

Pickthall, Ottomanism, and Modern Turkey

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If the East became the great love of Pickthall's life from the moment he set foot on Egyptian soil in 1894, it wasn't until the outbreak of the Ottoman constitutional revolution in 1908 that this love took on an intense political focus. In this essay I intend to distinguish the factors that differentiate Pickthall's early travels in Egypt-Syria-Palestine, the key experience behind his subsequent fictional representation of Arabs, from the impulse that led to a decade or more of political and religious struggle on behalf of Ottoman Turkey. Turning points in Pickthall's love affair with the East, other than the two just mentioned, included the success of his first oriental novel, *Saïd the Fisherman* (1903); his public declaration of Islam in 1917; and the defeat of Turkey and fall of the Young Turks in 1918. If, as Peter Clark argued, writings such as *The Valley of the Kings* and *Oriental Encounters* demonstrate Pickthall's awareness of a nascent Arab nationalism,¹ *The Early Hours*, his retrospective novelistic paean to the cause of the Young Turk revolution which did not appear until 1921, re-creates his belief in the destiny of the Turks to bring about a renovation of Islam. This chapter sets out to demonstrate not so much Pickthall's passionate engagement with and anger and bitterness at the eventual defeat of the Young Turks and their project for Turkey – the entire range of his articles in *New Age* amply demonstrate that – as the manner in which his early immersion in Arab and Islamic subjects in his fiction gave way to the creation of a discourse almost wholly centred on Ottoman Turkey's aspiration toward taking its place in modern civilisation underscored by a renewed Islam. It is necessary to consider the journalistic writings, beginning in 1911, to appreciate how the imaginative inspiration of Arabia and Arabian Islam eventually ceded to near obsessive identification with the religio-political fate of Ottoman Turkey.

Before looking in more detail at the changing stances Pickthall adopted toward Ottoman Arabs and Turks, I want to advert briefly to earlier, Victorian valorisations of Arabia and Turkey, specifically as these relate to the penetration of the modern (Western) world into the East. Though it would be difficult to discuss these outside of the terms set out by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, most are aware that the thesis of this work has been quite considerably revised

1 Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim* (London: Quartet, 1986), 89.

since its first publication in 1978.² For the purposes of the discussion below, it is taken as read that the kind of “Orientalisms” on show in the work of the Western writers and thinkers I deal with are distinctive and varied, and in Pickthall’s case, can be said to intersect with forms of Orientalism that Said never touched upon. I want at this point only to draw attention to a fundamental difference between Pickthall and a line of British travellers who were “sympathetic” towards the East. David Urquhart’s valorisation, from the 1830s to the 60s, of the Ottoman Empire in pre-modern, pre-Tanzimat terms; Wilfrid Scawen Blunt’s espousal of the aristocracy of Arabia’s “desert kingdoms” in the 1880s, and T.E. Lawrence’s public advocacy of the monarchic cause of the Hashemites in Arabia after the Great War; singly and together differ in at least one key aspect to Pickthall’s adoption of a divergent discourse concerning the modernisation of the Ottoman Empire.³ Embracing the cause of reform from Tanzimat to the Young Turks, the discourse Pickthall propounds and celebrates is presented as the vehicle essential for the reform as well as the protection of Islam in the modern world. Where the three other British travellers proposed for the East similar forms of Orientalist stasis – Urquhart, an unmoving classic Ottomanism; Blunt, a personal romance of Arabian rulers evoking an imagined golden age; Lawrence, an ersatz version of Blunt’s dream – Pickthall aligns himself with a discourse of reform and modernisation which I shall compare below to a theoretical framework recently termed “Ottoman Orientalism”.

With Pickthall, one of the enigmas to emerge from his individual engagement with the East is the apparent aporia contained in the epithet Aubrey Herbert gave to him – “loyal enemy”.⁴ If we apply that conundrum to Pickthall’s ambiguous engagement with British foreign policy, we see how in one context – the imperial imposition over Arabic-speaking Egyptians – it is endorsed, and in another – its calculated non-intervention on behalf of the Ottoman Empire in 1908, and from 1914–1921 active pursual of that empire’s demolition – it is denounced. As regards Egypt, “Pickthall combined a respect for Cromer’s firm rule with a disdain for the slogans of the Nationalists”. Over the punishment of the villagers of Denshawai in 1907 his stance “coincided with that of the more imperially-minded British officials of Cairo”.⁵ *Children of the Nile* published

2 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); A.L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London: Pearson Education, 2002).

3 See Geoffrey P. Nash, *From Empire to Orient: Travellers to the Middle East 1830–1926* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Nazan Çiçek, *The Young Ottomans: Turkish Critics of the Eastern Question in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

4 Anne Fremantle, *Loyal Enemy* (London, Hutchinson, 1938), 7.

5 Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 15–16, 17.