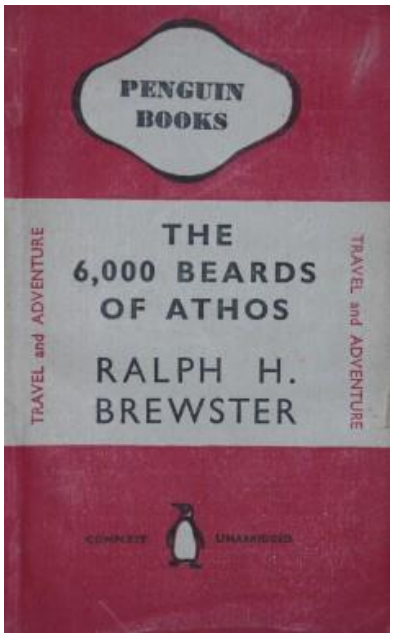
The Beards of Athos: Ralph Brewster

By Duncan JD Smith

The period between the two world wars saw a flowering of 'Athonite' literature, that is writing pertaining to the 35-mile-long peninsula of Mount Athos in northern Greece, a semi-autonomous orthodox monastic republic where no woman (nor female creature for that matter!) had set foot in a thousand years.



Legendary travel writer Robert Byron made his two journeys to 'the Mountain' in 1925 and 1926 and published his erudite *The Station* in 1928. The following year F. W. Hasluck, former Librarian at the British School at Athens and Fellow of King's College Cambridge, published his informative book *Athos and its Monasteries*. Later, in 1936, R. M. Dawkins, Bywater Professor of Modern and Byzantine Greek at Oxford and himself a former Director of the British School, published his own book *The Monks of Athos*.

A very different sort of account, however, and one that provides light relief by comparison, was the scandalous memoir written by the eccentric musician Ralph H. Brewster in 1935: it was published under the irresistible title *The 6,000 Beards of Athos*. First published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press the book details a journey made by the author to the peninsula and covers not only the landscape and the monasteries, but more memorably the life of the inhabitants, including their customs and sexual habits, which were rarely discussed elsewhere. Thus, Brewster brazenly states that "90% of all modern Greeks are, like the Levantines, bisexual. The fact is not generally known as the Greeks are tremendous hypocrites. Only people who have lived in Greece and associated with Greeks of all classes, and speak their language fluently are able to realise this. Great friendships between men and boys, such as played so important a part in the life of the Ancient Greeks, are very rare amongst the Greeks of today. Their relations are purely animal. It is supposed to be highly creditable to the active partner, whereas he who accepts the passive role is looked down on. However, in practice the roles are frequently interchangeable, and there is much lying as to who plays which part." Brewster's book is also unusual in giving an appendix detailing the acceptability or otherwise of the toilet facilities in each monastery!

Brewster's only other attempt at travel-writing came in the form of the less salacious *The Island of Zeus: Wanderings in Crete*.