

## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 14 (2017)

The *H*istorical Review  
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XIV (2017)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques  
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research  
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

### A politician and his books: the Venizelos library in Chania

Michael Llewellyn-Smith

doi: [10.12681/hr.16299](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.16299)

Copyright © 2018, Michael Llewellyn-Smith



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Llewellyn-Smith, M. (2018). A politician and his books: the Venizelos library in Chania. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 14, 177–185. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.16299>

## A POLITICIAN AND HIS BOOKS: THE VENIZELOS LIBRARY IN CHANIA

*Michael Llewellyn-Smith*

---

**ABSTRACT:** Eleftherios Venizelos loved books. He collected them, read them, and annotated them. With few exceptions, the most important being his translation of Thucydides into modern Greek, he did not write them. Books were an important part of his life, and he continued until the end to buy them. His collection of books is of historical and psychological interest. After his death in 1936, the books were transferred from his apartment in Paris and his wife's house in Athens to the Venizelos family house in Halepa, near Chania in Crete. After many vicissitudes, especially during the German occupation of Crete, they came to rest in Chania Municipal Library, where they remain today. This paper explores Venizelos' reading habits and preferences through this collection, showing that he used books both for professional information, for pleasure, and to improve his knowledge of foreign languages, in particular English. He was familiar with the great authors from Homer to Shakespeare; with philosophy from Aristotle to Bergson; with poetry, fiction, but especially with political thought, history and literature. It is good that the collection remains in the hands in the Municipal Library in the city where Venizelos lived and worked.

---

One morning I was walking to my mother's when I saw him coming down alone from the house. He was holding a book.

"Where are you going, Mr President?" I asked.

"To be alone," he answered. "Sikelianos has sent me his poems and I am going to study them."

"Do you understand them?" I asked.

"So far, no, none of them," he said, laughing. "That's why I am looking to be alone, to see whether silence and calm will help me to understand them. And after all, he sent me the book, poor fellow..."

He laughed again and went on his way at his usual rapid pace. And since Sikelianos was a closed book to me I was encouraged that not even Venizelos understood his incomprehensible (αλαμπουρνέζικα) books.

—P. S. Delta, Ελευθέριος Κ. Βενιζέλος, *Ημερολόγιο – Αναμνήσεις – Μαρτυρίες – Αλληλογραφία* [Eleftherios K. Venizelos: diary–reminiscences–testimonies–correspondence], ed. P. A. Zannas, Athens: Ermis, 1979, p. 268.

Eleftherios Venizelos loved books. When he could snatch a few moments from politics, at home or on a journey by sea or rail, he would take a book out of his pocket and read.<sup>1</sup> It might be a novel – Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on*

---

<sup>1</sup> For an account of Venizelos' intellectual and cultural interests, see Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "Venizelos' Intellectual Projects and Cultural Interests", in *Eleftherios Venizelos:*

*the Western Front*, for example – a book of poetry, a play of Shakespeare, or a work of history or of political, social or economic interest. In his apartment at the rue Beaujon in Paris he had a personal library, built up over the years. Until the last months of his life he continued to order new books, from booksellers in Britain, France and Greece.

When Venizelos died in March 1936, the question arose of what to do with his library. The books were divided between the rue Beaujon and Venizelos' house in Loukianou Street, Athens. The house soon became the British Embassy, when his widow, Elena Skylitsi-Venizelou, sold it to the British government.<sup>2</sup> The books finally came to rest in Chania Municipal Library, where those with an interest in the intellectual formation of a great statesman can browse among them, searching for clues.<sup>3</sup> One of the few to have done so is the historian Paschalis Kitromilides, who noted the "extensive presence of the great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians" and in particular the French historian Guizot. He identified a connection between Venizelos' historical and political thought and the school of conservative-liberal historian-statesmen whose main figures were Guizot, Mignet and Thiers.<sup>4</sup> It is an indication of the richness of the Venizelos collection that my own exploration, while it overlapped with that of Kitromilides, showed also a number of different areas of interest. It is almost certain that there are books, some of them containing annotations by Venizelos, which have to date been overlooked.

Besides the clues to Venizelos' personality and thought, there are also traps and false trails. People were always giving him books, and the fact that a book is in the library is not an indication that it was read by Venizelos. The only sure proofs are signs of his own reading. Many of the books bear such signs, but even more do not.

As in any good library, there is a substantial reference section, containing Webster's dictionary, Liddell and Scott's famous dictionary of ancient Greek, *Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Smith's

---

*The Trials of Statesmanship*, ed. Paschalis M. Kitromilides, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 377-388.

<sup>2</sup> The story of the house is told in Michael Llewellyn-Smith, *The British Embassy Athens*, Athens: British Embassy, 1998. Many of Mme Venizelos' books remain there, in the so-called Venizelos Library on the lower floor.

<sup>3</sup> The story of how during the war the books came to be moved from Venizelos' house at Halepa, then occupied by the Germans, to the Historical Archive of Crete is told in N. V. Tomadakis, "Ανέκδοτοι Σκέψεις. Περί Συντάξεως Πολιτείας [Unpublished thoughts: on the structure of the state]", in *Ο Βενιζέλος Έφηβος* [The young Venizelos], Athens: Kydonia, 1964, pp. 177-179. After the war they were moved from the Historical Archive to the Municipal Library.

<sup>4</sup> Kitromilides, p. 378

*Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, and the *Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* (Great Greek encyclopedia).

Besides the expected political, historical and biographical works, the collection indicates more surprising interests, including sport. Chrysaphis' book on the modern international Olympic Games is no surprise.<sup>5</sup> But near it are the Badminton Library volumes on fencing, boxing and wrestling, Harry Vardon's *The Complete Golfer* (London, 1905 & 1912) and a number of other golfing titles – one recalls that Venizelos played golf, including with that keen golfer David Lloyd George. There are also Capablanca's *Chess Fundamentals* (New York, 1921), and a number of books on bridge, which Venizelos had learned in his days as a lawyer and budding politician in Chania in the 1880s and 1890s. (Bridge passed down to the next generation: Sophocles Venizelos played at international level.) For the most part, I believe, people do not buy books about sport unless they intend to consult them. There is also an article on "Sport in Greece" by John Gennadios, contributed to the journal *Sport in Europe* in 1901, and dedicated in ink by Gennadios to "the great hunter who cleared Greece of wild beasts".<sup>6</sup>

In some of these cases, there is clear evidence, in the form of manuscript notes, that Venizelos had read a particular book. For the most part, these notes are on points of language rather than substantive comments on the content. But linguistic notes are not without interest. First of all, they show that until quite late in his career Venizelos continued to study and improve his knowledge of foreign languages, especially English. An example is R. B. Townshend's *Inspired Golf* (Methuen 1921, two shillings and sixpence), a short book with a coloured picture of a man wearing plus fours, driving off the tee. Venizelos has noted in the margin of the first 20 pages unfamiliar words such as "backslider", "clockwork", "all the go" (*του τελευταίου συρμού*), "nag" and "squint". Against the word "schlaff", a Germanic version of the English "scuff" in golf, he has written "to scrape the ground with the club in a stroke, before striking the ball", an accurate definition, which speaks of bitter experience. Since the book is dated 1921, Venizelos probably obtained it in the early period of his exile following the November 1920 elections, when he had time for leisure pursuits such as golf.

Of more importance in trying to determine the effect of books on his culture and upbringing are the very many works of history, biography and politics

<sup>5</sup> I. E. Chrysaphis, *Οι σύγχρονοι Διεθνείς Ολυμπιακοί αγώνες* [The modern international Olympic Games], Athens: Kouloura, 1930.

<sup>6</sup> The word Gennadios uses for hunter is *thiragreti*, an extremely rare coinage, the only other example known to me coming from the Anthologia Palatina 6, 184: "Τρισσὰ τάδε τρισσοὶ θηραγρέται, ἄλλος ἀπ' ἄλλης / τέχνης." I am grateful to Charlotte Roueché for this information.

in the shelves of the Chania library. Pride of place should go to Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos' history in an edition updated to the 1920s, and 16-volume *Περί Χαρίλαου Τρικούπη* [On Harilaos Trikoupis]. Venizelos' lifelong interest in ancient Greek literature and culture, the supreme example of which is his translation of Thucydides' Histories, is reflected in the library by Gilbert Murray's *Four Stages of Greek Religion* and many other books. His interest in Byzantine history and culture seems, on the evidence of the library, not to have been so great, though no doubt he was exposed to the historical novels of his great friend Penelope Delta.

Of modern thinkers, Venizelos had read Henri Bergson, underlining in *La Pensée et le Mouvant* (Paris, 1934) Bergson's rejection of the idea that knowledge is relative and the absolute unattainable. From Einstein, *Comment je Vois le Monde*, he noted the great scientist's tribute of honour to ancient Greece as the cradle of western science, where for the first time a system of logic was created in Euclid's geometry. More light-heartedly, he highlighted the provocative views of the now forgotten thinker C. E. M. Joad, in *Thrasymachus or the Future of Morals* (London, 1925) that old people are grumpy and useless and should be kept out of public life – a view rejected by Greeks throughout their history.

Among a wide range of books on economics and finance are J. M. Keynes' *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (London, 1923) and *A Treatise on Money* (London, 1930). Venizelos' manuscript notes on these refer to the "money" rate of interest and the "real" rate of interest, the credit cycle, commodity value and purchasing power. He has underlined passages on interest rates, inflation, the theory of foreign exchange, and other monetary and economic concepts. It is clear that Venizelos read this material with care. He also read the chapter on the Peace Conference in Keynes' *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1920), with its superb description of how Lloyd George bamboozled President Wilson. "His mind was slow and unadaptable," wrote Keynes, and "The President had thought out nothing [...] his ideas were nebulous and incomplete". Venizelos' underlining of these phrases certainly shows how they struck him and probably signifies agreement.

Here, as with many other books, we enter the realm of personal acquaintance. Venizelos met Keynes in Paris, though I have seen no account of their encounter. As I know from family lore, he also met my grandfather, Sir Hubert Llewellyn Smith, who was chief of the economic section of the British delegation to the Paris peace conference.

The Keynes books and other volumes show that Venizelos approached the inter-war period with undiminished interest in political, economic and social matters. Even in the 1930s he continued to expand his library with books such as G. D. H. Cole, *The Intelligent Man's Guide through World Chaos* (London, 1933), H. G. Wells, *The Way the World is Going* (London, 1928), Harold Laski, *A Grammar of Politics* (London, 1925) and Sir Arthur Salter's *Recovery: The Second*

*Effort* (London, 1932), in which Venizelos has noted passages on the gold standard, impoverishment in the midst of plenty, and paralysis of the system of credit.

Venizelos had met and dealt with most of the great figures of the contemporary world, and his bookshelves reflect this and his interest in biography. Pelham H. Box's *Three Master Builders and Another* (London, 1925) contains essays on Venizelos himself (the "other") as well as Lenin, Mussolini and Woodrow Wilson. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (London, 1918) shows signs of careful reading, in particular the essays on Cardinal Manning and on the great Victorian headmaster Dr Arnold. He also used Strachey's text to improve his English, noting precise definitions of phrases in the Manning essay such as "a magenta mantle" and "papal dispensation". He read the chapter on late Shakespeare in Strachey's *Books and Characters, French and English* (London, 1922), making many linguistic notes. He owned Emil Ludwig's best-selling biographies of Garibaldi, Goethe and Napoleon, along with biographies of Rousseau (and a 20-volume set of Rousseau's works), and a book by Karel Čapek, *President Masaryk Tells his Story* (New York, 1935). He read and studied not only the great liberal John Morley's classic life of Gladstone, but also Morley's biographical essays in *Critical Miscellanies*, vol. 1 (London, 1913), where internal evidence shows that he read Morley's essays on Robespierre, Carlyle, Byron, Macaulay, and Emerson; and in the same author's *Critical Miscellanies*, vol. 2 (London, 1918) on Vauvenargues, de Maistre and others. In the essay on Robespierre, Venizelos underlined a passage about political chaos and recovery: "It was the Girondins whose want of union and energy had, by the middle of 1793, brought France to distraction and imminent ruin. It was a short year of Jacobin government that by the summer of 1794 had welded the nation together again, and finally conquered the nation."

Not surprisingly, the library holds copies of many books touching on Greek events in the stormy period from 1910 to 1923: for example, the memoirs of Prince Nicholas and Prince Andrew, Arnold J. Toynbee's controversial *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* (London, 1921), and George Ventiris' classic *Ἡ Ελλάδα 1910-1920 [Greece, 1910-1920]* (Athens, 1931), inscribed by the author to Venizelos. Most of these lack annotation, but exceptions are the works of the eccentric and productive journalist-historian William Miller, whose books about Greece and Greek politics seem to have particularly attracted Venizelos' attention.<sup>7</sup> On the end papers of Miller's *Greece* (London, 1928) Venizelos has indicated 18 page references where something struck him, and on the page he

---

<sup>7</sup> Rightly so. On Miller, see Paul Hetherington, "William Miller: Medieval Historian and Modern Journalist", in *Scholars, Travels, Archives: Greek History and Culture through the British School at Athens*, ed. Michael Llewellyn Smith, Paschalis M. Kitromilides and Eleni Calligas, (eds), London: British School at Athens, 2009, pp. 153-161.

has either underlined a phrase or put a question mark in the margin or both. In a number of these he relives his disputes with Prince George, King Constantine and Ioannis Metaxas, which continued to work on his mind in the 1930s. On page 334 of Miller's book, Venizelos underlines Miller's comment that "in England, there exists that solid leaven of stupidity which Bagehot believed to be serviceable for the working of parliamentary institutions, whereas in Greece the number of alert intellects is relatively larger". It is clear from Venizelos' comments at other times on British parliamentary life that he regarded this stolidity or stupidity as a virtue compared with what he saw as the excessive individuality (*ατομισμός*) of the Greeks.

One of the incidental pleasures of browsing in the Venizelos library is looking out for dedications to Venizelos and the complimentary ways the donors described the great man. Apart from Gennadios mentioned above, the composer Manolis Kalomoiris, who also wrote a march dedicated to Venizelos, sent the score of his opera *Ο Πρωτομάστορας* [The master builder], a musical tragedy in three acts dated 1917. Kalomoiris wrote: "The Master Builder / For the master builder / Of the Great Greece / Eleftherios Venizelos / Dedicated by the composer" (my translation).

A biography of Cavour by Countess Evelyn Cesaresco (London, 1904) is dedicated with the words "To the / CAVOUR / of Greece. 'So much one man can do / That does both act and know.'"<sup>8</sup> On page 41, Venizelos has underlined the sentence, "In politics really disinterested acts bear fruit, whatever be their consequences to individuals." Not all of Venizelos' acts were disinterested, but the quality of disinterestedness was an important component of his image of himself, and an ideal to which he aspired.

Another dedication is the fine outsize volume by the Hellenist Daniel Baud-Bovy and the photographer Fred Boissonnas, *Des Cyclades en Crète au gré du vent* (Geneva 1919), with an introduction by Gustave Fougères dated July 1913. A short introduction by the authors dated September 1918 records that the journey started on 13 October 1911. The dedication is to "son Excellence Monsieur Venizelos, Président du Conseil des Ministres de Grèce". The book is illustrated by Boissonnas' black-and-white (sepia) prints, some set in the text, others as whole plates. The narrative is by Baud-Bovy.

Baud-Bovy and Boissonnas travelled via Aegina to Athens and presented themselves at Venizelos' office at the War Ministry<sup>9</sup> on 20 October 1911.

---

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is from Andrew Marvell's "Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland", the source also of the famous couplet "He nothing common did or mean / Upon that memorable scene". The first couplet refers to Cromwell, the second to Charles I. I am grateful to Sonia Anderson for pointing out this attribution.

<sup>9</sup> In this period Venizelos held the position of defence, or war minister, as well as prime minister.



They joined some 30 petitioners in the antechamber, including merchants, an old priest, an Albanian shepherd, and army officers. Baud-Bovy writes, "On s'inscrit; chacun passe à son tour; c'est la simplicité démocratique absolue. Le premier ministre nous reçoit debout. Il est grand, de proportions élégantes. Ses cheveux grisonnent mais tout en lui exprime la santé et l'énergie. Le regard de ses yeux bleus est inoubliable... c'est celui d'un apôtre. Il nous écoute, souriant. 'Aujourd'hui même, Messieurs, je vous ferai tenir quelques lettres qui faciliteront votre excursion en Crète, et vous permettront de traverser les monts Blancs.'" Hardly had the travellers finished dinner when their hotel porter gave them a folder containing several letters from Venizelos to functionaries and friends in Crete. "Elles sont entièrement de sa main. A ce détail on peut juger l'homme."

What the British today call the "surgery" of a parliamentarian or minister always fascinated travellers from abroad.

Among the many books on the Great War and the period of the peace conference, Venizelos collected a number written by or dealing with personalities who played a part in his life. Among these it is worth mentioning C. E. Calwell, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries* (London, 1927); it was Wilson who as Lloyd George's military adviser at the peace conference was highly critical of Venizelos' plans for the occupation of Smyrna. Harold Nicolson's *Peacemaking 1919* (London, 1933) carries cursory notes by Venizelos on the end papers, mainly about the United States' role in Paris. The book by US Secretary of State Robert Lansing, *The Big Four and Others of the Peace Conference* (New York, 1921), contains a chapter about Venizelos which reveals Lansing's difficulty in summing up his character. He concluded that "In a way the character of Mr Venizelos remains an enigma which cannot be solved until years have passed." Venizelos underlined the sentence "What he asked was granted because he asked it." Lansing questioned whether Venizelos' pro-Allied sympathies were due to "far-seeing statesmanship" or to the Ottoman alliance with the Central Powers, adding, "I believe that his inveterate hatred of the Turk was the chief influence" which induced him actively to seek to enter the war on the side of the Entente. Venizelos noted, in Greek, against this: "But my offer of Greek cooperation with the Allies happened at the end of August 1914, that is almost two months before the entry of Turkey into the war." This comment, while true in itself, passes over the important role that Turkey's attitudes and treatment of the Greeks of Asia Minor played in the formation of Venizelos' policy in August 1914. But it was not hatred of the Turk that moved him. It was ambition for his own country, and for the territorial gains that he believed would secure the future of the Asia Minor Greeks.

Basil Liddell Hart's *A History of the World War* (London, 1934) shows Venizelos looking for retrospective justification of his policies. His underlinings show that he



read carefully the chapters on the Dardanelles and the Gallipoli campaign, on which Liddell Hart took a positive view, arguing that General Sir Ian Hamilton came quite close to success. Venizelos quotes glowing judgments on Liddell Hart (“leading military writer of the time”, etc) by Hamilton and Colonel House to suggest that his own attempted participation in the Gallipoli venture was a sound venture.

What of fiction and the imagination? There is ample evidence of Venizelos’ interest, always with the caution that the presence of an author in the library does not mean that Venizelos had read him. One should remember also that Elena, his second wife, had her own literary tastes and some of these volumes may have been bought for her. Of fiction, there are editions, mostly leatherbound, mostly complete,<sup>10</sup> of Dickens, Disraeli, Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, Anatole France, Bulwer Lytton, Scott (the Waverley novels), Stendhal. Also the poets Browning, Rimbaud, Ronsard, Dryden, Lamartine and La Fontaine. Among dramatists there are several editions of Shakespeare; and Racine, Beaumarchais, Molière, Shaw. The list continues: Voltaire, Rabelais, Machiavelli, Oscar Wilde. There is evidence that Venizelos read Sir Thomas Brown and William Blake. A perhaps more surprising volume, and a reminder that Venizelos’ mind remained open to the new, is T. S. Eliot’s *Selected Essays*. Literary criticism appealed to him; there is much of it in the library.

Finally, returning to his Greek roots, we find a comprehensive selection of editions of the classics: Euripides, Plato, Isocrates, Homer in various editions including one from the eighteenth century, and in Pope’s translation, Aristotle, Herodotus, Xenophon, Plutarch, Sophocles, Aeschylus. There are examples of Byzantine literature, and from the modern there is Palamas and no doubt more. The bulk of Venizelos’ reading matter for his translation of Thucydides is not in this library.<sup>11</sup> But in J. B. Bury’s *The Ancient Greek Historians* (London, 1909), he has read and underlined parts of Bury’s essay on Thucydides.

Apart from the books, Chania Municipal Library contains two boxes of Venizelos’ legal briefs, which show him active in the court of first instance of Chania. The most intriguing case has Venizelos representing a client who had lent a donkey worth 600 groschen to a “friend” on the understanding that the

---

<sup>10</sup> As someone suggested on 2 March 2015, when I read a version of this paper at a King’s College London seminar, complete hardcover editions are generally less likely to be read than single copies of favourite works.

<sup>11</sup> Venizelos and Thucydides is a subject in itself. See, for example, Katherine Harloe and Neville Morley (eds), *Thucydides and the Modern World: Reception, Reinterpretation and Influence from the Renaissance to the Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Evie Holmberg, *Lessons Unlearned: Thucydides and Venizelos on Propaganda and the Struggle for Power*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003.

friend would use the ass on a day trip down to Chania, and return it by nightfall. But the “friend” stole the donkey.

What conclusions may we draw from this rich and unusual collection of books? The main ones are the breadth of Venizelos’ cultural and intellectual interests, and the way he maintained them until the end of his life. The range of interests displayed in the library contrasts favourably with that of virtually any contemporary politician. So far as I know, books were not an important part of his father’s household in Chania. He formed himself at his various schools, at the Athens University law school and subsequently by his own reading, just as he taught himself the languages he needed for his career, and went on improving them, especially English, until the end of his life.

The composition of the library reveals a man with a range of interests going well beyond the narrowly political, legal and economic. The bent of his mind is towards the large-scale, serious, liberal historiography of historians such as Guizot, political thinkers such as John Morley, political economists such as Keynes. His interests in people and history is shown in the range of biographical material; his interest in literature in the collected editions of the great writers of the nineteenth century. Modern fiction and poetry are not well represented, but we know from other evidence that Venizelos read contemporary novels.

The collection of Venizelos’ books is the jewel of Chania Municipal Library, which has made good progress of recent years in ordering and displaying it. The collection has its own room and is properly classified. The library is happy to show it to groups of schoolchildren on their guided tours, as part of their efforts and those of the Eleftherios K. Venizelos National Research Foundation and its museum to propagate the history of Venizelos and his times. I understand that the foundation plans to apply for a European programme in partnership with the library, aiming among other things to digitise and document some of the library’s rare books, highlighting the links between the library, the museum and the city of Chania. It is good that after their turbulent history, including packing and unpacking and neglect by the German occupiers of Venizelos’ house at Halepa, these books now have the care and attention they deserve.

*Visiting Professor, King’s College London, and  
Honorary Fellow, St Antony’s College, Oxford*