

EDITORIAL

In research devoted to the *Nachleben* of the Classics too little attention has been given to novels dealing with classical myths and history, perhaps because they have been regarded as too "popular". This attitude, however, is mistaken, for these novels have aroused great interest in readers who do not ordinarily come into contact with classical civilisation. The treatment of the Classics in these novels varies. On the one hand there are the novels which deal indirectly with ancient myth and history, mainly by means of allusions, e.g. *The secret history* by Donna Tartt which is discussed in this issue. On the other hand there are novelists who try to describe the mythical or historical events as realistically as possible. Among the novelists of the second group Mary Renault (pseudonym of Mary Challans) occupies a prominent position, and a recent book by David Sweetman, *Mary Renault, a biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), has again drawn attention to her achievement in this field.

Mary Renault has a special connection with South Africa, of course. She was born in England and had already written a number of "contemporary" novels when she emigrated to South Africa in 1948. At first she stayed in Durban but in 1959 she moved to Cape Town where she lived until her death in 1983. It was in South Africa that she wrote her "classical" novels. *The last of the wine* (1956) depicts Socrates and his circle in the last years of the Peloponnesian War. Sweetman remarks: "She was not suggesting that events in the Athens of 420 B.C. were the same as those in the Pretoria of A.D. 1953 but rather that the moral choices offered to individual citizens were comparable" (1993:155).

Only after the first draft of this novel had been completed did she go to Greece. A visit to Knossos inspired her next two books which deal with the myth of Theseus, *The king must die* (1958) and *The bull from the sea* (1962). Two further novels describe the experiences of artists in the Greek world. *The mask of Apollo* (1966) gives a fascinating description of the adventures of an actor in the 4th century B.C. and *The praise singer* (1979) is a fictional biography of the lyric poet Simonides. Her greatest achievement is the trilogy on Alexander the Great - *Fire from heaven* (1970), *The Persian boy* (1972) and *Funeral games* (1981).

Mary Renault's concept of the historical novel is interesting, as two quotations from an article "The fiction of history" show. She did not want to efface the differences between ancient and modern times: "People in the past were not like us; to pretend so is an evasion and betrayal, turning our back on them so as to be easy among familiar things." Above all she aimed at historical accuracy in her novels: "I have never, for any reason, in any historical book of mine, falsified anything deliberately which I knew or believed to be true. Often, of course, I must have done through ignorance what would horrify me if I could revisit the past ... But one can at least desire the truth; and it is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it; to alter some fact which was central to the life of a real human being, however long it is since he ceased to live, in order to make a smoother story, or to exploit him as propaganda for some cause" (Sweetman 1993:158).

Such high ideals entailed painstaking research, as the bibliographies appended to her novels clearly show. This could easily have led to historically accurate but boring novels but it is amazing how, by an imaginative use of her sources, she succeeded in giving a vivid and unforgettable picture of life in the ancient world. In this way she became one of the most popular historical novelists, with her books translated into every major language, and by her attention to historical detail she also made classical scholars some of her greatest fans.