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Turkish language reform: The Scottish connection

At a time when anti-Ottoman bigotry abounded, the Scotsman Elias John Wilkinson Gibb was a sympathetic interpreter of Islam to the Christian West. What struck Gibb, with his "Scottish democratic intellect", was how distant written Ottoman Turkish was from the spoken language.

The first advocate of Turkish language reform was a Scotsman by the name of Elias John Wilkinson Gibb. Brought up on the poetry of Burns, Gibb was born in Glasgow in 1857. He continued living in the family home at Lochwood until he was thirty-two, whereupon he moved to London to continue his studies of Turkish poetry. As a boy he was a pupil at Park School, which was run by Dr Collier, the author of *The History of England*. At the age of sixteen he enrolled as a student at Glasgow University where he studied Mathematics, Logic and Arabic and there is a photograph in a 1920s volume of the *Transactions of Glasgow University Oriental Society* showing a young Gibb dressed as a Turkish officer wearing a fez, presumably on his way to a fancy dress party.

In his study of Ottoman poetry, what struck Gibb from the outset was how distant written Ottoman Turkish, both literary and non-literary, was from the spoken language and from the early language of thirteenth-century Asia Minor and Central Asia. After leaving university and devoting himself entirely to the study of Persian and Turkish, he began publishing translations of Turkish prose and poetry. Any student of Turkish soon realizes how much Turkish has changed in the last 150, and particularly in the last eighty, years. In Western works, the changes are referred to as the language reforms — revolution would be more accurate. No sooner were the Ottomans masters of Constantinople than they began to produce literature; at first poetry and eventually prose. The prose, like the poetry, looked to Persia not only for models but for its vocabulary and indeed whole phrases. The following is a portion of Turkish prose from the sixteenth century. The Turkish elements (in italics) are drowning in a mass of Persian and Arabic:

Çun sani'-i sana'i'-i beda'i'-i umur-i kulliyat ve mudevvir-i
deva'ir eflaki tibak-i seb'a-i semavat ve kassam-i erzak-i
murtezikat-i mevcudat, suradikat-i kibab-i gayb ve
seraperde-i mukaddere-i la-reybden *bir vaz'*-i pesendide vu
ma'kul ve bir eser-i sayeste vu makbul zuhura *geturub*

Only the odd Turkish suffix or verb here denotes that the language is Turkish and not Persian. (It has been known for an Ottoman Turkish manuscript to be catalogued as a Persian work because the cataloguer had not read far enough into the text to discover a Turkish element.)

It was possible for Gibb to teach himself Ottoman Turkish based on his knowledge of Arabic and Persian, both of which languages had many works translated into English, as well as grammars and dictionaries. Turkish itself was problematic, in that there was so little to work with except the texts themselves, some of which he had to study in manuscript. In Glasgow he had no Turkish acquaintances, but he made the acquaintance of some Indian Muslims on whom he relied for clarification of the mystical aspects of the poetry. In 1882 his *Ottoman Poems Translated into English Verse* was published by Wilson and McCormick of Glasgow. Furnishing some information on the context, Gibb writes:

The object of the following pages is to place within the reach of English readers a concise account of the poetic art as cultivated by the Ottoman Turks. No work on the subject existed in the English language till 1879, when Mr Redhouse published his *Essay on the History, System, and Varieties of Turkish Poetry*. That little treatise, excellent so far as it goes, is, unfortunately, very brief; and lack of space precludes that amount of detail necessary to enable the non-Orientalist reader to form a clear idea of the structure and scope of Eastern verse. Indeed, such was not the purpose of the little book, which was written at a time of wild and unreasoning feeling against the Ottomans, to show how far removed from truth were the fulminations of certain excited orators who denounced the Turks as being, amongst other things, illiterate barbarians.

A quote from Gladstone's pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors and the Questions of the East* (1876) demonstrates the ethnic vilification to which he refers:

Let me endeavour, very briefly, to sketch, in the rudest outline what the Turkish race was and what it is. It is not a question of Mohammedanism simply, but of Mohammedanism compounded with the peculiar character of a race. They are not the mild Mohammedans of India, nor the chivalrous Saladins of Syria, nor the cultured Moors of Spain. They were, upon the whole, from the black day when they first entered Europe, the one great anti-human specimen of humanity. Wherever they went a broad line of blood marked the track behind them, and, as far as their dominion reached, civilization vanished from view. They represented everywhere government by force as opposed to government by law. — Yet a government by force can not be maintained without the aid of an intellectual element. — Hence there grew up, what has been rare in the history of the world, a kind of tolerance in the midst of cruelty, tyranny and rapine. Much of Christian life was contemptuously left alone and a race of Greeks was attracted to Constantinople which has all along made up, in some degree, the deficiencies of Turkish Islam in the element of mind!

Within a year, British public opinion, fickle then as now, had swung from sympathy for the Bulgarians to admiration for Osman Pasha's gallant defence, against overwhelming odds, of the Northern Bulgarian town of Plevna, in 1877: for a while at least, the Turks ceased to be the villains and were recast as heroes. Gibb enters the debate on a mission to expose English readers to the beauties and subtleties of this literature; taking poetry as his starting point, he demonstrates that although there was little Turkish literature translated into

English, it nevertheless exists in abundance. In his *Ottoman Poems Translated into English Verse* (1882) he condemns the religious bigotry of his own society:

Antipathy of race and religious bigotry are virulent and hard to kill (unhappily, they exist to this day, scarcely less unjust and cruel than in bygone times), and it is difficult not to think that these are in some measure responsible for the gross ignorance that almost universally prevails, in England, at any rate, regarding Turkey and all things Turkish. To select one striking example: but recently did the writer of these pages read in a popular religious magazine that, "in Mohammedan countries [meaning Turkey], Woman is treated as having no soul". This mediaeval delusion of Islam's denying a soul to Woman has been clearly and decisively refuted by Mr Redhouse, who quotes passage after passage of the Qur'an, showing how utterly false it is — how Islam in reality no more denies Woman a soul than does Christianity itself.

Possibly enough, this calumny may have arisen in error; but to proclaim it today shows, on the part of the traducer, either almost criminal ignorance, for it is very wrong to condemn where one does not understand, or vile dishonesty, for it is vilely dishonest knowingly to propagate a lie. Yet the writer of the article in question was a missionary in Turkey! Either he had, as we hope and believe, not taken the trouble to learn anything of the truth about the faith of the people amongst whom he lived, never hesitating all the same to pass adverse judgment thereon; or he stood greatly in need of someone to expound to him the Ninth Commandment. It is not unfrequently said by the class of persons to which our missionary belongs, i.e., those who pass judgment on what they know nothing about — and it may tend to discourage the study of Turkish — that the Turks are a barbarous people, possessed of no literature.

Having established that the Ottomans did indeed possess a huge corpus of poetry, he is confronted by the reality that it never reached the aesthetic heights of the Persian poetry on which it had been modelled, and offers an apology:

Although the want of originality undoubtedly renders Ottoman Poetry less interesting than it would be were the case otherwise, that cannot be considered a sufficient reason for its neglect; if the poetry of Persia is beautiful and deserving of careful study (and few who are acquainted with it will deny that it is both), that of Turkey must be the same, seeing how close is the relationship between them. Roman science and literature stand in very much the same relation to Grecian as Ottoman do to Persian. Professor Max Müller even says, in his *Science of Language*, "the Romans, in all scientific matters, were merely the parrots of the Greeks", yet no one is deterred on that account from the study of the Latin poets, and why should a similar circumstance interfere with that of the Ottoman?

As might have been predicted, his call to others to study Turkish literature and

"dissipate the dark cloud of ignorance and prejudice, and secure, if not respect and esteem, at least justice, for a noble and gifted nation" fell on deaf ears. If there was to be a proper study of Turkish Literature in the English language (or, at this period, in any western language), then he would have to do it himself. Fortunate in having a private income, he was able to devote himself entirely to the study of Turkish literature, particularly poetry. His first obstacle was the lack of materials at hand in Glasgow. He spent the summer of 1883 in London, where he took lodgings with his friend Edward G. Browne (later to become the author of *A Literary History of Persia*, the authoritative work on the subject). There, they studied Turkish and Persian texts together. Just as important was the fact that he could meet Turks working at the Ottoman Embassy, one of whom was the renowned poet Abdulkhak Hamid, who had taken up his post as second secretary in 1893. Gibb returned to Glasgow and visited London regularly, presumably to find materials for his research. On one of these trips he met Ida Rodriguez. They married in 1889, after which he remained resident in London.

By all accounts, he lived the life of a recluse while he was working on his *magnum opus* — nothing less than the history of Ottoman poetry, which was eventually to be published in six volumes. He must have had many discussions with his friends Browne and Hamid but it seems he was fairly reticent in the matter of personal reminiscence: Browne, on being asked to write about him for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, had to contact Gibb's parents for information.

In 1900, Gibb published the first volume of the *History of Ottoman Poetry* and had prepared the second volume for publication in the following year when he fell ill, and died on the 5 December. Shortly after his funeral at Kensal Green Cemetery, Edward Browne promised his wife and parents that he would see the manuscript through publication. Finally, in 1909, the last volume appeared.

The book was to sit on the shelves of libraries and Orientalists throughout the world but was hardly ever read by Turks themselves. At the time it was published, few Turks knew English, the Western language that educated Turks acquired being French. For years Turkish scholars of Ottoman poetry would badger professors of English language in Istanbul University to translate the part of the book which dealt with the poet they were working on. There emerged a consensus among these scholars that Gibb's opinions were sound; despite this, there was no translation of the book into Turkish until Halide Edip, herself one of modern Turkey's most distinguished authors, began a translation. Sadly, this resulted in only half of the first volume being published, in Istanbul. Other Turkish scholars announced that they were working on a translation; these promises never came to fruition.

In her introduction to her 1943 translation, Edip writes: "Gibb was Scottish, he was born in Scotland and educated in Scotland. This naturally had an effect on him." She does not expand on what she takes to be the significance of this, nor does she identify what it was that made Gibb particularly Scottish. However, it is known that Gibb did introduce himself to Muslims as a Scot, probably in order to distance himself from British foreign policy and public opinion.

The renowned critic of British imperialism Halil Halid dedicated his first book to Gibb's memory; and Edward Browne attesting to the esteem in which Gibb was held by his Muslim friends, "especially by the Turks, who constituted their majority", comments that:

This was strikingly shown at the funeral service, a simple and beautiful ceremony conducted according to the practice of the Presbyterian Church. Muslims are not, as a rule, easily induced to enter a Christian place of worship; but no small proportion of the little congregation present on that sad occasion were followers of the Prophet of Islam, and, as I can testify, their grief was very deep and real. In the words employed by one of them, "hardly amongst the Christians could there be found a better friend to Islam than he". So to their personal grief for the loss of a kind friend, a congenial companion, a wise counsellor, or a generous helper (for in one at least of these relations he stood to each one present) was superadded the bitter knowledge that Islam, and the nations and peoples which profess that creed, had lost one of the very few competent and sympathetic interpreters of its spirit and aspirations to the Christian West.

There is something of the tradition of the Scottish democratic intellect exemplified in Gibb's critique of Ottoman poetry for its "affectation, pedantry, and artificiality", "obsolete phraseology" and consequent lack of relevance to the ordinary Turk:

Until we reach the Modern School late in the nineteenth century, all Ottoman Poetry is masked by this "preciosity"; it has always appeared strange, unnatural, remote to the non-literary Turk, and to render it into the current language of English poetry would be to give an altogether false idea both of the poetry itself and of the effect it produces and always has produced upon the minds of ordinary men. As one of the ablest of my reviewers has pointed out with singular felicity, in order to realize how the Ottoman literary language stands with regard to the speech of everyday life, we have but to imagine what would have been the relationship of the language of English poetry to that which we ourselves speak, had all our poets from the days of Spenser persisted in writing in the artificial idiom of the "Faerie Queene". What actually happened among the Turks was the precise parallel to this; so everyone may judge for himself as to the adequacy of a translation into the ordinary language of today.

Gibb's vision started to be realized when, with the adoption of the Latin alphabet in 1928, literacy spread throughout the whole of Turkey — and with it, the love of books. Today the Turkish literary scene is as vibrant as any in the world. Ninety years after its original publication, his *History of Ottoman Poetry* — all six volumes — was translated into Turkish by Ali Cavusoglu, a schoolteacher from a small town close to Kayseri. As Gibb's monumental work starts to gain the recognition it deserves, his prescient advocacy of radical language reform deserves its own accolade.

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