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THE MIDDLE EAST, THEN AND NOW

THE ANNIVERSARY LECTURE

By SIR HARRY LUKE, K.C.M.G., D.LITT.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is, ladies and gentlemen, almost an impertinence on my part to introduce Sir Harry Luke to you, as he is so well known; but for those who are meeting him for the first time perhaps I might say that he has served all over the world, including being a Commander in the R.N.V.R. in the 1914-18 War. He has travelled all over the world and has written most entrancingly of so many things that he has seen and learned, including cookery. His third book of memoirs has just been published.* It is very good of him to come and deliver our Anniversary Lecture.

Sir HARRY LUKE: In thanking the Chairman for the all too generous terms in which he has introduced me, I feel that, in a way, I shall be returning evil for good. I had better warn you at once that you are not going to hear from me an analytical disquisition on the political and psychological changes in the Middle East. I am having the effrontery to take up your time—not much of it—this afternoon with an indication of some of the major changes in boundaries and way of life that I have encountered since I began travelling in Middle Eastern areas fifty-two years ago. When I first went to the Near East—the Levant we used to call it in those days—there were still being read by those interested in that part of the world the works by a very distinguished French man of letters, a traveller and a member of the Académie Française, the Vicomte de Voqué. I would like to begin by reading a quotation from one of his works, written about the turn of the century:

“The East, which no longer knows how to make history, has the noble privilege of preserving intact the history of other days.”

At the time when the Vicomte de Voqué uttered these words they appeared to be so obvious as to be accepted not only as an epigram but as a truism. For the Ottoman Empire, which in effect largely coincided with what was then known as the Near East, had changed little since the reforms of Sultan Mahmud II in the eighteen-twenties and thirties. There had been, it is true, some shrinkage of territory in the Empire's European provinces, but at the turn of this century it was still an Islamic autocracy whose frontiers ran from Yanina to the Yemen; it still conserved the forms—and to some extent the pretences—of an earlier age, even if the reality of the Padishah's authority had departed from such provinces as Bosnia, Herzegovina and Eastern Rumelia, which had come to owe him only a nominal allegiance.

My first journey in these regions was made in 1904; I returned from my latest one three weeks ago. In the interval I have had many years of

* See reviews, this Journal.

official service in Cyprus, Palestine, Turkey and Transcaucasia, and have made numerous private journeys, both before and after my retirement from the Public Service, to the territories of the Ottoman Empire and its Succession States. Indeed, there has been hardly a year between 1904 and now when I have not been there except for the period 1938 to 1942, when I was marooned in the Pacific. I have therefore been well placed to note how the Near East (or Middle East if you prefer it), far from being static, has become exceedingly dynamic. The Vicomte de Vogüé was an eminent Academician and a delightful writer, but he was no prophet.

When I was first in Constantinople—in those days Stambul meant, of course, not the city as a whole but only the predominantly Turkish quarter, the ancient Byzantium—Sultan Abdul Hamid II had left to him another five years of his long reign. Even so, there was still living in strict seclusion in the capital, in one of the Bosphorus palaces, his predecessor, Sultan Murad V, whom he had caused to be deposed as far back as 1876. Abdul Hamid was one of the most baffling of the personalities who have had a share in shaping the destinies of the modern world, for he was a blend of qualities difficult to reconcile in one individual. Astute yet credulous, well informed but a seeker of counsel from his Interpreter of Dreams; apprehensive to the point of neurasthenia yet a player for high stakes; callous in allowing the shedding of human life in the mass, yet so sensitive as regards its individual extinction that he could scarcely bring himself, and then only after hours of painful deliberation, to confirm the death sentences pronounced by his courts; the master of an Empire that was still wide if it was no longer great, and of a Court synonymous with lavish ceremonial, yet simple in his attire and a man to whom personal display was utterly foreign; the lord of a harem well stocked with women who, in the words of Sir Charles Eliot's *Turkey in Europe*, "would account his slightest and most transient favours her highest glory," yet a scorner of pleasure whose mode of life was that of an overworked Civil Servant.

As he grew older, Sultan Abdul Hamid grew more and more suspicious. No Minister felt secure in the service of his Padishah, no official of importance but was under close observation by the spies set on him by the morbidly distrustful monarch and was heavily out of pocket by having to bribe these spies into harmlessness or by having to maintain a staff of counter-spies. This was the period of the exploitation of the Turk by Western concessionnaires and of the dazzling rather than sound finance of European banks in Turkey not inaptly known as "Bosphorescence." It was the period when the dynamos sought to be imported by the concessionnaires were regarded with extreme disfavour by the Ottoman Customs, not only because they tended to be confused with dynamite but also on their own demerits as producing revolutions more rapidly than any other known agency.

It was the time when, by the censor's order, a French-Turkish and Turkish-French dictionary compiled by a distinguished Moslem savant had to omit the words "conspiracy" and "deposition"; when the only meaning it was allowed to give the word "revolution" referred to the movements of the solar bodies; when Bibles imported into Turkey were

delivered with the name "Armenia" carefully blocked out—a sign of painstaking staff-work, since the name appears in the Bible only twice. It was the time when text-books on chemistry were liable to be confiscated because they contained, and not only contained but repeated, the subversive formula H_2O , H_2 , obviously referring to Sultan Hamid II and the O indicating that His Majesty equalled zero.

It was the time when a French theatrical company on tour in Constantinople could undergo the following trying experience. The company proposed to perform an historical play entitled "Richelieu," but the Turkish censorship promptly vetoed the appearance of a crowned head on the stage. King Louis XIII was accordingly disrated to a duke, but this did not satisfy the censor. He next objected to the presentment of an ecclesiastical personage of high rank; and, as the Cardinal could scarcely be turned into a layman, he was left out altogether. The play could not now very well be called "Richelieu," so the title was dropped, the love interest was heightened, and the play ultimately presented as a sentimental comedy under the name of "Mademoiselle de" something or other.

One last illustration of the official psychology of the period. When the Empress Elizabeth of Austria was assassinated at Geneva in 1898, the Turkish censorship allowed no reference to the manner of her death, which might have put ideas into the heads of subjects of the Sultan. So the announcement in the Turkish press began with the bare statement that Her Majesty had died suddenly on September 10. But at this point the censor's thoroughness broke down, for he forgot to prevent the announcement from going on to say that the news had evoked universal horror and execration.

My second journey, which began in 1907 and ended in May, 1908, was made at the close of an epoch—an epoch interpreted politically by the Treaty of Berlin. Within two months of my return to England there had broken out in Macedonia the revolution of the Young Turks which in 1909 was to dethrone Abdul Hamid; but he was still in the full exercise of his autocratic powers when in the spring of 1908 I stayed in the Castle of Masyad, the home of the Syrian branch of the Ismailieh Sect, to whom the Crusaders gave the name of the Assassins. For during the Middle Ages this now entirely harmless and inoffensive sect was an organization of hired murderers which perpetuated in half the languages of Europe the sinister associations of its name. But in 1908 it was a downtrodden little community, persecuted by Abdul Hamid and his officials because it insisted—despite its desperate poverty—on sending its little offerings to the Aga Khan in India. Abdul Hamid resented these Moslem "Peter's Pence," pitifully small though they were, leaving Ottoman territory to go to a wealthy and distant dignitary living on foreign soil. From what I heard of them last year when revisiting the neighbouring Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers, I gathered that they were reasonably contented; but the interesting thing about them is that they owe spiritual allegiance to the same Aga Khan today as did their grandfathers in 1908, the only difference being that while His Highness was then being weighed in silver, he has now advanced through gold and platinum to diamonds. The next weighing will presumably have to be made in uranium.

While on the subject of living links with the past, may I mention one of which I became aware when staying in Baghdad in April of this year. And to explain it I must go back a little, to a previous experience of mine in 1913. In January of that year, suddenly and unexpectedly, there arrived in Cyprus, where I was then serving, Mehmed Kiamil Pasha, the Grand Old Man of Turkey, four times Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire and a lifelong friend and admirer of this country. At the age of eighty-two his fourth Ministry had just been violently overturned by the Young Turks, and the old man was unceremoniously bundled out of the country and sought asylum in Cyprus, which was his birthplace. I might add that he had not seen his native island since he had ceased to govern it as far back as 1864.

Five weeks later—that is to say, in February, 1913—his Young Turk successor as Grand Vizier, General Mahmud Shevket Pasha, was assassinated in the streets of Constantinople. Now the point of my story is this, that two months ago my hosts in Baghdad, Sir Michael and Lady Wright, took me to a luncheon party given by Mahmud Shevket's brother, a delightful elderly gentleman called Hikmet Suleiman Bey, a well-known Prime Minister of Iraq in the reign of the late King Ghazi. There must have been quite a span between these brothers, almost as big a span as between the eldest and youngest sons of Kiamil Pasha, who had settled down in the house next to mine in Nicosia. In the mornings I used to find it a sight of considerable piquancy to watch from my windows Kiamil's eldest son, one Said Pasha, a decrepit roué and invalid of sixty or thereabouts, being wheeled up and down the ramparts for his morning airing in a bathchair, side by side with the push-cart containing His Highness's youngest son, aged five or six. An unusual pair of brothers.

I might add that in the Ottoman Empire three great dignitaries of State were honoured with the title of "Highness": the Grand Vizier, the Sheikh ul-Islam (who was the chief Islamic authority, a member of the Cabinet and a close equivalent to our Lord Chancellor), and the Chief of the Eunuchs, whose Turkish title was *Qizlar-Aghasi*, "the Master of the Girls." The first two kept their rank until the end of the Empire, but the Chief Eunuch was demoted at the fall of Abdul Hamid.

Let me try in a few sentences to summarize the major changes on the political face of the Middle East since I first knew it. That vast and diverse region was then shared between two Emperors, the Sultan and the Shah. Iran remains as it was save for a change of dynasty; but let us see what has happened to the Ottoman Empire, beginning with Turkey in Europe.

In 1904 Ferdinand of Coburg was still Prince of Bulgaria, still made his annual *salaam* in Constantinople—his visit *ad limina*—as the Sultan's Vali of Eastern Rumelia, wearing a fez to indicate that in this capacity he was just an Ottoman functionary. Albania was an integral part of Turkey and had yet to see that transient and embarrassed phantom, its first Mpret, William of Wied. King Zog was a little boy of nine, son of a mountain chief, and who could have foretold that the King of Italy would one day add the crown of Skanderbeg to his own before Albania disappeared behind the Iron Curtain and the ancient monarchy of the House

of Savoy gave way to a republic? Mount Athos, that venerable Byzantine republic of monks which bans everything female from its territory, had not yet exchanged Turkish for Greek suzerainty; and when I stayed there with the Sultan's representative at the little port of Daphne until the melting of the ice on the mule-tracks enabled me to ride up to the monastic capital of Karyaes, the only other member of the house-party was a heavily overworked gynæcologist from Salonika. This specialist, described on his visiting card as "*Le Docteur Nissim, gynécologue-accoucheur,*" was recuperating from a nervous breakdown in the only part of the world where he could be quite sure he would not be called upon to exercise his professional skill.

As for the islands, Thasos, although within swimming distance of the coast of Turkey in Europe, had emerged only two years previously from the administration of the Khedive of Egypt; Samos was an autonomous principality under Christian princes appointed for five years by the Sultan; Crete was being governed—and had been since 1898—by Prince George of Greece as High Commissioner for the Concert of Europe, a term which has now acquired an almost archaic flavour. It is interesting to note amid all this change that Prince George is still alive at the age of eighty-seven. A Turkish Vali governed the Dodecanese—then the Ottoman Vilayet of the Archipelago—from Rhodes; another governed what has now become the kingdom of Libya from the ancient citadel of the Deys in Tripoli in Barbary. Cyprus, administered by Great Britain since 1878, was still under the suzerainty of the Sultan, and so remained until November 5, 1914, when Turkey was reluctantly drawn into the European War on the side of the Central Powers. It fell to me to announce to the Turkish notables of Nicosia, assembled that evening for the engagement ceremony of one of their number to the Mufti's daughter, that the political link that still bound the Island of Aphrodite to her Moslem overlord had been severed.

As for Turkey itself, Kiamil and Kûshûk Said were its elder statesmen; Enver was an obscure staff-captain and Talaat was earning four pounds a month as a telegraphist in Salonika. In Athens the Diadoch Constantine was smarting under his defeat by the Turks in 1897, while Mustafa Kemal, his victor of a quarter of a century later, had not yet loomed on the horizon. Venizelos was a village politician unheard of outside his native Crete.

Husein, the future Sherif of Mecca, a hostage at the Court of Abdul Hamid, could not in his wildest dreams have imagined that within a few years he would become for a while His Hashemite Majesty, dignified with the portentous title of Jelaletkum; that he would see one of his sons succeed him as King of the Hejaz before following him into exile, another pass by the transitory throne of Damascus to that of Iraq, a third renew in the Amirate of Transjordan, under a British Mandate, the Crusaders' Principality of Oultre-Jourdain, with the Cross and the Crescent co-operating in developing a territory once fiercely contested between the two.

Ibn Saud, the powerful Wahhabi king, was then a cloud no bigger than a man's hand; and a revived Arabian Empire was as little thought of as was a Turkish Republic in conjunction with a Turkish Khalifate. More

improbable than either would have seemed a laicized Turkish Republic divorced from the faith and hierarchy of Islam and contradicting in almost every respect the principles on which the old Turkey had been based. Who then anticipated seeing a Turkey that had rid itself of its Christian *millet*s, to emerge from the crucible as an almost homogeneous Turkish State?

The French would have been surprised to learn that soon they would be singing again "*Partant pour la Syrie*"; Dr. Herzl's programme, "the creation in Palestine of a home for the Jewish people secured by public law," was an aspiration that seemed far indeed from realization. The most likely heir-apparent to the Sultan in Palestine was Nicholas II. An independent Israel was undreamed of, or perhaps I should say was then no more than a dream. That the Ottoman provinces of Syria and the Jezireh would before long proliferate into five independent states would have seemed fantastic nonsense.

So much for the major political changes; the psychological changes in the peoples of the Near East form too complex and uncertain a subject to be touched upon here. The future has yet to reveal what will be the development of the new Turkey, from which the inspiration and creative element of past Turkish greatness—that of Islam—have been deliberately excluded. Nor is it possible to assess completely as yet the effect on the Persians of their transition from the rule of the effete and degenerate Tatar dynasty of the Kajars to that of an indigenous House. But let us hope that the visible and external manifestations of these changes are no indication of the inward change, for these manifestations would suggest, if taken alone, that Eastern peoples were losing their individual characteristics and were aiming only at a drab uniformity with the West. The cheap and nasty billycocks and felt hats, the nastier cloth caps, for which the Turk has had to exchange his becoming if unpractical fez, strike the most depressing note in those who could enjoy in the old Turkey at least the picturesque variety of appropriate and æsthetically satisfying clothes; it is difficult to see what the Persian has gained by the loss of his black astrakhan or felt bonnet and its replacement by the képi of field-blue which Riza Shah prescribed as his contribution to that "bowlerization" (if I may so term it) of the East which was imposed on their respective subjects by the Duci of Hither Asia. It is a curious thought that only in British Cyprus can a Turk now wear a fez (though few do today) and can still write his language—if he wants to—in the Arabic script.

It is not possible in a brief address of this sort to do more than skim rapidly over the surface of what is a very big subject. The region under discussion has probably changed since I first knew it in more directions and more surprisingly than any other—and is continuing to do so. Who, for example, would have expected to see a revolutionary republican Egyptian Government teaming up with the most feudal and medieval monarchy in the world today, that monarchy whose sandy wastes are being so plenteously irrigated by generous streams of gold? Who, in another order of ideas, would have expected a generation ago to find the muezzins of mosques no longer climbing to the tops of the minarets for the call to prayer, but sitting comfortably below and doing their stuff into the

"mike." Nor is this the end. In some mosques gramophone records now take the place of the live muezzin, and effect a consequential economy in the budget of the parish council.

But even that is not the end. Some people believe that history is a process of continuing change, others that it revolves in circles. Those who hold the latter view may be confirmed in it by hearing that in at least one quarter of Baghdad the Mayor has now prohibited the call to prayer being mechanized, as being too disturbing to those of the inhabitants who are not affected by the summons. So those particular muezzins may no longer sit at their recently acquired ease at the foot of the winding staircase of the minaret, but must resume their laborious climbs to the top. I think I found the real answer to their problem this spring in the Moslem Sultanate of Brunei in Borneo, where the Sultan is now building what will be the biggest mosque in the Far East. He is equipping the minaret, a lofty and square one, with an express lift.

The CHAIRMAN: On your behalf, ladies and gentlemen, I offer thanks to Sir Harry Luke for a most delightful talk. The contrast between those early days and these is quite remarkable. As to whether the change has been a good or bad one, we can all make up our own minds. At any rate, the delightful manner in which Sir Harry has dealt with his subject has proved a wonderful wind-up to our Annual General Meeting. We thank you very much indeed, Sir Harry. (*Applause.*)

