

Writers attack the end of our Greek chapter

by Helena Smith
Athens

BONDED by poetry and death in Greece, Lord Byron and Rupert Brooke have once again found common cause, according to a campaigning alliance of Greek Anglophiles and London literary luvvies. They say the pair will be turning in their graves over a British Council decision to close its flagship library in Athens.

John Mortimer and Fay Weldon have added their voices to those of Greek academics and English speakers in protest at the Foreign Office decision to close the Athens library and others throughout Western Europe and South-east Asia. The Government hopes the closures will save £7 million over three years.

The libraries will be replaced by computerised 'infor-

mation centres', and new homes must be found for their books. Even Greek academics, a reticent bunch at the best of times, have picked up their pens to disapprove of the council's closure of its lending library in a city still in awe of Byron and his verse.

They were raised on British Council books, reading English translations of the ancients before the Modern Hellenes ever got round to taking Plato seriously. Has British culture, they now ask, really come to this?

'The British Council is part of Athens' sacred geography,' says Ruth Nagley, a writer who presides over the Concerned English Speakers of Athens. 'It's had 50 years of cultural predominance here partly because of its magnificent collection of books.'

The group would now like to form a Commonwealth library

to rehouse the council's 11,000 tomes, but neither time nor money is on its side. The council has offered to donate them to a 'suitable home'.

The furore may never have got further than the fifth floor rooms that housed the collection had some of Britain's dwindling group of Hellenophiles not raised their eminent heads.

Patrick Leigh Fermor has joined Weldon and Mortimer in questioning the replacement of libraries with computerised information centres. Do people really read novels on CD-roms? Would they want to take a screen to bed?

'It demonstrates the creeping philistinism that is manifesting itself all over the place,' sniffed Leigh Fermor from his home in the southern Peloponnese. An octogenarian Anglo-Irish writer, he served as the council's deputy

director in Athens after the war.



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The Oxford University Press and the Society of Authors say the closures do nothing for Britain's best asset: the export of its language and culture. The Athens council alone collects more than £11 million a year in fees for English language training.

'What we sell abroad are our novels, ideas, fiction and fantasy,' says Weldon. 'The For-

eign Office clearly hasn't grasped that the rest of the world comes to England to read Shakespeare.'

The British Council believes it is 'moving with the times'. 'Lending books,' says John Mumby, who heads the council in Greece, 'doesn't do much to promote bilateral relations, which is our primary objective. You just have to look at the 100,000-plus inquiries we have with our education infor-

mation service every year to see that such centres do.'

But the knowledge that other countries have kept their tomes *and* created such centres has made the argument hard to swallow. The Institut Francaise and Goethe Institute in Athens embraced the CD-rom long ago and their bookshelves are not only groaning but growing.

'Other countries really do respect their culture a lot



Fay Weldon and John Mortimer are angered by the British Council's decision: 'Other countries really respect their culture a lot more than we do.'

more than we do' sighed Weldon.

This week, London will select the winner from the three bidders vying for the Athens library. The Concerned English Speakers are in no doubt that if it goes to the Greek state, the main contender, the UK taxpayers' books will be left to rot. If they don't get their Commonwealth library, it will be the real death 'of a foreign field that is forever England'.