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The Rise of Oriental Travel: English Visitors to the Ottoman Empire, 1580-1720

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Jonathan Burton

On the cover of Gerald MacLean's engaging new study, *The Rise of Oriental Travel: English Visitors to the Ottoman Empire, 1580-1720* is a 'Portrait of a European Man' by the Ottoman Artist Abdelcelil Celebi, known as Levni, and painted c.1720. MacLean does not discuss this portrait, but its selection as a cover image is calculated and significant. A strikingly similar image appears on the back book flap, portraying MacLean in a pose not unlike Levni's anonymous traveller. Each stands against a backdrop of perfect blue sky, clothed in characteristically Western garments, and wearing an expression that appears to survey the scrub-speckled desert landscape which he foregrounds and dominates. Produced nearly four centuries apart and through distinctly different technologies of representation, these images juxtaposed on the dust jacket offer important insights into the critical and narrative composition of MacLean's book. The author's portrait, produced through photographic technology, offers sharper lines and what would seem to be a more trustworthy representation than Levni's painted portrait of the sky, landscape and traveller. While the inert facial features of Levni's European man conform to conventions of Ottoman court painting, the windblown, sunglasses-wearing MacLean would appear to be more authentic. Whereas Levni's desert landscape is idealised with blooming flowers, MacLean stands on a more desolate scene, where unexceptional, pale green scrub pushes through rocky crevices. In other words, MacLean's portrait seeks to revisit and demystify Levni's, offering accuracy, truth, and perspective in place of Levni's romanticised fiction.

Like the author's photograph, *The Rise of Oriental Travel* revisits with a critical eye the stories of four journeys into the Ottoman Mediterranean undertaken by Englishmen in the century before there was a British Empire. By reading these narratives against each other, corroborating them with contemporaneous documents, and drawing on his own experiences of wandering 'deliberately into and across the footsteps of these four travellers' (p. xvii), MacLean seeks to highlight a range of early modern attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire that belie notions of uniform hostility and/or fearfulness. In other words, like the photograph that replaces Levni's impressionistic portrait with an aura of crystalline authenticity, MacLean's re-narration of four English travellers' tales promises to reproduce their 'narrative rhythms' while stripping away and exposing the footing of their more fanciful elaborations. The point of these re-tellings 'which MacLean characterises as biographies of books, more than authors' is threefold. First, they carefully set each narrative in an intertextual web to indicate how travellers' accounts are variously inflected by the rank, profession, and ethnographic literacy of each author. Second, they seek to 'open and add nuance to the continuing Orientalism debate' (p. xv) by indicating where earlier visitors to the East 'both did and did not conform to the attitudes and prejudices of later Orientalists.' (ibid.) By evidencing the admiration, envy, and fascination that the early modern English felt toward Ottoman culture, MacLean's accounts join the research of Nabil Matar, Daniel Vitkus, Emily Bartels, Ania Loomba and others in arguing that for the English, 'theological differences with Islam and the Ottomans were important, but nothing like the whole story.' (p. xiv) Third, presented as a study of English encounters with Islamic cultures, these narratives offer insights into 'the global formations of Englishness' whereas for each traveller, the experience of travel 'changed what it meant to be English.' (ibid.)

The four books chosen for retelling suggest a cross-section of English culture as well as narrative styles. Thomas Dallam's manuscript journal titled 'A brefe Relation of my Travell from the Royall Cittie of London towards The Straite of mariemediteranum and what happened by the waye' (1599), presents the observations of a 'minimally prejudiced' artisan who repeats hearsay and writes in predominantly secular terms. The Protestant chaplain William Biddulph's *The Travels of Certaine Englishmen* (London, 1609) is instead a carefully edited epistolary narrative that seeks challenge previous accounts, but which sees the Ottoman world through a highly prejudicial lens of biblical knowledge. Where Biddulph's text hopes to 'set the record straight' through piety, Sir Henry Blount's *A Voyage into the Levant* (London, 1636) proposes a secular, rationalist, Baconian inquiry into the Islamic world by a wealthy, classically-educated, gentleman traveller. Finally, *The Adventures of (Mr T.S.) An English Merchant Taken Prisoner by the Turks of Argiers* (London, 1670) offers a proto-novelistic 'concatenation of facts and fantasies' (p. xiii) that anticipates Orientalist accounts of Levantine degeneracy, even as it reveals a continuing admiration for Ottoman imperialism.

After a sequence of brief introductory sections consisting of the Prologue (a translated Ottoman document,

to which I will return), the Argument, and the Preface (treating methodology), *The Rise of Oriental Travel* is divided into four parts, each apportioned to a single text and subdivided into chapters reflecting episodes of particular interest within that text. Part 1, 'Dallam's Organ: By Sea to Istanbul, 1599', turns to the manuscript journal of Thomas Dallam, narrating the English organ-maker's journey to Istanbul where he was responsible for assembling and playing a highly crafted, musical clock of his own construction and which was to be presented as Queen Elizabeth's accession gift to Sultan Mehmed III. In Dallam's account, MacLean chooses one with more literary qualities than most. Dallam's story is taut, episodic, and even funny, and MacLean's rendering here is attuned to these qualities even as it contributes a wit all its own. Previous commentators have tended to focus on the ethnographic and intercultural aspects of Dallam's journal and MacLean too indicates how Dallam's account points toward instances of English deference and where instead it anticipates behaviours that would flourish in the age of British Empire. Yet what distinguishes MacLean's re-telling is his attention to the journal's treatment of relationships between English travellers. We see, as if with new eyes, how English registers of distinction might be undermined or re-configured in the Ottoman world. For instance, MacLean renders apparent the powerful anxieties of Henry Lello, England's ambassador-to-be in Istanbul, whose career came to depend on the success of Dallam, a common craftsman. This begins MacLean's emphasis, revisited throughout the text, on the tensions between and rivalries among English travellers of different stations and/or backgrounds. The unstated implication is that the self-fashioning of English travellers has as much to do with their representations of other Christians in an exotic and global register as it does with encounters with Jews and Muslims.

In Part 2, 'Biddulph's Ministry: Travels around Aleppo, 1600-12', MacLean turns to an account often cited by critics interested in English representations of Levantine life. Yet for MacLean, what is most interesting is how deeply William Biddulph's *The Travels of Certain Englishmen* is shaped by personal grudges and 'thinly veiled accusations aimed at living Englishmen.' (p. 52) By puzzling together miscellaneous documentary evidence to fill in the gaps of Biddulph's narrative, MacLean shows how the Protestant chaplain's alleged efforts to 'set the record straight' in fact participate in an expatriate culture of gossip-mongering which would have consequences for the careers of English authors, ambassadors and clergymen. When Biddulph goes on to discuss aspects of Ottoman life, these observations too are used to draw lesson for English reform, whether in regards to marital practices, national loyalty, or (especially) attitudes toward the clergy. Although he is said to contribute to the 'Orientalist project of making the East knowable' (p. 94), MacLean insists that Biddulph's perspective remains 'resolutely that of an English Protestant clergyman with little or no interest in the social, cultural, or political life of those around him.' (p. 101) More important was the task of setting the record straight in regards to heresy. Thus Biddulph's observations of other nations 'reinforced prejudices that he had brought with him, but at the same time they reflect the different degrees to which he felt foreign customs threatened Protestant belief.' (p. 96) Not surprisingly, Biddulph reserves his most trenchant scorn for Roman Catholicism, rather than the more alien but lesser known Christian sects of the Levant. (MacLean's ample endnotes testify to the author's own knowledge of the diversity and specific sects conflated or misrepresented by early modern travellers, as well as continuities with contemporary descendants of the peoples described.)

In next examining Henry Blount's *A Voyage into the Levant* (1636), MacLean chooses a text that suggests for travellers a program involving a complete personal, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual makeover [that] would have shocked the pious Biddulph. (p. 130) Whereas Biddulph concerns himself with the increasing danger of spiritual contagion the further one finds oneself from England, Blount prefers to avoid his fellow countrymen, don local garb, and suspend customary expectations. He describes his preparations for travel as 'putting off the old man', a Baconian rather than Pauline rebirth involving an abandonment of English predispositions with the goal of testing tradition and authority. For Blount, Turkey is the most apt scene in which to 'behold these times in their greatest glory', and so he casts his narrative as an empirical study of the roots of Ottoman imperial might. In Blount's rationalist inquiry, MacLean finds cause to argue that 'Christian supernaturalism may not have dominated discourse about the East before the French Enlightenment as Edward Said has suggested.' (p. 123) Nevertheless, he also finds conclusions that anticipate Orientalist arguments regarding primitivism and degeneration.

In the fourth text under study, *The Adventures of (Mr T.S.) An English Merchant Taken Prisoner by the Turks of Argiers*, MacLean finds a great many more proto-Orientalist tropes. He recounts with equal parts gusto and curiosity T.S.'s lurid sexual adventures among Maghrebian women, his encounters with bizarre and unusual creatures, and his discovery of a 'glorious and all but forgotten past encrusted within a degenerate living present.' (p. 214) While this is convincing material for his argument that by the end of the seventeenth century travel writing contained some of 'the founding impulses of Orientalism and imperialism', the chapter is most interesting in its consideration of the proto-novelistic qualities found in *The Adventures*. Indeed, MacLean indicates here that 'the rise of Oriental travel' occurred in conjunction with the rise of the English novel. Thus while Dallam, Biddulph and even Baconian Blount may have reproduced myths and inaccuracies, it is with T.S. that we find the 'murky mix of fact and fiction' (p. 179), as well as various structural tropes which would ultimately coalesce as the novel.

MacLean's re-told tales are engaging, thought-provoking, and witty. Drawn together in *The Rise of Oriental Travel*, they gesture toward an anatomy of seventeenth-century English responses to the Ottoman world. Although MacLean is often more interested in the ways in which these texts register rivalries among English or European subjects than in issues of ethnography or transculturation, he nevertheless provides us with a useful archive for broader inquiries. Still, in the place of its slender epilogue that testifies to a dearth of records of English women visitors to the Ottoman Empire (and which seems more like an appendix), this reader would have liked to have seen a deeper engagement with the implications of this material for the historiography of British travel and empire. Suggestions regarding the relationship between travel writing and empire might be more fully developed. And it remains unclear why we should we read these documents in terms of a 'rise of Oriental travel' when there are ample accounts of earlier eastern travel from the likes of Margery Kempe, John Mandeville, or any number of English crusaders (not to mention continental travellers such as Marco Polo or Johannes Schilteberger)? For that matter, why is 'Oriental' travel limited to English visits to the Ottoman Empire?

As entertaining and illuminating as they can be, MacLean's re-tellings are no less selective than the texts they revisit and amplify. Like the author's dust jacket photo that seems to sharpen and demystify the cover image, MacLean's renderings are in fact just as framed and subject to the pose of the renderer. They focus on narrative frames, ways of seeing, and the experience of the traveller at the expense of the 'Oriental' landscapes and peoples described. What we are brought closer to, that is, is something other than the traveller's experience. While MacLean never claims to present an absolute reproduction of the traveller's experience, one implication of his supplementing the four texts under study with corroborating documents is that a fuller, more accurate history of English travel will emerge. This would also seem to be the point of his promise to consider 'the contemporary historical setting of these visits as seen from the Ottoman side.' (p. xvii) Unfortunately, this is a promise that goes largely unfulfilled. The book opens with an absolutely fascinating prologue consisting of a translated Ottoman account of the reception of Dallam's fabulous clock and which would seem to promise a contrapuntal analysis. Rather mysteriously, MacLean chooses not to comment on this document at all. Likewise Ottoman portraits, including the cover image, are included among the 36 plates, but these too garner no commentary. At the same time, MacLean does (of course)

discuss at great length Dallam's account, as well as several of the European images reproduced in the book. In other words, in the same way that the author's photograph effectively supplants the Ottoman portrait of a European traveller on the book's cover, an aggregation of English voices is made to stand in for what was an intercultural experience. What remains unclear ? particularly where MacLean focuses on rivalries among the English themselves ? is the extent to which the English experience is inflected by others. In its decision not to fully integrate Ottoman accounts with their English counterparts, *The Rise of English Travel* runs the risk of presenting a study on Orientalism that reproduces its unilateral practices of exclusion. Still, by making available to readers contending Ottoman representations, MacLean provides us with the means by which we might ourselves provincialise European histories and particularly the germinating Orientalism of early modern English travellers.

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