



Greek Fire: The Story of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis

By Nicholas Gage

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The love affair of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis scandalized and fascinated the world from the moment it began in 1959 during a cruise on the fabled yacht Christina. In the decades since, dozens of books have been written about the incandescent diva who transformed opera and the Promethean tycoon who revolutionized international shipping, but none has focused on the tempestuous relationship between them, which is widely thought to have collapsed following Onassis' celebrated marriage to Jacqueline Kennedy in 1968.

Now, Nicholas Gage, author of the acclaimed international best-seller *Eleni* and a former investigative reporter for the *New York Times*, gives us the first and only full account of this fateful romance, presenting startling new information he has uncovered. Gage was able to persuade the couple's associates, relatives, and close friends--some of whom had never spoken before--to share their most intimate recollections. He also gained access to some of Callas' most private papers, which provide an utterly new view of her personal life. His narrative shows us that the Callas and Onassis relationship, far from being a passing dalliance, was in fact the deepest and longest-lasting emotional commitment either of them ever knew.

Gage meticulously reconstructs the events leading to the affair, from Callas and Onassis' first meeting at a masked ball in Venice in 1957 to the tycoon's pursuit of her throughout Europe, culminating in the 1959 cruise. It was during this three-week summer holiday, hosted by Onassis and his wife, Tina, that Aristotle and Maria's daily encounters ignited passions before the alarmed eyes of the crew and other illustrious guests, including Sir Winston and Lady Churchill. We follow the couple through the ensuing press hysteria and the rancor of their shattered marriages; the days of bliss and battles on the island hideaway of Skorpios; the agonizing deterioration of Callas' voice; and the strange covert courtship Onassis conducted prior to his marriage to the widow of the American president, a surprise that stunned the world once again and nearly destroyed Callas.

Within days of his marriage to Jacqueline Kennedy, Onassis was back at Maria's

door. Although they were never to marry, the relationship between the tycoon and the diva, Gage reveals, would continue and deepen, through tragedies and trials, until the end of their lives.

Penetrating the mass of published misinformation concerning his subjects, Nicholas Gage gives us the most reliable account ever of these legendary figures, a brilliant dual biography of two icons of the golden age of glamour. **Greek Fire** is an operatic spectacle of desire and loss, certain to transform our understanding of some of the most compelling personalities ever to capture our imagination.

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Nicholas Gage**

Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Nicholas Gage's meticulously documented and consistently absorbing account chronicles the stormy love affair between Maria Callas (1923-77) and Aristotle Onassis (1906-75). Gage sees the soprano who reinvented the art of opera and the tycoon who transformed the shipping industry as kindred spirits, drawn into romance by a deep connection to their Greek origins and a shared sense that, despite all they had achieved, something was missing. They found that absent element in a once-in-a-lifetime passion, which Onassis betrayed by marrying Jacqueline Kennedy in 1968. Gage appears to share the view of the tycoon's Greek coterie, who viewed this marriage as an act of hubris that inevitably led to financial and personal reversals which embittered Onassis in his final years. But he doesn't blame the tycoon for Callas's decline, pointing out that by the time they met, she was already experiencing severe vocal problems and was eager for respite from her taxing performance commitments. In any case, her career and his business dealings take a back seat here to Gage's evocative portrait of his subjects' outsized personalities and the jet-set society in the gaudy postwar years. Some of the new information is revelatory, particularly Gage's persuasive contention that Callas bore Onassis a son who died hours after his birth in 1960. At other times his investigative-journalist approach seems too weighty for this highly personal story of love, rage, and big, big egos. Fortunately, these lapses don't seriously mar a text distinguished by smooth prose, the seamless interweaving of several narrative strands, and a warm sympathy for its genuinely tragic protagonists. --

Wendy Smith

From Publishers Weekly

Arguing that previous books about Maria Callas (1923-1977) and Aristotle Onassis (1904-1975) are full of errors, investigative reporter Gage (Eleni) attempts to set the record straight on the couple's birth dates, where they first met, when they first slept together and many other details of their ill-starred love affair. His most interesting revelation, based on Callas's private papers and statements by her maid and butler, is that instead of the abortion Callas said Onassis forced her to have in 1966, she actually had a "secret son," a baby, conceived at the beginning of their affair in 1959, who died the day he was born. Gage gives an exhaustive account of the infamous three-week cruise on which the much-publicized liaison began, accounting for each meeting between the opera diva and the shipping tycoon, what they said, what they ate and wore, and how the other passengers, including Callas's husband and Onassis's wife, reacted to the developing scandal as they sailed along the Greek and Turkish coasts on Onassis's opulent yacht. The author asserts that the lovers were drawn together in large part by their shared Greek heritage, and he equates their mutual passion with "Greek Fire," the all-consuming incendiary substance used in battle by the warships of the Byzantine empire. Unfortunately, the book, laden with excess detail, fails to emanate the same heat. So much has already been written about the affair that, even though the particulars may change and new facts are found, the story is all too familiar, especially the depressing ending of the aging tycoon marrying Jackie Kennedy instead of Callas and immediately regretting it, and the prescription-drug-dependent diva living as a recluse in Paris, still in love with Onassis but refusing to accept him again as a lover. Photos not seen by PW. (Oct.)

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From Library Journal

Investigative reporting on an affair.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alan Coleman:

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