

Xenophon's Retreat - Greece, Persia and the End of the Golden Age by Robin Waterfield.
faber and faber 2006.

The Expedition of Cyrus, the Greek historian Xenophon's dramatic telling of the escape of the mercenary army of which he was a part, following the battle of Cunaxa at which they were unsuccessful if not exactly defeated, is one of the great documentary testimonies from the ancient world. It is a testament to the greatness and courage of the human spirit, and also of its narrowness and propensity to weakness.

Robin Waterfield shows himself to be as superb a narrator as he is a translator in Xenophon's Retreat, and any reader who eschews anything 'classical' because they believe it to be dry and boring will find here a book that confounds the stereotype.

Waterfield analyses not only the political background to the Graeco-Persian tensions but also goes into the background of Xenophon, who brought not just a military eye and mind to the events in which he played such a key role, but also that of a disciple of Socrates.

The final chapter is perhaps the most interesting of all, because it details the impact of the events on later history, particularly the part it played in changing the invincible reputation of the Persians to one where it was believed they could be beaten; and this in turn paved the way for the conquest of Alexander the Great of the Persian Empire, an event by which the entire world was changed and a geo-political dynamic was fixed which continues to be relevant today.

This is a fine work, with some unexpected flashes of humour, and an opening description of hoplite warfare that sets the pulse racing!

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh