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*A Commerce of Knowledge: Trade, Religion, and Scholarship Between England and the Ottoman Empire, 1600–1700.* Simon Mills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 352.

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For a variety of religious, financial, and intellectual reasons, a rising number of English chaplains stationed themselves at England’s Levant Company in Aleppo during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Simon Mills is interested in exploring the role these chaplains played in disseminating information from the Ottoman Empire back to England, and vice versa. Tracing the antiquarian motivations of key chaplains, Mills shows how a “commerce of knowledge” originated in the seventeenth century and crossed over and spread into the eighteenth. By focusing on England – rather than nations like Italy or France – his book intervenes in the sphere of European-Ottoman relations. Mills also offers interested readers an inter-generational review of how chaplaincy in the East played a vital role in the advancement of English scholarship.

The Hebraist and theologian John Lightfoot’s statements serve as the starting point for Mills’ discussion of the fascination that English scholars had for the East. Writing in the 1670s, Lightfoot confesses that he longed to gaze upon “those places in the land of Canaan” (1). Referring to Levantine sites such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, Mills suggests that Lightfoot’s words point to a “shifting intellectual landscape” whereby the English wished to understand and experience the sacred sites explicitly and implicitly alluded to in the Bible (2). But this historical interest in “Canaan” did not arrive suddenly – as Mills demonstrates throughout his book, it was built through individual relationships between scholars, merchants, and citizens that were carried over into institutional

relationships. In other words, the efforts of curious chaplains led to certain exchanges of knowledge, exchanges that Mills then attempts to trace by focusing on the chaplains working for the Levant Company.

In part one, “From Oxford to Aleppo,” Mills contextualizes the history of the Levant Company in Syria. This history began with the diplomatic relationship forged between Sultan Murad III and Queen Elizabeth I in 1580, which allowed the English to participate in the trade competition between Northern European countries. This allowed the English to gain access to goods from the Mediterranean, freely cross borders, interact with an international community, and bring back resources and information about Ottoman culture. English chaplains sought employment with the newly established Levant Company because they saw it as an opportunity for adventure and a means to supplement their income by participating in trade (20).

With the promise of gaining a positive reputation and the increased opportunity to earn additional income from international trade, more candidates applied for chaplaincy positions overseas. The English government became selective about its candidates after realizing they were sending representatives for their country, and thus selected only those chaplains they felt were qualified to appropriately reflect England’s moral and intellectual standard (21). Mills explains that, in addition to their religious duties of preaching to the company’s employees and presenting sermons to the general populace, chaplains were encouraged to educate themselves in Arabic and Hebrew and to acquire books in these languages from Aleppo or elsewhere from the Levantine region – Mills notes that Edward Pococke, a chaplain of the late seventeenth century, was able to amass a library of 416 manuscripts (72).

But how did chaplains come to be recognized as scholarly role models in addition to their religious roles? Mills explains

that many English chaplains acquired free time during their appointment, allowing them to pursue other interests (24). Some chaplains collected manuscripts, as Pococke did, while others, such as Robert Huntington (who arrived in Aleppo after Pococke) collected coins (146). Those interested in collecting manuscripts travelled throughout the Mediterranean on manuscript missions, searching both for themselves – i.e., for the creation of their own personal libraries – and for other interested scholars. These antiquarian efforts eventually led to England’s notable reputation in trade – it was acknowledged for excelling in local and international markets, and for being a site that provided access to various “orientalist” resources (28). Here, Mills also discusses how the activities of these “travelling and trading” chaplains speak to England’s proto-imperialist motivations.

Continuing his focus on emerging libraries in Part II – “Building a Library in Seventeenth-Century Syria” – Mills provides an overview of the role of two chaplains in the Levant Company: Edward Pococke and Robert Huntington. Mills highlights their work in building prominent libraries in Aleppo by dedicating a chapter to each chaplain and investigating how they came to acquire and assemble a variety of manuscripts (68). During the 1630s, chaplains sought intermediaries to help guide, translate, and act as mediators at auctions for special collections. Pococke, for example, would not have been able to acquire manuscripts in Arabic and Hebrew without the help of his intermediary, Ahmed (75).

Mills expertly transitions from Pococke’s chapter into Huntington’s, who, between 1671 and 1681, had followed in Pococke’s footsteps and accumulated an expansive library of oriental manuscripts (97). Huntington also established an important epistolary relationship with Arabic Christians, most notably “the Maronite patriarch Iṣṭifān al-Duwayhī (c.1630–1704)” (108). The

relationship between Huntington and al-Duwayhī re-established and reignited the longstanding “tradition of intellectual exchange between Europe and Syria” (108). As Mills explains, a network that was built on a foundation of Christianity helped introduce and integrate “the study of Arabic and Syriac into western Europe” (109), thereby producing an incentive to continue collecting manuscripts. Overall, Part II focuses on inter-cultural and inter-religious contacts to stress the significance of Arabic intermediaries in Syria, and in the Levantine more generally.

In Part III, “The Making of an Antiquarian,” Mills continues to discuss Huntington’s antiquarian endeavours, noting that his interests lay, not only in the written word of the past, but also in objects that could not be easily fabricated, such as medals and coins (146). This chapter also highlights the potential dangers of journeying outside of Aleppo, and analyzes the pilgrimages of various chaplains by providing accounts of their time in Jerusalem. As Mills notes with respect to William Biddulph, his “physical presence in the Holy Land [Jerusalem]—with the concomitant appeals to ‘seeing’ at first hand, and to experience—served to resolve interpretative problems in the Scriptures” (164). In this way, readers may note Mills circling back to the introduction, in which John Lightfoot wished to witness and to validate the Biblical word in those lands of “Canaan” (1). Conversely, Mill’s final chapter in this section looks to Henry Maundrell’s *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter, A.D. 1697* (1703); this travelogue demonstrates Maundrell’s attempts of reconciling the Biblical understanding of Jerusalem with his “authority of first-hand experience” (179).

Maundrell’s travelogue moves into the final part, “Missions,” in which Mills expands his analysis of intercultural interactions to focus on chaplains and Arabic-speaking Christian churches. Mills uses examples by Pococke, Huntington, and Robert Frampton to

show how translating texts to Arabic was essential for the chaplains' original purpose of preaching the Bible and Protestant Christianity. Mills then ends his study with an analysis of Thomas Dawes. As Mills explains, Dawes' letters from Aleppo in the 1760s shows a shift in interest from manuscript collection to the Indian subcontinent. Thus, Mills suggests that due to the broken network of Syrian and English scholars, "the commerce of knowledge had come to an end" (249).

Although the web of connections between the various chaplain's ventures back and forth throughout the book is detailed and complex, Mills provides ample information for scholars to pinpoint the significance of each chaplain's respective contribution to England's scholarship about the East. Scholars interested in England-Ottoman relations and/or the intervention of religion in early-modern history will find this book useful as it touches upon a rich archive from the Levant Company.