

A Brief Review of "A Few Days In Athens," A New Student's Impression

Post by "Lee" of February 10, 2020 at 4:12 PM

I am new to the study of Epicureanism and noticed that "A Few Days in Athens" repeatedly appeared in list of books about the philosophy. My interest was further piqued when I found the quote from Thomas Jefferson where he called the work, "A treat to me of the highest order." After Cassius Amicus recommended the book I decided to start reading. The short description and comments that follow are to share my impression of the book and encourage others to read it.

Frances Wright employs an effective narration to explain the philosophy that makes the book an entertaining read. She creates the book as recovered from a fictional scroll found in Herculaneum. The story on the scroll is set at the time when Epicurus was teaching in his private Athenian garden. The main character, a young man from Corinth named Theon, travels to Athens to study the Stoic philosophy with Zeno. He meets Epicurus in the street and his inquires become the literary vehicle for the exposition of Epicurean philosophy as he makes a sincere effort over several days to learn the teachings of Epicurus and how it compares to the Stoic, Peripatetic, Cynic and Academic schools.

The book includes a series of delightful dialogs between Theon and historical figures from the schools such as Epicurus, Zeno, and Metrodorus. Theon travels back and forth between the porch of the Stoics and the the garden of the Epicureans to have question and answer discussions that follow a mostly-faithful account of the various philosophical positions on ethics, materialism, rationalism, idealism, and religion. I particularly enjoyed the last two chapters (15 and 16) which describe Epicurean materialism and the frequent harm inflicted on humanity in the name of religion.

After finishing the book, I did research on Frances Wright who was an interesting, rebellious and accomplished woman from the 19th century. I was astonished to learn she wrote "A Few Days In Athens" when only 18 years old.

I recommend this book without reservation to anyone who is looking for an entertaining introduction to Epicureanism and a refreshing departure from the typical nonfiction philosophy tomes.