

Imagining Armenia: Orientalism, Ambiguity and Intervention

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I first came into contact with Jo Laycock's *Imagining Armenia* when I received the Manchester University Press catalogue and found it listed on the page after my book. It interested me for two reasons: firstly it struck me that the two books explored similar themes, the difference being my monograph dealt with Cyprus, which had come under British rule, while Armenia had not (1); and secondly because I have started working on a project on the French trained Armenian Legion in British Cyprus during the Great War. It has given me a great deal of pleasure to review *Imagining Armenia* as my first foray into publishing on Armenian history (outside of the history of Armenians in Cyprus (2)). The book is refreshing because it deals with the Armenian 'Question' from a social and cultural rather than a diplomatic and political angle and thus offers different insights into British imperialism and activism, and British and Armenian identity than diplomatic and political studies. Also, much of what I have read about the Armenian Genocide of 1915 separates the Genocide from its context, which is that of the First World War, while Laycock firmly situates the Armenian Genocide within this context, as well as in the humanitarian and imperialist drive that characterised British responses to the Eastern Question, but also to events in the Congo Free State and elsewhere, in the second half of the 19th century. I highly recommend this book to all those who are interested in British cultural imperialism and the cultural aspects of war, and to those interested in the Armenian 'Question'.

Laycock's *Imaging Armenia* explores the various British images and representations of the Armenian cause and plight from the 1870s to the 1920s. It therefore looks at how the British saw the Armenians as revolutionaries, as victims of massacres in the 1890s and as victims of the genocide of 1915. In turn this means that the British perceptions were of a group of people who were at the same time victims, but whom some among them, were also 'revolutionaries' who challenged Ottoman rule and perhaps, according to some

historians, brought upon – even invited – the violent Ottoman reaction against the people they claimed to lead (for example Stanford Shaw and Guenter Lewy). The British views oscillated between a paternal/maternal imperial instinct to help those in need, and relative disinterest in what was happening in an obscure part of the Ottoman Empire, which, despite divisions across Conservative and Liberal politics, was broadly considered integral to the balance of power in the Near and Middle East. The attempt to stimulate public awareness, generate sympathy and funds to aid the suffering Armenians produced interesting perceptions of Armenians, especially of women and children, which were driven by British social justice, imperial ‘protectiveness’ and ideas of the civilising mission. These approaches partly explain the multiple British views of Armenians and the Armenian cause. Another angle Laycock explores well is the cultural filters that the British brought with them in dealing with Armenians. Laycock reveals these were determined by various factors: the fact that Armenians were Christians; the historical relationship between England-Britain and Armenians and their land; and British attitudes to the Ottoman Empire more generally, and especially the ‘Greeks’. What Laycock does excellently is intertwine British social tensions with these filters, which are so important in understanding the multiple British visions of the Armenians. She provides interesting comparisons with the Greeks and Jews. Moreover, she breaks the Armenians down along class lines, and also as victims, as people displaced and forced to become refugees, living in makeshift camps, in foreign cities, longing to return home, despite their suffering and loss.

Rather than summarise Laycock’s achievement, my task here is to critically engage with this body of work as vigorously as I can based on my own work on British imperialism in Cyprus and the Ottoman Empire in the hope of adding to the knowledge *Imaging Armenia* puts forward.

One of the historical contexts that needs understanding in any scholarly work on the Armenian Question is the broader ‘Eastern Question’. The Eastern Question relates to two historical developments between 1774 and 1923 in the Near East: the conflicts of the European Powers as they sought to protect and expand their interests, informal or formal, real or imagined, in the Near East; and the creation of ‘ethnic’ nationalities in the Ottoman Empire and the formation of nation-states (Greece, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Albania) or desired nation-states (Egypt, Armenia, Israel). Armenia fits well into this and Laycock correctly claims that scholars have tended to focus on the ‘high’ politics, diplomacy and imperialism of the ‘eastern question’. She has gone a long way to rectifying this by emphasising the social and cultural meanings of the encounters between the British and Armenia. Laycock focuses on categorising the British reaction to and representation of the Armenian plight, identifying ‘Armenophile’ pressure groups.

But, while achieving this, she could have taken her analysis a step further and related her socio-cultural analytical focus to the decision-making. Perhaps this is why Laycock overlooks Arman John Kirakossian’s monograph *British Diplomacy and the Armenian Question: From the 1830s to 1914*.⁽³⁾ In any event, a good example of what I mean is Laycock’s treatment of the Armenian Question in 1878. She argues that it was the British fear of Russia that resulted in the policy to ‘prop-up’ the Ottoman Empire (p. 8), but why did they fear Russia weakening the Ottoman Empire? By the 1870s the British had significant commercial and financial interests in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt and an Ottoman or Egyptian collapse would have meant catastrophe for British investors and the government, who also had to worry about the fact that it had guaranteed (along with the French government) the Ottoman loan of 1854 to continue fighting the Russians.⁽⁴⁾ In order to circumvent this, Beaconsfield’s government asked Sultan Abdul Hamid II to cede to the British the right to occupy and administer Cyprus (done in the Anglo-Turkish Convention), ostensibly to establish a military and naval base to help defend the Ottoman Empire from further Russian attack, but in reality to protect British interests from an Ottoman and Egyptian collapse. Cyprus’ insalubrity and exceedingly hot climate made the island unsuitable in the eyes of many political and military elites to fulfil such a role and Beaconsfield’s government thought better of spending the money to correct the situation.⁽⁵⁾ This necessitated Gladstone’s Liberal government occupying Egypt when a local movement threatened British interests there. So the question arises, to what extent discourses on Armenia were framed by the elites – the politicians, bureaucrats, investors, businessmen, diplomats and others who stood to lose from an Ottoman collapse – and to what extent by those idealists, clergy and advocates who stood to gain from Armenian independence? How were British interests reconciled alongside British idealism? How were these

'high' imperialists influenced by Laycock's 'low' imperialists? Are such distinctions valuable? I think so, but both are also inseparable in forming a comprehensive picture, and both are not 'black and white'. Laycock correctly states that 'even though Armenia was never a British imperial possession, imperialism provided the context for British encounters with Armenia' (p. 23). If this is the case, government policy and more importantly how this policy was decided and influenced by forces such as pressure groups is vital for a comprehensive understanding of the British imperial encounter with Armenia. Also, Laycock's argument that British Liberals led the Armenian cause, while well substantiated, does not resolve certain questions. For example, how does this assertion sit with the fact that it was Beaconsfield's Conservative government that forced Abdul Hamid II to sign the Anglo-Turkish Convention in 1878 (also in the Berlin Treaty) which provisioned for Ottoman reforms to its Christian provinces in Anatolia under British supervision? Another question is if the Liberals were so concerned with the plight of Armenians why did the Liberal government not aid the Armenian cause in the 1890s? What do these two examples say about the impact of liberal pressure groups?

The other aspect of the 'Eastern Question' is nationalism and national identity and its relationship to European imperialism. Laycock rightly situates the evidence alongside the main theories, namely Orientalism and Balkanisation, to account for the fact that Armenia does not easily fit into 'east' and 'west' Saidian dichotomy. In this sense, Armenia compares well to Cyprus, although she excludes Cypriots from the list of peoples in the Near East which do not fit into Said's 'east' and 'west' dichotomy. Laycock's claim that scholars have failed to engage with issues on Armenian political and identity development because Armenia was not considered part of European or Imperial history is also true of Cyprus. At the same time, however, it is also true that for some British, both Cyprus and Armenia did belong to the European space and these discourses existed alongside orientalist ones, thus resulting in neither Armenians nor Cypriots being easy to categorise. It is this 'failure to categorise' into an 'east' and 'west' dichotomy (and perhaps not the fact that they do not belong to European or Imperial history) that has resulted in the failure of scholars to engage with the political and national development of either.⁽⁶⁾ These 'in-between' peoples are simply too hard to understand.⁽⁷⁾ It is also true, however, that in the case of Cyprus' 'Europeanness' the British drew upon Hellenism and the unitary idea of a modern Greece. Laycock claims that Philhellenism led to the idealisation of Greeks (p. 7–8), but in my view it was the idealisation of the Greeks during the Enlightenment and thereafter which led to Philhellenism. The idea of a unitary ideal for a modern Greece goes beyond Philhellenism and was a more general European approach to modern Greeks. Philhellenism was simply the extreme form of the idealisation, which had seen every British school boy and girl forced to learn Greek. Eastern Orthodox Cypriots, especially for the British back home sitting in the comfort of their offices, were considered Greeks and this dominated initial policy, despite discourses that question the 'Greekness' of the Eastern Orthodox Cypriots. Armenians, however, could not be considered Greeks, but as Laycock shows, they too had an important place in the British imperial imagination, dating back to the Crusades (an imagination which again interlocks with that of Cyprus – two branches of the Lusignan family ruled Cyprus and Armenia, until in the 14th century the Cyprus branch claimed the Armenian title) and being an interest of archaeological pursuits. Laycock does not explore the differences in meaning between Greece and Armenia, but recognises that modern Greece did not live up to the expectations that Europeans had created from their vision of ancient Greece. Laycock uses the term 'rediscovery' to account for the 'renewed' British interest in Armenia and the attitude of those who encountered Armenia, but does not sufficiently prove that these words are appropriate when she justifies them by generalising that 'British observers treated people, and place as passive and inert, waiting for British interest to bring them "alive" for the rest of the world' (p. 43). I associate these terms with the fact that Europeans had pre-existing filters, generated through their education, religion, various ideas and movements, such as the Romantic Movement, their interest in archaeology, which affected how they envisaged modern Greece, the Holy Land, and Cyprus, and to a lesser extent Armenia. After reading chapter two it becomes apparent that Europeans brought their own image of Armenia and Armenians to the Armenian Question and to Armenians, whether they visited the Armenian inhabited areas of the Ottoman Empire or not. By chapter five it becomes clear that the Armenian and Armenophile (who the 'Armenophile's' were could have been explored in greater depth) vision of an Armenian homeland resembled the Greek vision of the 'Great Idea' and indeed the establishment of the Erivan Republic was similar to the small Greek state established in 1830 – both were a

small part of the ‘dream nation’.[\(8\)](#)

The book has the title *Imagining Armenia* and one of the chapters (chapter two) has the subtitle ‘Images of Armenia during the Late Nineteenth Century’, yet there are a mere two images in the book. It may be that Laycock struggled to find images or that she struggled to obtain the rights to publish them, but given that she does not discuss other images it leads me to conclude that she perhaps does not believe that images are as vital as words. I agree with John MacKenzie’s argument that ‘a full understanding of orientalism requires some comprehension of the extensive range of artistic vehicles through which representations of the orient were projected’.[\(9\)](#) The same applies to the other themes of Laycock’s book – imperialism, warfare, identity.

Laycock states that Armenians formed a minority in areas inhabited by a mixture of Turks, Kurds, Greeks and others (p. 2), implying that the Armenians were never in the majority in any area and that they were a minority compared to these other groups. This is highly contentious, since no irrefutable demographic data exists. In Armenian heartland areas, such as the Vilayets of Van (namely in Van town and Shatak), and Bitlis (namely in Sasun), there is little doubt that the Armenians were in the majority alongside Kurds and Turks, but when Kurds and Turks are lumped together as ‘Muslims’ they do outnumber the Armenians. And this is indeed the point: identity seems to have been in flux during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Ottoman Empire, but religion was still the primary reference point, alongside regional and familial identities.

What I found really interesting and a potential avenue for Laycock to further explore, is how the displaced survivors of the genocide saw the solution to their plight in terms of returning home. They saw their identity in terms of their village and not in ‘national’ terms with the new republic created. Would they have felt the same if an Armenian homeland encompassing most of ‘historic Armenia’ had been established with their village outside its boundaries? Europeans, it would appear, saw the nation state as the determiner of identity and the only secure path for the future of the displaced, but they were not strong enough and did not have the interest to seriously attempt to establish a mandate over an Armenian state (along Woodrow Wilson’s lines or those of anyone else). After the First World War imperialism had been extended for the first time since the British occupied Cyprus east of Malta into the Middle East heartland, but there the British and the French had real interests – oil – and no serious rival, in Anatolia and the Caucasus they would have had to come into conflict with Kemalist nationalist forces and perhaps with Bolshevik Russia (the latter already being present on a greater scale than they were). Displaced Armenians did not however all settle in the Armenian republic, nor in the United States, France and Britain, but also in numerous other cities in the Near and Middle East. For example, according to the *Annual General Report for Cyprus for the Year 1920* there were about 10,000 Armenians in the island [\(10\)](#), however, in the *Annual Report for the Year 1931* it stated that the 1921 Census had found only 1,197 Armenians and a rise to 3,377 in the 1931 Census [\(11\)](#): thus most of the 10,000 found in 1921 had not been counted as ‘official’ residents, but were living in refugee camps, and most had subsequently moved on. Armenians preferred to settle in places under European rule, such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Cyprus, rather than in the Armenian Socialist Soviet Republic.

There are a number of times while reading *Imagining Armenia* that I felt that further context, explanation and detail was needed. Some of these are:

- Mention is made of the Armenian diaspora in Britain, but there was not enough detail on how many Armenians there were, how organised they were, from what backgrounds they were from and how influential they were.
- Laycock states that the US does not recognise the Armenian Genocide (p. 6–7), and it is true that neither the US government nor the US Congress have officially recognised it, but 42 of the 50 US states have made individual proclamations recognizing the events of 1915 as genocide. This also raises the question whether genocide and mass killing should be ‘recognised’ by governments and parliaments, or left to courts and historians.
- Baquda camp: where is it? How many people there? Were there other camps?
- Why were Lloyd George and Lord Curzon pro-Armenian and anti-Ottoman?
- The Sovietisation of the Armenian republic was not explained.

One of the few exasperating elements of this book is the dropping of names without there being sufficient explanation of who they are and why they are important. Examples are: Isabella Bishop (pp. 48–9); William Ainsworth (p. 49); Alexander MacDonald (p. 49); H. F. B. Lynch (p. 50); W. H. Harcourt (p. 156); Some of these names and others (William Ramsay) do not appear in the index. Equally annoying were the constant references to ‘Turkey’ instead of Ottoman Empire. This, in my view, is anachronistic, and fails to distinguish between the Ottoman Empire and the state that succeeded it, the Republic of Turkey.

Despite these criticisms *Imaging Armenia* goes where no book on this subject has gone before, into the uncharted waters of British perceptions of Armenians and the Armenian Question during the most turbulent period of Armenian history, when they were the victims of mass killing and eventually genocide. The British image of Armenia was multilayered, oscillating between co-existence and clashes, occident and orient, but which aspect of this image influenced government policy and civil society? Was it a case of Armenia being ‘too European’ enough to bother about in the aftermath of the Ottoman collapse and the establishment of mandates in the Middle East? Was it that the British (and France) did not have serious interests in Armenia? Or was it that they were unwilling to fight Kemalist nationalists? Laycock provides an interesting and timely socio-cultural analysis of British views of Armenians and the Armenian Question, filling a void in the historiography and answering numerous questions, while at the same time also leaving (and creating) various other questions which remain to be answered.

Notes

1. Andrekos Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915: The Inconsequential Possession* (Manchester, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Minorities of Cyprus: Development Patterns and the Identity of the Internal-Exclusion*, ed. Andrekos Varnava, Nicholas Coureas and Marina Elia (Cambridge, 2009). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Arman John Kirakossian, *British Diplomacy and the Armenian Question: From the 1830s to 1914* (English translation, Princeton, NJ, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915*, pp. 65–92. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Ibid, pp. 93–126. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ibid, pp. 152–201. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Another excellent example is the Ionian Islands. Thomas W. Gallant, *Experiencing Dominion: Culture, Identity, and Power in the British Mediterranean* (Notre Dame, IN, 2002). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See the brilliant Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonisation, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford, CA, 1996). [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester, 1995), p. 14. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. HMSO, *Cyprus: Report for 1920* (London, 1921), pp. 4–5. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. HMSO, *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Cyprus* (London, 1931), pp. 5–6. [Back to \(11\)](#)

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