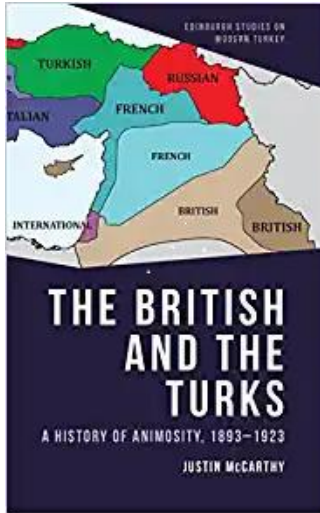




**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

Justin McCarthy, 2022. *The British and The Turks, A History of Animosity 1893-1923*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Pp. 658. Hardback \$109.44. ISBN: 1-3995-0004-3.

**Nur Bilge CRISS<sup>1</sup>**



This book is Justin McCarthy's *magnum opus*, based on the collection of documents and literature during his professional life as historian. There are numerous volumes written about Ottoman-Turco-British relations which range from the history of British literature to military histories, diplomatic and economic histories, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs as well as cultural impressions in opera, theatre, as well as about archeology.<sup>2</sup> There were also popular histories on the sultans, imaginary lives in the harem and even sexual conduct written as if the author had been privy to all these scenarios. Orientalist paintings, also mostly imaginary provided visual samples of the forbidden. Consequently, high culture contributed to an imagined reality, which catered to fantasies about the East. Immorality and decadence were associated with the Orient in the public mind. Further yet was a politically loaded concept, the Eastern

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<sup>2</sup> A few samples of contemporary studies on the British Empire are as follows: James Morrison, (Trilogy) *Heaven's Command, Pax Britannica, Farewell the Trumpets*, London: Penguin Books, 1979; Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, London: Penguin Books, 2004); Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, Boston and NY: Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt, 2012; Gerry Docherty and Jim MacGregor, *Hidden History, the Secret Origins of the First World War*, Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishers, 2013; Scott Anderson, *Lawrence In Arabia, War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, NY: Doubleday, 2013; Steven Richmond, *The Voice of England in the East: Stratford Canning*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2017; Jonathan Parry, *Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022.



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

Question, which the Great Powers projected towards the Ottoman Empire by the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

British production of geographical as well as demographic-ethnic maps and cultivating ties with local leaders in the Arab provinces to facilitate trade served the long-term objective of partitioning the Ottoman Empire. The European state system, also called the Concert of Europe limited/delayed British desiderata but was not averse to war so long as war was outside European territories or took place in the colonies. Further, balance of power that the system enforced until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to prevent any great power from dominating others was a powerful detriment. Consequently, the Eastern Question which had targeted Poland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with its partition among Russia, Prussia, and Austria for the sake of balance-of-power and to avoid war between the big three, was directed towards the Ottoman Empire during the next century. However, the Great Powers were cautious this time because partition might lead to a European war over the spoils. Hence, it might be preferable if the Empire collapsed from within albeit with significant help from the outside. Where was the Ottoman Empire in this system?

Istanbul was in a liminal position at best and in a precarious situation at worst as this book reveals. Although McCarthy has a substantial Bibliography, I have added selected studies in footnotes concerning (and limited to) this review.

The book consists of two parts, the first one entitled “Broken Promises” comprises case studies where the United Kingdom was directly involved in gnawing Ottoman territories by utilizing ethno-religious groups starting with the Armenians in eastern Anatolia and continuing with the Balkans while trying to dictate reforms that would transfer all administrative authority to foreign agents in those territories. Part two, entitled “The Final Confrontation” is about World War I, Ottoman defeat, occupation, and Turkish armed resistance and a negotiated versus dictated peace, culminating in the Lausanne Peace Treaty of 1923.



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

What differentiates McCarthy's account of a history of hostility from the literature available hitherto is its scope and comprehensive approach. To begin with, McCarthy weaves this period history upon London's European rivalries with France and Russia and later with Germany following German unification in 1870. Temporally and spatially, the narrative covers what used to be called the Near East, then the Middle East, and southwest Asia in the quest to keep the "jewel in the crown" India, protected from "foreign" encroachment. Hence, the Great Game with Russia, a term coined earlier, but popularized by Rudyard Kipling, poet, and unapologetic imperialist, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Secondly, this history is about imperialistic hegemony, and sustainability or the lack thereof. There are limits to protection or support from the strong to the weaker party. Support usually comes at the price of exploitation. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, defensive policies against exploitation are demonstrated clearly with diplomatic tools adopted, either through search for allies or managing adverse situations with the least damage to its survival. Two major cases in point are extending capitulatory rights (extraterritorial trade and judicial rights) to various European countries as a balancing act in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Empire's strength was at its peak. The other was *idare-i maslahat*, meaning compromises made in economic-territorial terms or governance by the weaker polity while they initially seek security under the wings of the potential hegemon. Contradictory as this policy might seem, it is a matter of gaining time only until there comes a point when that tactic is no longer feasible when confronted with outright aggression towards the heartland, and ensuing dictated "peace" terms in tandem with prolonging war-by-proxy as in the Greco-Turkish wars of 1921-1922. In other words, Ottoman governments were aware of the threats that band wagoning embodied and worked to lessen the adverse impact in order to avoid becoming another Poland.

The reign of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) was one of diplomacy of compromise, a major case being the "temporary" occupation of Ottoman Egypt by



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

the British in 1881-1882 that practically lasted until 1953. Granted that, Egypt was only nominally Ottoman under the Kavalalı dynasty (1805-1953) until the beginning of WWI in 1914 when the British declared Egypt a Protectorate. Istanbul also boasted Kavalalı family members who resided in the capital or owned large estates on the Mediterranean coast. The Kavalalı elite proved to be loyal and beneficial to the Ottomans, often through intermarriage, entrepreneurship, and as high-ranking bureaucrats. For the British, Egypt served as a base for the “scramble for Africa,” a very fashionable enterprise among European Great Power circles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An unexpected resistance came from the Ottoman court when the British asked Ottoman military action to put down the rebellion by Ahmad Mahdi in Sudan against British incursion. Even at its weakest, the Ottomans refused to become a proxy of Britain.

Third, this book shows that the perpetual *modus operandi* of Britain in foreign affairs, that is hubris coupled with deceit is a pattern employed towards friend and foe alike even today when it is not an empire any longer.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that the term “Perfidious Albion” concocted by the Irish during the Medieval Age, is also reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century British imperialism. Roderic Davison had once described 19<sup>th</sup> century British foreign policy as “God’s an Englishman, and all roads to India should be kept open.”<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, we know enough not to look for standards of morality in international relations where hegemonic national interests are concerned. On the other, it is a basic human right to expect decency against manipulation to promote wars, civil or transnational according to contemporary value systems.

Last, but by no means least, the foremost contribution of McCarthy’s book to literature is the rendition of a history over Turco-British relations of how a weaker polity resisted an aggressive world power against all odds and eventually imposed

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World*, London: Vintage Publishers, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Roderick H. Davison (1916-1996) was professor of European Diplomatic History in The George Washington University. The first part of his playful description alluded to Ronald F. Delderfield’s 1970 novel *God is an Englishman* (Swann Family Saga of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century).



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

its own political will to shape its own future. That said, we shall turn to highlight the sources and processes of hostility based on selected cases from the book.

### **Builders of Public Opinion**

A casual glance at Google about British political leader William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898), twelve times Prime Minister during 60 years of public service will reveal that his policies against the Ottoman Empire stemmed from the anti-Ottoman public opinion in England. In contrast, McCarthy's prologue to Part I, "Broken Promises" (McCarthy, pp. 1-325; 1-5) discusses how public opinion evolved since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with deliberate patience by the Church, civil associations, politicians, and newspapers to build an atmosphere of hostility towards the Ottoman Empire over ethno-religious-nationalist issues under a single concept; that of religion.

Vast territories of the Ottoman realm in the south were the original, hence sacred Christian spaces conquered first by Arabs, and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Ottoman Turks. Consequently, hostility towards Muslim rule was an issue in the Christian west. This was more of an emotional tie but turned political under the guise of "protecting the Christians." Using religion as a policy tool, however, also facilitated Great Power rivalries to come to the fore. When the French self-proclamation as defenders of the Catholics in the Levant was matched by Empress Catherine the Great's proclamation of being defenders of all the Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire (the most populous non-Muslim community at a time when all national churches were not yet autonomous but adhered to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy), therefore was an explosive challenge to European powers. While the French and Russians were concerned with certain geographies such as the Levant, and the Mediterranean north Africa, Russian concentration extended to the Balkan Slavs and northeast Anatolia where Armenians and Assyrians dwelled. British approach covered all Christians regardless of denomination.

London's stance provided more flexibility in using the religious card when and if it was propitious to do so, notwithstanding propaganda to keep the anti-



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

Ottoman memory alive. Consequently, to suggest that the British politicians only responded to English public opinion to guide policy is a gross misstatement when they were supporters, if not builders of hostility.

There was a time, however, that the United Kingdom allied with the Ottomans in the Crimean war (1853-1856) against Russia as self-fashioned protector of the Ottoman Empire. Emperor Napoleon III of France stirred a problem over maintenance of the Churches of Nazareth and Bethlehem (the Church of Nativity), which had been Russia's responsibility. Tsar Nicholas I (r. 1825-1855) was under the mistaken assumption that Russia had a legal right to uphold the interests of the Ottoman Orthodox, a right given to them by the Ottomans at the end of the first Crimean war of 1774. This was not the case, and his legal counselors had misled him, Nicholas was later to admit.<sup>5</sup> The Ottomans did not really care who controlled the churches, which was a Christian affair, hardly any of their business. But the territory belonged to the Ottoman Sultan and his permission was necessary insisted the parties. That permission favored the French and led to war when the Ottomans resisted Russian arrogance.

The major British motive in joining the Crimean War was to secure its reach to India like many historians argued (note that the Suez Canal was not built until 1869 after which London began to focus on Egypt). An important actor who supported Ottoman resistance towards Russian desiderata in the Holy Places was the British Ambassador in Istanbul, Stratford Canning who fell afoul his government by promising the Ottomans British support where none existed in the beginning.<sup>6</sup> Not exactly because of his influence at the Ottoman Court, but because the Ottomans grew weary of the Russian emissary Prince Alexander Sergeevich Menshikov's (1787-1869) bullying tactics and ensuing Russian incursion into

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<sup>5</sup> Roderic H. Davison, "Russian Skill and Turkish Imbecility: The Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji Reconsidered" *Slavic Review*, 35:3 (1976), pp. 463-483.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Richmond, *The Voice of England in the East, Stratford Canning*, London, and NY: I. B. Tauris, 2017. Canning's diplomatic service spanned 50 years in Istanbul from 1808-9 to 1856. Therefore, this study based on Canning's personal archives is of value.



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

Ottoman territory to support fellow Slavs did Istanbul declare war on Russia. Ottoman forces under Ömer Pasha's (Ömer Lütfi Paşa, 1806-1871) command cleared the Danubian provinces, Moldavia and Wallachia of Russian invaders before the allies reached the Bosphorus. Russians lost the three-year long war to the coalition of British, French, Piedmont (King of Sardinia/Piedmont, Victor Emmanuel II wanted to present Italian power at the peace conference), and Ottomans. What were the gains at the price of carnage? Not much except for stalling Russian expansionism temporarily, until 1876.

By 1856, the Ottomans were almost bankrupt and began to borrow money from abroad and engaged in debt financing from then on with dire consequences. Thanks to war journalism and telegrams which were present in a war zone for the first time, the British public became aware of the outmoded tactics used by their land forces command. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" published as early as 1854 expresses lament. "Forward, the Light Brigade – Was there a man dismayed? Not though the soldier knew. Someone had blundered – Theirs not to make reply. Theirs not to reason why. Theirs but to do and die. Into the valley of Death. Rode the six hundred."<sup>7</sup> The elegy ends with a call to honor the glory of the charge along with the memory of these brave men. Of the 664 cavalymen 469 fell by Russian artillery, which led to reforming outmoded war tactics in England. Leo Tolstoy's *Tales of Sevastopol* also enriched Russian literature when he wrote a first-hand account of the siege of the city. Russia had borne half (or one third according to some accounts) of the human losses of nearly a million men who fought in this war.<sup>8</sup> Further, Nicholas I was utterly dismayed when he found out that sums, he had invested in reforming the military forces, were pocketed by his own generals instead of, for example completing the railroads towards the Black Sea for logistical support.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.poetry foundation.org> (Poems).

<sup>8</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History*, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 2010.



## **Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

Meanwhile, the Great Powers formally admitted the Ottoman Empire to the European system of states at the Paris Peace Conference of 1856. Although a security guarantee about the integrity of the Ottoman realm in an annex to the agreement was now on paper upon the insistence of Ottoman diplomats, the language was so blatantly non-committal that it was meaningless. McCarthy refers to this factor in “Broken Promises” (pp. 1-3). The result of this nonchalance was the two-front Ottoman-Russian War of 1876-1878 to which the United Kingdom only sent observers. It was yet another carnage that surpassed the Crimean War.

The enormous indemnity that Russia imposed upon the Ottomans decreased by British arbitration, but even then, was damaging enough to lead to official Ottoman bankruptcy in 1881. This overlapped with the time when the Egyptian Crisis flared referred to earlier. The German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (Chancellor, 1871-1890) the self-styled “honest broker” in Europe clipped the vast territorial ambitions of by then an independent Bulgaria. None the less, the Ottomans not only lost major tracts of territory in the Balkans except Macedonia (British inspectors cum agents would soon see to that situation). Russians occupied major provinces in the east such as Kars, Ardahan and Batumi.

### **The European State System Goes Astray**

The Concert of Europe, built in post-Napoleonic Europe upon the principles of the Westphalian system of 1648 began to break down in the face of naked self-interest of nations old and new after the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coupled with the second industrial revolution, colonial rivalries and newly founded alliances led to polarization until 1914 when World War I began without the belligerents realizing that this would turn into a world war.

With the centenary of the war in 2014, myriad books have been published based upon newly opened archives, biographies re-written as well as memory studies and memoirs/diaries discovered. There is a plethora of reasons as to why this war began, but none of the irresponsible behavior of decision-makers strikes a reader as false assumptions do. One, since this war was to be of short duration,





**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

nobody even thought about stocking up on durable foodstuffs or fuel. Second, assuming that international law would be upheld whereby trade from neutral countries could bring non contraband materials such as food and medicine proved mistaken. The British, who had not signed this law of war activated a total embargo on the continent and the Mediterranean. Third, assuming sheer numbers such as Russia's two million untrained peasants drawn away from the fields would overwhelm the German war machine proved equally wrong. In short, this was total war where civilians died of starvation and disease, economies came to a halt and colonized people were used as fodder in the British and French armed forces.

To the Ottomans allied with Germany, this was just a continuation in the chain of incessant wars since the 1911-1912 Italo-Turkish War in Libya, immediately followed by the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. Ottomans fought against the Russians, the British and the Allied coalition forces in different fronts. The Empire bled to death while Ottoman Greeks who lived on the Aegean shores were forcibly deported, and the Armenian community massacred on the way to re-location in 1915 while Armenian men were fighting alongside Russians in the Caucasian front. A disastrous armistice followed, Istanbul was occupied along with many parts of Anatolia while the British and French severed the Arab provinces.

Partly based on revenge over the Gallipoli wars of 1915-1916 lost to the Turks, partly as punishment towards massacres of Armenians, but mostly built upon age-old hostility towards the Turks, Britain partitioned the Empire. But, partitioning the Anatolian heartland, as the Allies tried with the dictated Sèvres Treaty of 1920 was another matter.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Allies held Istanbul ransom to Turkish acquiescence to that treaty which remained unratified. When that did not work, the Turkish war of Independence followed with Britain's proxy, the Greeks. Turks won with seasoned commanders who gathered around Mustafa Kemal Pasha

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<sup>9</sup> Erik Goldstein, "British Peace Aims and the Eastern Question: The Political Intelligence Department and the Eastern Committee, 1918" *Middle Eastern Studies*, (1987), 23:4, pp.419-436.



**Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 4 Number 1 January 2023**

(Atatürk, 1881-1938). Peace making came with the Lausanne Treaty of 1923.<sup>10</sup> However, peace building took much longer.

Justin McCarthy wrote a timely reminder of British hostility towards the Turks. It is timely because of imperial hostility displayed once again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; in the case of misleading propaganda to support US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and war mongering during the current Ukraine-Russia war. Who exactly is behind encouraging Russian Muslims in the Caucasus, specifically the Chechen and Circassians to rise against Moscow is not yet clear. But the *modus operandi* in seeking regional proxies is terribly reminiscent of the past.

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<sup>10</sup> Erik Goldstein, “The British Official Mind and the Lausanne Conference, 1922-23” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, (2003), 14:2, pp. 185-206.