holmes-Henderson and Edith Hall. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2025, ISBN 1-80085-564-8.

By Archie Duke

In an age when accessibility in Classics is an increasing concern for both academics and enthusiasts, Arlene Holmes-Henderson and Edith Hall's volume offers an interesting summary of the state of inclusion within Classics education. They describe the development of the subject from its nascent stages in the early 20th century to the present day. As two of the most established scholars in the sub-disciplines of Classics Education and Reception, Holmes-Henderson and Hall speak with great authority. Their aim with this publication is to engender an atmosphere of accessibility in Classics (p. xix). Although it is not explicitly stated in the preface, another aim for their book is to justify funding and interest in the organisation, 'Advocating Classics Education' (ACE); this is evident through the detailed descriptions of the organisation's achievements. Whilst this book is aimed primarily at teachers and other professionals within the discipline of Classics education, its accessible writing style and coherent flow mean that it can also be useful for students of Classics as well as a general audience. This publication is unique in its engagement with Classics education and builds upon the work of Hunt (2022; 2024; 2026) and Holmes-Henderson, Hunt and Musié (2018) in particular, setting the stage for future research and change within the discipline.

The book is separated into seven chapters, each investigating or describing a key aspect of the Classical Civilisation or Ancient History courses at Secondary Schools in England. Chapter One successfully navigates the history of the two A Level subjects. Beginning with a discussion about the history of the discipline itself, this chapter engages with the elitist nature of the subject. For instance, there is an effective treatment of the methods the working-class of the past used in order to teach themselves Classics, such as Miller's *Cheap Tracts* and Cassel's *Popular Educator*

magazines; this then provides a useful foundation for the authors' recognition of the classist elements of the discipline. This is nothing new, however, as there already exists an extensive timeline of Classics education in working-class communities in Hall's previous publication with Stead (2020). Moreover, in their description of the history of elitism in the subject, there is not an outline of the history of racism in Classics, despite the latter being an equally prevalent form of exclusion, frequently intersecting with class.

Chapter Two, 'Reinvigorating Classical Civilisation Education in the 20th Century', describes the development of the subject of Classical Civilisation. The current unique selling point of this particular school subject is that it offers access to the Classical world through translation, making it accessible to a wider audience. The authors criticise the elitist attitudes of the subject's creators, David Lloyd-George (1863-1945) and the Marquess of Crewe (1858-1945), for their attitude that students should learn the ancient languages in order to engage properly with the subject (p. 36). In their criticism of this attitude, the authors claim that individuals with a better grasp of pedagogy would have supported an introduction to the "ancient world" through translation as it would "equip these youngsters to understand issues relevant to citizenship, for which the ancient Mediterranean societies provide perfect case studies" (p. 37). The language that the authors use here is telling of the Eurocentric attitude that still haunts the discipline. This quote indicates that the study of Greece and Rome is the only aspect of ancient history that builds an awareness of "citizenship", an argument similar to the widely debunked idea that Greece and Rome were the 'foundation of Western civilisation'. This attitude echoes still in OCR's A Level and GCSE Classical Civilisation's curriculum and prescribed sources. Consequently, the authors fail to recognise the Eurocentricity of their argument: why does the history of Greece create a "perfect case study" for a good citizen, but the ancient history of another region does not? This is an attitude not unique to the authors but is something with which we all must grapple.

Chapter Three, 'Ancient History Education: Past and Present', clearly illustrates the history of the subject of Ancient History, from its inception to the changes in its curriculum. A major

milestone of the subject was Moses Finley's reformulation of the A Level at the Classical Association's 1962 conference, which called for a shift in the focus of the subject away from the 'Great Men' narrative to a social history approach (p. 62). The authors praise Finley's "solutions-oriented approach" and argue that the reappraisal of the subject reflected a more accessible version of the Ancient History A Level (p. 64). Despite this, the authors again hesitate from calling for a modernisation of the Ancient History GCSE and A Level curriculum. There is more to the ancient world than Graeco-Roman antiquity, yet the current OCR curriculum does not reflect this. The primacy of Greece and Rome influences the public perception of the ancient past, which consequently becomes Eurocentric. Whilst this is not the fault of the authors, they miss a good opportunity to call this out; discussing the subject's past could have been a salient way to engage with the subject's present.

In the same chapter, Holmes-Henderson and Hall show how the Ancient History A Level enrolment numbers have increased by 241% since 2004 (p. 77); yet they do not explore whether these numbers consist of state or privately educated students, neither are they explicit about the geographical distribution of these enrolments. These are important considerations that a book on the inclusivity of Classics must have, yet it is a major omission from this volume. The consequences present a widely positive view of the state of the subject, albeit an artificial one, for Hunt and Holmes-Henderson (2021, 1) show how some parts of the UK face a "Classics Poverty" in that there is no opportunity to study Classics. Such an omission of context is likely a result of the tension between the book's aims: the authors want to demonstrate how the history of Classics is centred in classism, but they also have a vested interest in the success of ACE and Classics in schools. Therefore, for Classics to be seen as successful, they cannot acknowledge the lingering class disparities in the discipline, resulting in an incomprehensive view of accessibility in the subject.

Chapter Four, 'Voices of Experience', documents interviews with individuals who have either taught Classical Civilisation or studied the A Level (or both). The authors take a more relaxed tone in this chapter, reflecting the informal nature of the personal stories being told (p.

82), this aids the book's accessibility. For instance, they tell the story of one individual who studied Classical Civilisation at A Level in a state school and went on to study at Oxford and Durham (pp. 93-97). Holmes-Henderson and Hall use these examples to show how successful A Level Classics alumni can be, and this adds a personal tone to the thus far academic discussion. This chapter is therefore useful for charities like Classics for All due to the testimonies, which could be used when trying to encourage schools to introduce Classics into their curriculum.

Chapter Five, 'Advocacy for State School Classics Education', documents the work of the authors' organisation, ACE (p. 109). The authors list the main individuals in the organisation and describe their contribution; whilst this is quite lengthy, it is a nice touch to recognise those fighting for the discipline's future. They also provide an extensive list of events that ACE has organised, such as in Exeter, Belfast and Bath (pp. 121-124). The authors highlight the successes of ACE in creating a culture within academia whereby Classics is advocated for at the school level. However, the authors exaggerate their claims at success when they correlate the rise in GCSE and A Level enrolments in Classical Civilisation and Ancient History courses to their advocacy, which they call ACE's "measurable outcomes" (p. 155). They provide no explanation as to why they ascribe this rise to ACE, an increase which could equally be caused by the work of other organisations, such as Classics for All, or just by Classics appearing in popular culture.

Chapter Six, 'Getting Started', is perhaps the most useful chapter in this volume. This details ways in which individuals could engage with Classics at the school level, with sections dedicated to school leadership, teachers, parents and students. Holmes-Henderson and Hall's success with this chapter is to dedicate three and a half pages to providing information to students who are interested in the subject; they detail where students can access more information(p. 168-169), the Classics competitions students could enter (p. 169-170) and in person and online courses for Classics and ancient languages (p. 171). This is tangible advice that students can use and is not seen often enough in the research on expanding access to the subject, exemplifying the utility of this book to a variety of audiences.

Chapter Seven, 'Next Steps for Classics Education in Policy and Practice', successfully outlines recommendations for policy makers and professionals in Classics education. This chapter is perhaps more useful for those who have the ability to influence public policy, such as politicians and organisations like Classics for All or the Classical Association. The recommendations are informed by the authors' experience and are robust; a refreshing recommendation is for young people to be involved in the decision-making process, putting their needs at the heart of the debate (p. 178). The authors also emphasise how important an expansion of research into Classics education is (p. 174); this is an effective reminder that the inclusivity of the subject is the prerogative of all those who are in it: teachers, students and academics.

Ultimately, Holmes-Henderson and Hall's publication should be read by Classics professionals, teachers and particularly policy makers. This book allows us to glimpse at the nature of Classics education in the UK, as well as to understand what has been done in the past decade to improve accessibility in the subject. Nevertheless, the authors do not critically engage with the existing Eurocentricity of Classics in the GCSE and A Level curriculum; this is a major omission, especially as classism and racism often go hand-in-hand; the authors address the former but unfortunately not the latter. Despite the various missed opportunities outlined above, the authors' suggestions of ways in which the subject could be improved are incredibly valuable for all those who have an interest in the existence of Classics.

References

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