

INTRODUCTION

Probably the most famous and undoubtedly the most widely read study of English history is Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 and All That*, first published in 1930. For those unfamiliar with this classic, it is a glorious parody of text-book history : an inextricable jumble of misremembered "facts" from English history and literature, presented in a series of solemn clichés with a constant appeal to inane nationalism. For Ottoman historians Sellar and Yeatman's classic is particularly appealing, since much of what is published in their field embodies the methodology which these authors pioneered. Why this should be so is at first something of a puzzle. There are, after all, more Ottomanists working today than ever before, some of them producing work of the highest quality. What is noticeable, however, is that it is not the best work that defines the character of modern Ottoman historiography and gives it its direction. The best work tends rather to stand out in isolation and only rarely leads to serious debate and development. It is the bad and mediocre that is typical. What, in fact, Ottoman history lacks is a serious academic tradition, as opposed to serious work by isolated individuals. It is worth asking why.

The strongest influence on the direction of Ottoman historical studies is undoubtedly nationalism. As this is the official ideology of most, and probably all the successor states to the Ottoman Empire, where inevitably consciousness of the Ottoman past is strongest, it is a force that it is almost impossible to escape. To the nationalist, the Ottoman Empire is an episode in the history of a nation and, to adopt the Sellar and Yeatman scheme of history, is either a Good Thing or a Bad Thing according to the nation in question. Of the competing nationalisms, the strongest has probably been Turkish, since many Ottoman historians working outside Turkey itself have, wittingly or unwittingly, adopted its tenets. For the Turkish nationalist, the Ottoman Empire was one of a succession of Turkish States, which lead according to choice, from Bilge Kagan or the Huns until the present. This preconceived scheme inevitably comes up with pre-determined answers, leading historians to explain Ottoman law, customs and institutions with reference to a Turkish, usually Central Asian past, and to ignore alternative (and usually more plausible) explanations for the problem in hand. Nationalism, in short, by pre-determining answers to historical problems blocks rational historical enquiry. There are also areas of research

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which it renders out of bounds. An example of this is the study of place names, which can yield useful historical data: it is through place names, for example, that one can map the areas of Scandinavian settlement in the British Isles. However, the results of research in this field would not invariably be acceptable to nationalists and the fact that governments in the Middle East and the Balkans frequently change place names which they find ideologically unacceptable indicates that this is an area fraught with danger. So as well as pre-determining answers, nationalism excludes certain items from the historical agenda.

Another negative influence on the development of Ottoman studies has been a decline in philological skills and, allied with this, an increasing influence of the social sciences. This is perhaps inevitable, as it reflects a general trend in the academic world, and need not in itself be harmful. For the study of Ottoman history, however, where almost all the source material exists only in manuscript and where reliable editions are a rarity, philology in the sense of the scientific and literary analysis of texts, is a *sine qua non*. Many mistakes in Ottoman history arise simply through careless misreadings and misunderstandings of texts. The social sciences, by contrast, can have only a limited use for the Ottoman historian. The problem is that good social science depends on continuous series of reliable data, and this is precisely what is lacking in most areas of Ottoman history; furthermore, the social sciences require a grasp of statistics which most Ottomanists do not possess. Clearly the social sciences do have their place, and in the hands of a few historians, have made a useful contribution to Ottoman studies, but in the hands of the innumerate they lead simply to woolly thinking.

The fashion among Ottomanists for the social sciences seems to reflect a wish to keep up with whatever is fashionable in other fields of history. Again this is not a bad thing in itself, but requires rather more discrimination than is usual. The model which Ottomanists follow is, inevitably, European history, but too often they forget that the study of European history is a century in advance of the study of Ottoman history. The major facts are known, the chronology is known, texts and documents are published, issues have been raised and debated. None of this is true of Ottoman history, and when Ottomanists attempt to imitate contemporary debates in European history, the result is usually a grotesque parody. This point is illustrated by the Ottomanist fashion for imitating the work of the Annales School. The results have not been happy, and it is easy to see why this should be. The pioneer of this School, and perhaps still its greatest representative, was the mediaevalist Marc Bloch, whose *Feudal Society* provides the kind of generalisations and grand sweep of history to which some Ottomanists aspire. Bloch however succeeds because he was able to base his generalisations very securely on the detailed and precise work of a generation of text editors. Ottomanists have no such advantages. They have no choice but to work on details, and to accept that answers to the big questions are, for the

moment at least, out of reach, and when they look to European history for inspiration they should select what is appropriate, and not what is fashionable.

Not all barriers which an Ottoman historian faces are intellectual. One of them is physical, and this is the problem of access to records. In some cases access is no longer possible because, as in Bosnia, records, whether in stone or on paper, have been deliberately destroyed. One should remember, too, that it is only by good fortune and the swift action of scholars that the Ottoman archives in Istanbul survived the holocaust of Ottoman culture in the 1930s. Where records do survive, the problem is gaining access. This is particularly true of the Libraries and Archives of Istanbul, which remain by far the richest source for the study of Ottoman, and indeed Islamic history and civilisation. What strikes the foreign researcher very forcibly, is that access to these institutions is in the hands not of scholars and librarians, but of civil servants, consular officials and the security services, and that the granting or withholding of access often seems to be quite random. One can only conclude that the purpose of these apparently arbitrary hindrances is to discourage serious research, and to keep the study of Ottoman history firmly under government control.

There is probably not much that historians can do to make access to Ottoman records any easier. However, the other problems which impede the development of the academic study of Ottoman history are more easily dealt with. Firstly, Ottomanists should be aware of the ideologies and preconceptions which have determined the course of their subject. Nationalism is the most obvious, but there are others. Secondly, they should recognise priorities. We do not even possess an accurate chronology of the Empire's history, or an adequate account of its institutions and personalities. Until these basics are sorted out, sophisticated, high level debate is not possible. Thirdly, they should be selective in what they borrow from European historians. Finally, they should be less respectful of received opinion, no matter how eminent the source. Without open debate, no subject can advance. The lack of serious debate has, in some aspects, left the study of Ottoman history stranded in the 1930s which is where, I suspect, some national governments would like it to stay.

Manchester, 1994

