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ARMENIA

A Year at Erzeroom

Robert Curzon

INTRODUCED BY RUDOLF ABRAHAM

Armenia

Armenia: A Year at Erzeroom, and on the Frontiers of Russia, Turkey, and Persia

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About the Introducer

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Note on the Introduction

In the following introduction I have used the modern spellings of place names interchangeably with those as they appear in the text.
R. A.

INTRODUCTION

The Honourable Robert Curzon is perhaps best known for his *Visits to the Monasteries of the Levant.* Published in 1849, this timeless account of the Eastern Tour went through no fewer than three printings in its first year and, like Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* (with which it is frequently compared) may be considered one of the most influential travelogues of the nineteenth century.

Born in London on the 16th March 1810, he was the grandson of the 1st Viscount Curzon by his son Robert, and the son of Anne Harriett, Baroness of Zouche of Harringworth. He was educated at Charterhouse and Christchurch, Oxford, but left in 1831 without a degree, entering Parliament as MP for Clitheroe the same year. This borough being disenfranchised the following year as a result of the Reform Bill, he set out almost immediately for the Near East.

A student of the history of handwriting and an exhaustive collector of manuscripts (those deposited in the British Museum after his death number some one hundred and twenty seven), he was travelling in Egypt, Syria, Turkey and Greece throughout 1833 an 1834, and returned to Egypt in 1837 and 1838.

It was during a stay in Constantinople, while wintering there between visits to Egypt, that Curzon met Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador there. The meeting was evidently a successful one, for in 1841 we find him back in Stamboul as Sir Canning's private secretary. And it was while working in this capacity that he was appointed to the joint Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission—essentially as a replacement for Colonel Williams (later to become General Williams, the celebrated defender of Kars) who was unable to attend due to illness—and despatched to Erzerum for the best part of the next twelve months.

A joint incentive on the part of both Persia and Turkey, the purpose of the Commission was to establish a fixed boundary across highland Armenia—the existing boundary, such as it was, being a rather nebulous affair—and thus check border incursions by various Kurdish tribes. "Along the whole [boundary] there ran a broad belt of a kind of debatable land, upon which every man felt it his duty to shoot at every other man whom he did not get near enough to run through with his long spear, or knock upon the head with his mace . . ." The resultant agreement, signed by both parties in 1847, was followed by the appointment of a second commission, since the whole area from Baghdad to Ararat was so poorly mapped as to necessitate a complete up to date survey—a task which took the best part of the next four years to complete. (In a number of ways, regional boundary problems remain far from settled: as evidenced by Kurdish calls for autonomy, and the as yet unresolved dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.)

The area around Erzerum is a fascinating one, as rich in legend as it is in historical associations: as the site of Earthly Paradise, as the supposed birthplace of Noah, as the final resting place of the Ark, as the hunting grounds of the Oghuz Turks as related in *The Book of Dede Korkut.* Repeatedly fought over by Rome and later Byzantium, Persia and the Arabs, not to mention the Frankish armies of the Crusades, the medieval Kingdom of Armenia reached its zenith during the tenth and eleventh centuries, when it stretched down over much of what is now south east Turkey. Historically speaking, the area only gained its Turkish character with the irruption of the Seljuks into Asia Minor, following their defeat of the Byzantine army at Manzikert (modern Malazkirt, north of Lake Van) in 1071, and with the gradual arrival of various nomadic Turkoman tribes. Administered under the *millet* system during the Ottoman period, it underwent major demographic change in the early twentieth century, with the expulsion of the Armenian population following the uprisings of 1915.

The volume resulting from Curzon's sojourn in and around Erzerum, written some ten years later and long after its author's return to England, is a loose framework of vignettes, rather than a

narrative proper, which broadly reflect the passing seasons of the year. The style, while less elaborate than Kinglake's, is none the less poetic—and "reveals in our author a pretty pen," as Hogarth would later observe. The reader need only turn to his descriptions of "fragrant coffee, served on salvers bright" and the sublime grandeur of Lake Tortum, for examples.

Curzon is a splendid observer, detached yet opinionated, rarely, if ever, condescending. The detail of his observation is impressive, as is the diversity of subjects covered—from the manufacture of *tezek* to an exhaustive list of local birds, and from a brief history of Trabzon to the legend of Ferhad and Shireen. And while much attention is directed to those subjects so obviously in keeping with his interests—the monasteries, manuscripts and ecclesiastical history of Armenia—Curzon still manages to paint a vivid portrait of this fascinating area during the mid nineteenth century.

Armenia is further distinguished by its author's humour. This is evident in his description of the wolves which prowl about, and "eat the dog that eat the child, that came out to see the weather so mild, in the street that (not) Jack built;" in his portrayal of Funduk the dog, who becomes "sadly vexed with fleas," and whose dignity thereby suffers, "from the necessity of scratching with his hind leg, just like a common, vulgar dog;" and in his observation that "some extraordinary specimens of the genus homo are to be met with in many parts of the East, generally in the character of Frank doctors."

Curzon's prejudices and sympathies are evident within the text. He is critical of the Kurds ("their only virtue is that they are not cowards") and describes the local Christian population as a "heavy and loutish race"—though he accords to the Armenian population of Constantinople a greater degree of refinement. To the Turk, in contrast, he ascribes considerable merit: "the Turk obeys the dictates of his religion, the Christian does not; the Turk does not drink, the Christian gets drunk; the Turk is honest, the Turkish peasant is a pattern of quiet, good-humoured honesty; the Christian is a liar and a cheat; his religion is so overgrown with the rank weeds of superstition that it no longer serves to guide his mind in the right way. It would be a work of great difficulty to

disentangle the pure faith preached by the Apostles from the mass of absurdities and strange notions with which Christianity is encumbered, in the belief of the villagers in out-of-the-way places, among the various sects of Christians in the dominions of the Sultan... Of two evils, it is better to follow the doctrines of a false religion than neglect the precepts of a true faith." He is equally critical of the West—in particular, of Russia and her conduct during the campaign of 1828–1829, which resulted in appalling losses on her side.

It is fair to say that all of Curzon's travels, whether in the Levant, eastern Turkey or Italy, share the same motivational force: the collection, or study, of manuscripts. These he gathered with a view to an exhaustive treaty on the subject—a project never completed, though his *Catalogue of the Materials for Writing &c* contains examples in Syriac, Arabic, Turkish, Uigur, Persian, Armenian, Greek and Coptic, from manuscripts in his possession.

Curzon returned to England in January 1844, being awarded the Lion and the Sun of Persia, and the Nishan of Turkey, in recognition of his services to both countries. He married Emily Wilmot-Horton in 1850 and, though he later travelled to Italy, spent most of his later years in England. He began writing *Visits to Monasteries of the Levant*, the result being described in The Times as "some eight and twenty chapters of most agreeable writing, replete with information on most interesting points," and *Armenia* was published in 1854, going through three editions in its first year. These were to be his only literary works published in any sort of quantity. A very small edition of his *Catalogue of Materials for Writing &c,* was issued in 1849 by the Philobiblion Society; while his *The Lay of the Purple Falcon*, a poem in archaic style (or, as Hogarth described it, "a counterfeit medieval ballad, begun by Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta . . . "), was published in 1847 in an edition of only thirty copies. He succeeded his mother in the Barony of Zouche (or de la Zouche) in 1870, and died at the family house at Parham, Sussex in 1873.

It is interesting to compare the Erzeroom of 1843 with the Erzerum of today. Little touched by the boom in tourism which swept through Aegean and Mediterranean Turkey in the 1980s, it

has retained something of an air of the unspoilt. Though most of the old city walls have disappeared, and the interior of the Çifte Minare Madrese has since been turned into a tea house, the relief carvings remain as exquisite as ever; Seljuk tomb towers still stand scattered across the city; and the mountains continue to loom up—albeit crowned by a radio antenna, but snow-dusted by late October—beyond the city's edge.

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Chapter One

Fena Kara Degniz.—The Bad Black Sea. This is the character that stormy lake has acquired in the estimation of its neighbours at Constantinople. Of 1000 Turkish vessels which skim over its waters every year, 500 are said to be wrecked as a matter of course. The wind sometimes will blow from all the four quarters of heaven within two hours' time, agitating the waters like a boiling caldron. Dense fogs obscure the air during the winter, by the assistance of which the Turkish vessels continually mistake the entrance of a valley called the False Bogaz for the entrance of the Bosphorus, and are wrecked there perpetually. I have seen dead bodies floating about in that part of the sea, where I first became acquainted with the fact that the corpse of a woman floats upon its back, while that of a man floats upon its face. In short, at Constantinople they say that everything that is bad comes from the Black Sea: the plague, the Russians, the fogs, and the cold—all come from hence; and though this time we had a fine calm passage, I was glad enough to arrive at the end of the voyage at Trebizond. Before landing, however, I must give a passing tribute to the beauty of the scenery on the south coast, that is, on the north coast of Asia Minor. Rocks and hills are its usual character near the shore, with higher mountains inland. Between the Bosphorus and Heraclea are boundless fields of coal, which crops out on the side of the hills, so that no mining would be required to get the coal; and besides this great facility in its production, the hills are of such an easy slope that a tramroad would convey the coal-waggons down to the ships on the sea-coast without any difficulty. No nation but the Turks would delay to make use of such a source of enormous wealth as this coal would naturally supply when it can be had with such remarkable ease so near to the great maritime city of Constantinople. It seems to be a

peculiarity in human nature that those who are too stupid to undertake any useful work are frequently jealous of the interference of others who are more able and willing than themselves, as the old fable of the dog in the manger exemplifies. I understand that more than one English company have been desirous of opening these immense mines of wealth, on the condition of paying a large sum or a good percentage to the Turkish Government; but they are jealous of a foreigner's undertaking that which they are incapable of carrying out themselves. So English steamers bring English coal to Constantinople, which costs I don't know what, by the time it arrives within a few miles of a spot[1] which is as well furnished with the most useful, if not the most ornamental, of minerals as Newcastle-upon-Tyne itself.

Beyond Sinope, where the flat alluvial land stretches down to the sea-shore, there are forests of such timber as we have no idea of in these northern regions. Here there are miles of trees so high, and large, and straight that they look like minarets in flower. Wild boars, stags, and various kinds of game abound in these magnificent primaeval woods, protected by the fevers and agues which arise from the dense jungle and unhealthy swamps inland, which prevent the sportsman from following the game during great part of the year. The inhabitants of all this part of Turkey, Circassia, etc., are good shots with the short heavy rifle which is their constant companion, and they sometimes kill a deer. As their religion protects the pigs, the wild boars roam unmolested in this, for them at least, "free and independent country." The stag resembles the red deer in every respect, only it is considerably smaller; its venison is not particularly good.

Trebizond presents an imposing appearance from the sea; it stands upon a rocky tableland, from which peculiarity in its situation it takes its name—τραπεζα being a table in Greek, if we are to believe what Dr.——used to tell us at school. There is no harbour, not even a bay, and a rolling sea comes in sometimes which looks, and I should think must be, awfully dangerous. I have seen the whole of the keel of the ships at anchor, as they rolled over from one side to the other. The view from the sea of the curious ancient town, the mountains in the background, and

the great chain of the Circassian mountains on the left, is magnificent in the extreme. The only thing that the Black Sea is good for, that I know of (and that, I think, may be said of some other seas), is fish. The kalkan balouk, shieldfish—a sort of turbot, with black prickles on his back—though not quite worth a voyage to Trebizond, is well worth the attention of the most experienced gastronome when he once gets there. The red mullet also is caught in great quantities; but the oddest fish is the turkey. This animal is generally considered to be a bird, of the genus poultry, and so he is in all outward appearances; but at Trebizond the turkeys live entirely upon a diet of sprats and other little fish washed on shore by the waves, by which it comes to pass that their flesh tastes like very exceedingly bad fish, and abominably nasty it is; though, if reclaimed from these bad habits, and fed on corn and herbs, like other respectable birds, they become very good, and are worthy of being stuffed with chesnuts and roasted, and of occupying the spot upon the dinner-table from whence the remains of the kalkan balouk have been removed.

On landing, the beauty of the prospect ceases, for, like many Oriental towns, the streets are lanes between blank walls, over which the branches of fig-trees, roofs of houses, and boughs of orange and lemon trees appear at intervals; so that, riding along the blind alleys, you do not know whether there are houses or gardens on each side.

The bazaars are a contrast, from their life and hustle, to the narrow lanes through which they are approached. Here numbers of the real old-fashioned Turks are to be seen, with turbans as large as pumpkins, of all colours and forms, steadily smoking all manner of pipes.

I do not know why Europeans persist in calling these places bazaars; charchi is the Turkish for what we call bazaar, or bezestein for an enclosed covered place containing various shops. The word bazaar means a market, which is altogether a different kind of thing.

The bazaars of Trebizond contain a good deal of rubbish, both of the human and inanimate kind. Cheese, saddles, old dangerous-looking arms, and various pedlery and provisions, were all that