SOME THOUGHTS ON CICADAS

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New Zealand is rich in cicadas; having, indeed, many more species than the whole of Europe. The Maoris have for them an admirably onomatopoeic name, Kikihia, which the entomologists in their wisdom have adopted for the name of a distinctive genus.

During a hot dry summer the singing of the various species from coastal dunes to alpine fellfields may remind a naturalist with some smattering of the classics or a classicist with an ear for the subtler sounds of nature that insects of this group, also known as ‘tree-cricket’, were favourites of the ancient Greeks. τέττιγες were caught and kept in rush cages for their cheerful chirping and fed on γήτειον whatever that may be, probably moist green stuff. A propos of which, Mr Stuart Chambers, a busy farmer who still finds time to be an observant naturalist, informs me that one New Zealand species, Notopsalta sericea, ‘will sing well for you if you catch a male and place it in a cage; then in the evening place the cage near a light, and as the cicada warms up, he will start to sing.’ As a mark of social distinction or of a long family tree, Greek ladies were proud to wear a golden brooch, fashioned in the form of a τέττιξ. Different sizes were recognised, the larger being ἕχετης or ἀχέτας; the smaller τεττιγόνιον.

In classical literature cicadas first appear in a famous simile in Iliad III, 151. The poet is poking gentle fun at the garrulity of elderly statesmen. In the sun-baked farmlands of Greece, Sicily and Italy, it is not surprising that cicadas forced themselves upon the ears of the pastoral poets nor did they escape their eyes. Hesiod’s ‘boomer’ (ἀχέτας) was dark-winged (κυανόπτερος) and Theocritus’ τέττιγες λαλαγεύντες were αἰθαλίωνες. In Plato cicadas share with poets the distinction of being described as τῶν Μουσών προφήται. Is some dark innuendo intended? The philosopher’s meaning is open to various interpretations, a lively subject for debate.

Typically, because he was a man who noticed such things, Lucretius comments upon the emergence of cicadas from their ‘teretes folliculos’. In Vergil they sing with renewed vigour and the poet gives us that superbly evocative line ‘sole sub ardenti resonant arbusta cicadis’ (E.2.13). Juvenal’s perceptive way of saying ‘wait till real summer comes’ is ‘Expectate cicadas.’ Nor are cicadas overlooked by the writers of later centuries. To the Pseudo-Anacreon the τέττιξ with its λιγυρή οίμη was θέρεος γλυκύς προφήτης. Nemesianus (253-284 A.D.) unashamedly writing in the strain of Vergil’s Eclogues, has one of his rustics claiming ‘nec aestivis cantu concedo cicadis’ (E.4.42).

Throughout the centuries English writers have shown a penetrating
understanding of the sights and sounds of the countryside. Yet the cicada fares badly; and the reason is obvious. Britain’s single species, *Cicadetta montana*, confined to the New Forest, is so rare that some authorities consider it may be in danger of extinction. In Tennyson’s ‘Oenone’ there is an often quoted passage:

For now the noonday quiet holds the hill:
The grasshopper is silent in the grass:
The lizard, with his shadow on the stone,
Rests like a shadow, and the cicala sleeps. (1883 text)

Evidently not understanding that hot sunshine is the stimulus which cicadas need to set them singing, Tennyson presents lesser writers with a clear example of that heartening dictum ‘quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus.’ However by 1893 ‘cicala sleeps’ had been changed to ‘winds are dead’; a reading which the Oxford Edition of 1906 finds distasteful; and so restores the sleeping cicala. Browning was quick to notice these musical insects in southern Italy ‘where the baked cigalas die of drouth;’ but when he thus wrote, was he not forgetting that towards the close of a sirocco-seared summer cicadas also are coming to the end of their natural span?

Browning’s friend, Waring, actually Alfred Domett, slipped away to New Zealand, where he stayed for thirty years, was Prime Minister for a short uneasy period and amassed the material for his monumental epic ‘Ranolf and Amohia’.

Domett’s stay in New Zealand was long and industrious; and, inter alia, it gave him the opportunity to observe the behaviour of cicadas, which for an English poet was something of a new experience. ‘These beautiful insects’ he writes ‘abound in the Islands.’ His imagination was stirred and his sensitivity sharpened by a thoroughly unfamiliar environment. Furthermore, he was an omnivorous reader; and, as is shown by the Notes which are added to his long romantic poem, he had perused not without discernment all the best current books on New Zealand as they were published, from Dieffenbach, Hooker and Buller to Grey and Maning.

This extract from Ranolf and Amohia (Book III Canto I) deserves quoting:

She steps into the noon-glare hot and blinding
But what a gush of gladsome sound
At once assails her! like the winding
Of tiny watches numberless; all round
Unceasing streams the loud vibrating hiss
Of gay cicadas in their summer bliss.

Tennyson and Browning may have been superior poets; but Domett knew more about cicadas.

In the latter half of August 1975, my wife and I were able to distinguish
by ear five species of cicadas as they rhapsodised in the Aegean sunshine. On Cos and Crete, even early in the day, their concerto among the pines rose and fell in waves of sound. At Knossos their surging crescendo challenged the audibility of even the most experienced speakers. In such historic settings, it was not hard to understand why for century upon century peasants and poets have come under the spell of their rhythmical racket. The modern artisan has his transistor, so often, it seems, set at one of the noisiest stations; the Mediterranean countryman at the season of high summer had his cicadas making the air vibrate with their persistent strumming.

This difficult epigram is by Nicias (A.P. VII. 200). It is discussed by Guiseppe Giangrande in *J.H.S.* 1975 Vol. xcv. I offer a translation.

**A Trapped Cicada’s Lament**

Οὐκέτι οὐ πάλιν οὐ ξανάρμαξαι
τανύφυλλον ὑπὸ πλάκα κλωνὸς ἐλιχθεῖς
τέρμοι’ ἀπὸ ἡδινών φθόγγον ιεύς πτερύγων.
χεῖρα γὰρ εἰς ἀραιὰν παιός πέσον ὡς μὲ λαθραίως
μάρψεν ἐπὶ χλωρών ἐξόμενον πετάλων.

Never again ensconced neath the long-leaved spread of a branchlet
Shall I rejoice as I make music from tapering wings,
Into a child’s rough clutch I fell when he stealthily snatched me,
There as I couched at ease, up in the foliage green.

Nicias’ deliberate use of Homeric adjectives, such as τανύφυλλον, ἡδινών, ἀραιῶν, seems to be aimed at giving a mock heroic flavour to the lines. Perhaps the most puzzling word is ἐλιχθεῖς. ‘Coiled like a snail’ is hardly an apt description of the shape of a fullwinged adult cicada, as was the insect which fell into the child’s swift, yet fumbling fingers. Accordingly, Giangrande suggests that if Nicias is referring to an example of the European species, *Cicada flexuosa*, the difficulty is solved. But is it? Even if, at some time in the larval stage, cicadas may be said to be coiled or encurled, this is hardly true of the singing adult.

Cicadas may be divided roughly into two groups, sun-singers and shade-singers. Nicias’ insect is clearly one of the shade-singers. In my garden I have tracked by his φθόγγος a cicada and found him snugly hidden in the curling leaf of a lemon-tree. In dry weather snails ‘hole-up’ in cool dark corners. If we translate as ‘holed up like a snail’, we may be not far off the poet’s intended meaning.

Meanwhile, at a time when bird song is generally in the doldrums, a host of cicadas is teasing the ears of the curious with a babel of timbals and sending out a challenge to look a little further.