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**James Mather, *Pashas – Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World*.
New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009. Pp. xviii & 302. 16
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‘Once upon a time...’

‘Pasha’ was, apparently, ‘the word coined by contemporaries for the merchants who traded in the parts of the world now known as the Middle East’ (page x) as part of the English Levant Company (1581 – 1825). ‘Pasha’ was actually the highest Turkish honorific title, granted to provincial governors and to the ministers of the Ottoman imperial council. The Levant Company would therefore have come into regular contact with pashas, but the title cannot meaningfully be applied to anyone within the Company itself. Having chosen a misleading title, James Mather proceeds to litter his book with repetitive references to merchant ‘pashas.’ This causes a serious discrepancy whenever he is forced to mention real pashas. Incredibly, this only happens three times in the whole book, and even then it is almost by accident in primary source quotes. On each occasion Mather simply passes over the discrepancy without comment (p.143, p.148, p.193). Yet he admits in passing that English traders were actually known as ‘factors’ (p.19) and awkwardly mixes references to ‘pashas’ with ‘factors’ throughout the book.

Pashas is full of such careless, anachronistic or just poorly defined usage of specialist terminology. Some of the most obvious gaffes involve Mather’s use of Ottoman and Islamic terms. For example, he refers to the ‘dar al-Harb,’ where the opposite - ‘dar al-Islam’ - is meant (p.10). Mather also muddles up the ‘Porte’ with the ‘Divan’ (p.267 n.8) and refers to the ‘Gate of Felicity’ as if it was something different to the Porte (p.133). More seriously, he wrongly credits Halil Inalcik with the assertion that the Ottoman sultans only made exclusive claim to the title of Caliph ‘centuries’ after Selim I’s conquests, when

Inalcik actually concedes that Selim's own son and successor, Suleyman, made the claim (p.24).

The second problem with *Pashas* is its structure. Mather produces a narrative-thematic hybrid within a geographic framework where the chapters are grouped under the headings of Aleppo, Constantinople and Alexandria, after a brief Prologue in Jerusalem. Mather's intention is that we might 'see these locations refracted through the pashas' collective experiences... travel is intended to take us through the changing contours, not just of physical realms, but of mental worlds in the quarter-millennium of the narrative's span' (p.12).

This interesting structural conceit soon collapses, since 'Aleppo' actually spends a lot of time back in London with excursions to Constantinople, whereas half of 'Alexandria' is really about Smyrna. Mather's approach also involves dramatic temporal shifts. 'Jerusalem' jumps from 1917 back to 1601, while 'Galata' (ch. 4) jumps from 1845 back to 1453 and then forward to 1661 within the space of two pages (p.105ff.). His introduction to London's Royal Exchange also zigzags back and forth over three centuries within the space of a few paragraphs (p.46), while his discussion of the change from joint stock to regulated trading leaps from 1592 to 1771, so that quoting 'a contemporary' becomes almost meaningless (p.60). This chronological disorientation gets the better of Mather when he refers to the Seven Years War as having taken place in 'the latter half of the seventeenth century' (p.229).

The third problem with *Pashas* is the scope of Mather's interests. He describes Alfred Wood's *A History of the Levant Company* (1935) as 'focusing on its political and economic affairs,' as though a merchant company with a royal monopoly would be equally concerned with other affairs (p.245 n.3). Mather himself pursues 'a different approach from traditional studies on the Levantine trade' using letter books and travelogues to explore personal 'mentalities' and 'minutiae' (page xi). So, 'the net is cast wide enough in what follows to incorporate a larger constellation of characters beyond traders themselves' (p.5).

Mather does make brief, unsubstantiated, references to 'globalisation' (page xi, p.243) and a daring insinuation about Ottoman free trade that is retracted in an endnote (p.8, cf. p.247 n.11). He also immediately retracts a suggestion that the 'consumer revolution' of the late eighteenth century was already under way in the early seventeenth century (p.54f.). Existing scholarship on the change from joint stock to regulated trade, rivalries with the French, and frictions with the East India Company is synthesized, but not without Mather managing to credit Wood with the reverse of what Wood actually wrote about the relative weight of crown and company demands on ambassadors' workloads (p.136). Readers interested in a reassessment of the Levant Company and other early trading companies in the light of contemporary economics are redirected to the *Journal of Economic History* and Niall Ferguson (p.258 n.95). Given his professional expertise as a commercial lawyer, readers might reasonably have expected such a reassessment from Mather himself.

The fourth problem, behind all the others, is that Mather is not really interested in the history of the Levant Company *per se*. He suggests that 'this book may be seen as seeking to add to the growing chorus which calls, if not for the abandonment of the controversial scholar Edward Said's 'orientalism' thesis, [then] at least for its careful qualification and confinement largely to the contexts of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (p.10). This argument is attributed in part to Robert Irwin's *For Lust of Knowing* (2006), which actually argues that Said's thesis is fatally flawed and was comprehensively demolished years ago. Undeterred, Mather openly aligns himself with the 'red-black alliance' of Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar (page xi) against the 'polemic' of Bernard Lewis (page xi) and 'the constant provocation of Samuel Huntington's seminars' during Mather's year at Harvard (page xii).

Predictably, the 1882 British occupation of Egypt, Allenby's 1917 Palestine campaign and the 2003 Iraq invasion are conflated into variations on a 'theme' of 'trampling' the 'Islamic World' (page x), despite Mather's willingness to acknowledge Britain's 'lasting commitment to preserving the territorial integrity

of the Ottoman Empire' (p.222). Mather prefers the days when the British were 'puny and timid' compared to 'Ottoman might' (p.137) and when Britons were accustomed to 'grovelling' and 'surrender' (p.144).

While he believes 'the skies were darkening for the Middle East' when the British were set to arrive 'not as guests but as colonisers' (p.14), Mather's view of Ottoman imperialism is positively sunny. 'Once upon a time,' according to this fairy tale, 'there was a peaceful and mutually enriching encounter between Britons and the still-troubled Middle East' (p.244), 'cultural and economic equality' and 'constructive engagement' (p.14). The message is obvious enough: Ottoman (Muslim) imperialism was essentially good, whereas British (Christian) imperialism was irredeemably bad. This argument does not survive close scrutiny, since *Pashas* is full of prevarication and self-refutation.

Mather blames 'the poisoned rhetoric of clerics and other religious polemicists' for British hostility towards Muslims (p.10), then later describes how Levant Company chaplains were prominent in the study of Arabic and Persian, motivated by 'English empiricism' and 'truth-telling' (pp.162 – 164). Mather advertises his biblical ignorance by dismissing arguments that the Islamic conquests were God's punishment against wayward Christians as 'perverse logic' (p.86) and rejects the entirely accurate observation that the Koran contains explicitly anti-Christian passages as 'the recycling of a bigoted medieval inheritance' (p.87).

Ottoman belligerence is dismissed as a 'caricature' based on a 'fracas' (p.7) and various 'spats' (p.119), while the enduring influence of Ottoman aggression on later attitudes was just so much 'psychological baggage' (p.117). Passing references to 'Muslim Universalism,' like the title of Caliph, remain unexplained (p.249 n.45 cf. p.24, p.262 n.112, p.132). Ottoman trade agreements with Christian nations were originally granted as 'privileges' unilaterally bestowed by a Muslim universal emperor upon tributary unbelievers (p.145f.), but Mather still adopts the misleading term 'capitulations' (p.141f.). Mather disparages claims that 'Ottoman lawlessness'

prevented the observance of these privileges as an 'untruth' and part of the 'old slur' of 'oriental despotism' (p.145) before describing how 'Fending off violations would become a well-worn theme in the Company's history' and launching into a self-refuting portrait of oriental despotism in action (pp.146 – 149).

Mather admits that Ottoman 'tolerance' did not mean 'equality' (pp.90 – 95), but only mentions later that non-Muslim 'dhimmi' status meant any testimony against a Muslim was not acceptable in court (p.142) and required the payment of the 'jizya' poll tax (p.145). Mather claims that the adoption of oriental dress was motivated by 'an instinct to fit in' (p.93f.), then later concedes that it was 'safety' which 'demanded' the adoption of 'oriental disguise' (p.110). He insists that the many merchants enslaved by Barbary corsairs form a separate subject of study (p.10), then later quotes an ambassador's oration to the sultan, 'begging the freedom of all English slaves' (p.134). He finally admits that lobbying for the release of captives was a major part of the ambassadors' duties and recounts several instances of violent assault against Levant Company men, before reaching a typically postmodern conclusion: 'Albeit that some of these tales were no doubt fabrication, they did reflect a certain reality' (p.144).

Mather hopes that 'if one thing should come out of what follows, it is that there was (and is) nothing quintessential, ineluctable or necessary about conflict and misunderstanding between Crescent and Cross, East and West, Muslim and Christian' (p.14). For another recent Yale publication presenting a different view, see Efraim Karsh's *Islamic Imperialism* (2006).