



ESSAYS: ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND MISSIONARIES

A TRAVELER'S VIEW OF THE "GILT-EDGED MISSION": REFLECTIONS ON A CENTURY OF AMERICAN MISSIONARY INVOLVEMENT IN ANATOLIA

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Historians generally regard travelers' accounts more skeptically than other sources. Reports about a place and its inhabitants by passers-through are often superficial and convey misunderstanding rather than insight. But the narrative of an observant voyager can provide a succinct, discerning view of a multifaceted topic. The travel book *Across Asia Minor on Foot*, which records a journey through central Turkey in 1911-12 by Englishman W.J. Childs, achieves this purpose. During his five-month, 1,300-mile trek from the Black Sea port of Samsun to the Mediterranean city of Alexandretta (today's Iskenderun), Childs visited several American Protestant mission centers, including a station at the town of Marsovan (Merzifon), sixty-five miles inland from the Black Sea. His account of its foremost institution, Anatolia College, as well as its medical hospital, illustrates one of the most important American missionary establishments in Anatolia on the eve of the First World War. Moreover, his narrative distinguishes key elements that characterized roughly one hundred years of missionary involvement in Turkey leading up to that point.

The Marsovan station was a model mission, and Childs' portrayal of its development and operations would have been almost equally valid for similar centers in about twenty locations

throughout Anatolia. To underscore the scale and variety of the work at Marsovan, Childs first evokes a popular view of a Christian mission, which he depicts as a native village in a tropical setting with a couple of large huts as school and church, presided over by “an earnest, amiable, white-bearded man . . . He generally rides a horse, carries Bible and umbrella, and gathers natives about him in the shelter of convenient palm trees.”¹

This image contrasted sharply with Marsovan station. When Childs visited in 1911, it consisted of a multitude of buildings, many solidly constructed of stone, occupying more than twenty acres of land. The complex was enclosed by walls and contained diverse facilities, which Childs enumerates:

Anatolia College [for men], a High School for girls, a school for deaf mutes, a hospital of sixty or seventy beds, and a Boys’ Home. There are also workshops in which trades are taught, and college students may earn the cost of their education; a flour mill capable of grinding for a population of 4000; a bakery; a printing press and book-bindery; the houses of the Americans; and a Turkish bath.²

This sizable compound was one of a number of comparable centers spread across Turkey. All traced their origins to the same organization, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, or ABCFM, which as Childs notes, was a Protestant mission agency formed in 1810. A corporate charter granted by the state of Massachusetts in 1812 enabled the American Board to solicit and disburse funds in pursuit of its aims—chiefly to propagate the Gospel and spread Protestant teachings, but also to pursue general altruistic labor.

Congregationalists had founded the American Board; however, it was not tied to a single Protestant sect, nor was it an ecclesiastical body. The public in the United States that supported it and the missionaries it dispatched worldwide belonged to various Protestant denominations. The Board was structured like a corporation, but a decentralized administrative system permitted

¹ Childs 1917, 49.

² Ibid. 51.

initiative by those serving in mission fields, which encouraged experimental and diverse endeavors and also allowed for adaptation when required.

Childs' image of a Bible-carrying missionary riding a horse and seeking to establish outposts in unknown lands would have been appropriate had he been writing eighty years earlier, when Board missionaries were initially surveying Anatolia. The tour in 1830-31 of the Reverends Eli Smith and H.G.O. Dwight across Turkey to Persia is perhaps the best known expedition of this early era. Traveling on horseback, Smith and Dwight were the first American missionaries (perhaps the first Americans) to visit many of the region's towns and villages—including Marsovan.³

From its inception, the ABCFM directed its personnel to explore. The founders had established an agency for evangelization, yet they only had approximate ideas about where, among whom, and how to achieve their goal. The American Board's first missionaries to Turkey, Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, who arrived in Smyrna (today's Izmir) in 1820, were told to investigate and report on the people and places they encountered.⁴ Practical knowledge was crucial for accomplishing their work. In the case of Smith and Dwight, their journey a decade later opened the door to Anatolia's interior for the American Board. Moreover, their observations, published in 1833, comprised one of the earliest detailed exposés of Turkey's geography and cultures to circulate in the United States. The habit of inquiry and the filtering of information back to the American public exemplified by this work was a salient feature of the missionary venture throughout the century.

Despite Smith and Dwight's report that one-thousand of Marzovan's five-thousand homes belonged to Armenians of the Gregorian Church, an institution presumed by the

³ Smith 1833, 89-90.

⁴ "Instructions from the Prudential Committee" 1819.

American Board to be in need of evangelistic revival, the agency did not immediately commit effort to the town. Eventually, in 1852, at the request of a budding local Protestant Armenian community, two missionary families settled in Marzovan and were soon running Sunday services, Bible classes, and a primary school.

Nonetheless, the town did not witness much more American investment until 1864, when the ABCFM transferred a men's seminary and a girls' school from Istanbul to Marzovan. Henceforth, the American Board's presence grew steadily. After several years of renting quarters, its missionaries bought land and constructed a building for the seminary (1871). They opened a boys' high school in 1883, reorganized it as Anatolia College in 1886, and finally incorporated it under the laws of Massachusetts in 1894.⁵ The other facilities mentioned by W.J. Childs in *Across Asia Minor on Foot* sprang up around this core. Describing the mission property at Marzovan in 1911, Childs declares: "Regularity has not been attempted in laying out the compound. Buildings were erected and added to as suited the immediate purpose, and so a picturesque village has grown up. . . No two houses are alike, nor on the same line of frontage."⁶

This irregular plan not only reflected the random development of the Marzovan mission, but also mirrored the fluid progress of the ABCFM's work in Anatolia. The Board's missionaries had arrived in Turkey in the 1820s with the notion of introducing the Gospel and Protestant beliefs to all its communities. Finding access to Muslims prohibited, they adapted their approach, narrowing their efforts to indigenous Christians. They considered the Eastern Churches astray—burdened with rites, rituals, and an ill-informed clergy—and they sought initially to bring about internal reform. Instead, they nurtured the emergence of a new Protestant community.

⁵ Stone 2006, 183-85.

⁶ Childs 1917, 51.

After the Ottoman Empire recognized its Protestant subjects as a *millet* (official religious community) in 1847 and defined their rights and privileges in an imperial charter in 1850,⁷ the missionaries turned to creating institutions for this community's spiritual and intellectual advancement. They established residences, or "stations," in urban areas with Protestant populations (mainly Armenian) and helped organize churches and rudimentary schools to teach literacy. As the community grew, care of these institutions was left to locals. In the 1860s and '70s, the missionaries began founding more sophisticated schools, particularly for training Protestant pastors and teachers. Some of these schools, such as the men's seminary and high school at Marzovan, evolved into independently chartered mission colleges with even broader goals. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the ABCFM had over twenty stations in Turkey, and its missionaries were running fifty boarding and high schools and ten colleges.⁸ Its properties were valued in the millions of dollars.

If spreading the Gospel was the chief aim out of which the American Board's educational work in Turkey arose, and the Protestant community was the hub around which it evolved, both objective and scope had been reformulated at Anatolia College by the time of Childs' visit. The school's administrators had adopted a broader and more inclusive approach, which held that it was viable "to combine the most earnest religious teaching with perfect religious liberty."⁹ A Protestant evangelical atmosphere still pervaded the school, but students were free to follow their own convictions and worship where they pleased. Rather than just preparing leaders for a specific community alone, the school's goal was enlightenment for all. In 1911, the college's annual bulletin proclaimed: "We are not seeking to build an institution. We are here to build up a

⁷ Strong 1910, 106.

⁸ "One Hundred and Third Annual Report" 1913, 95.

⁹ *The Anatolian* 1911-12, 33.

country on better foundations—to help in the establishment of good moral principles, as well as to inform and train, broaden and strengthen the minds of the people.”¹⁰

In his book, Childs reports more than a dozen different ethnic groups in Anatolia College’s student body. Enrollees came from all over Turkey, as well as the Aegean Islands, the Balkans, and Russia. In 1912, eighty-one students at the school were Protestant, whereas 268 belonged to either the Gregorian or Greek Orthodox Churches. After the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, Muslim students had even begun registering at the college; yet, only sixteen attended in 1912.¹¹ Undoubtedly, the school’s distinctly Christian identity and atmosphere minimized its appeal to Muslims.

Anatolia College and similar institutes in Turkey were modeled on the Protestant colleges of New England and the midwest of the United States, where the missionaries had been educated. Like their American prototypes, instructional programs at the mission schools were broadly conceived. They sought to provide both an intellectual and practical education. The curriculum at Anatolia College comprised a wide array of subjects in the humanities and sciences, which was virtually unobtainable elsewhere in the region. Furthermore, students could develop industrial skills in the school’s workshops, as well as earn the cost of their education. The missionaries believed that exercise balanced study. Manual labor that blended a means of self-support with physical activity stimulated intellectual progress. The schools in the United States through which they had passed, such as Oberlin, Carleton, and Grinnell, upheld the same principles.

Sports (including tennis, track and field, and baseball), an orchestra, a band, and many other extracurricular activities rounded out Anatolia College’s academic and self-help programs.

¹⁰ Ibid. 17.

¹¹ *The Orient*, Feb. 26, 1913.

Students could also participate in a variety of associations and clubs. Since the school was in a region of historic interest, one of the most popular was the archaeology club. The 1913-14 college bulletin records that members often visited the Hittite site at Boğazköy, where they took special interest in several thousand recently discovered cuneiform tablets.¹²

Undoubtedly, the foremost extracurricular activity, which stemmed from college president Charles Tracy's passion for fossil hunting, was exploring Marsovan's environs, and even beyond, to gather flora, fauna, rocks, and other natural materials. The items accumulated over the years, so that by the time of Childs' visit in 1911, a museum building was under construction to house more than seven thousand botanical, zoological, and geological specimens. When the Anatolia College Museum opened two years later, it would exhibit one of the most extensive collections of native natural history items in Turkey.¹³ Like this distinctive edifice, Anatolia College itself stood out uniquely in its surroundings. As Childs emphasized, it was "an American college, in all but its students, set down in Asia Minor."¹⁴

Whereas mission schools in Turkey were mainly attended by Christians in 1911-12, missionary medical facilities served a universal clientele. Childs stressed that "more than college or school, more than any other form of missionary enterprise, the Mission Hospital at Marzovan reaches people of all races and faiths. It alone—and like it other mission hospitals—attracts the Moslems. Colleges and schools these leave to the Christians; and keep the missionaries at arm's-length; but to the hospitals they come as readily as any."¹⁵

The American Board had sent physicians to Turkey since the early 1800s; however, until the 1880s, they generally worked alone, touring on horseback to dispense treatments rather than

¹² *The Anatolian* 1913-14, 23.

¹³ Stone 2006, 191.

¹⁴ Childs 1917, 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 58.

working from a hospital. These doctors were among the first to bring Western methods of medicine to Anatolia's interior. Post 1880, the American Board began founding clinics and hospitals and recruiting more physicians to oversee them.

With a medical staff of thirteen, led by two American doctors, the Marsovan hospital and dispensary treated approximately ten thousand patients in 1912.¹⁶ During Childs' visit, a new hospital building was under construction. Designed to accommodate 150 beds, it would double the capacity of the old facility and accommodate more of the numerous sufferers who came to the mission, many of whom reportedly journeyed days on end by carriage or bullock-cart, on donkeys, or hobbling on foot, from as far away as the Black Sea and even the Mediterranean.¹⁷

Notably, however, even in this seemingly all-encompassing field of missionary labor, Childs alludes to a separation between the hospital and those it served. He recounts that he often visited the American and English nurses' duty room, a "pleasant sanctum" where "the grateful custom of afternoon tea was never allowed to lapse."¹⁸ He remarked that patients strolling on an adjacent balcony "always gazed curiously into the room in passing, and wondered at its easy-chairs, and tea-table, and foreign inmates following the customs of their country."¹⁹

By the same token, from the nurses' room one could observe that "beyond the balcony lay the lawn [as it was called by the Americans] . . . a screen of young trees, and then the compound wall with the native town huddling against it; and a red brick minaret so near at hand that you could see the priest walking round the little gallery, see him place open hand on cheek,

¹⁶ *The Anatolian* 1912-13, 28.

¹⁷ Childs 1917, 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 63-64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 64.

and clearly hear each word of his call to prayer.”²⁰ Childs’ description suggests a divide, over which caregiver and patient examined each other as if from a distance.

Besides a new hospital building and the natural history museum, several other structures were being erected at Marsovan in 1911, including a gymnasium, classrooms, and dormitories. Construction was costly, and the annual bulletin for Anatolia College contained requests for financing.

Throughout the nineteenth century, American Board missionaries had relied on the generosity of donors in the United States to run their work in Turkey. Successful fundraising ensured survival and growth. When Anatolia College was incorporated in Massachusetts in 1894, its administrators entered the struggle for patrons directly.

Childs recognized this crucial and constant aspect of the missionary enterprise, and he noted that Marsovan’s location put it at a disadvantage. “Rich men,” he remarked, “keep to the coast, see the great missions there, with the American flag flying over buildings erected upon historic spots, and giving and bequests by will follow.”²¹ However, he added that compared to mission stations even deeper and more remote in Anatolia, Marsovan was not performing badly in the contest for funds. In fact, some even considered it a “privileged metropolis of missions” and christened it the “Gilt-edged Mission,” which “attracts to itself . . . money.”²²

The American Board and its missions employed various methods to obtain financial contributions—print media, sermons and speeches by missionaries, and the aid of special fundraising agencies. One of the most effective and enduring tools, which had existed since the ABCFM’s incorporation, was its news bulletin, the *Missionary Herald*. This monthly journal

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 50.

²² Ibid.

kept supporters in the United States abreast of the Board's operations, highlighted its achievements, appealed for donations, and publicized the largesse of benefactors.

The *Herald* had emerged from an earlier periodical, the *Panoplist*, whose stated aim in its inaugural 1806 issue was to disseminate evangelical truth. By 1820, when ABCFM missionaries first entered Anatolia, the journal had changed its name to reflect a new focus: communicating "missionary intelligence." Reports and tabular lists of Bibles printed and distributed, new mission stations opened, and congregations assembled prompted dutiful readers in the United States to send dollars and cents to the American Board.

Up to about 1870, the *Herald* preserved a simple format: text only, except for an occasional map. Subsequently, it was transformed. Images were added—a few engravings at first, but eventually abundant photos. Along with graphics, the content was enhanced, and more articles about the geography, history, and cultures of the lands where the ABCFM worked supplemented missionary intelligence. By the end of the century, the *Herald* had become a richly illustrated monthly magazine, providing readers at home with details about the world abroad—highlighting, of course, the Board's role and needs in contributing to the world's enlightenment.

The Marsovan station and other missions in Turkey benefited from the *Missionary Herald*. Through its pages missionaries could publicize their efforts and transcend geographical limits. They could even display the flag. In one turn-of-the-century article titled "Good Times and Beautiful Things in a Mission Station," the president of Anatolia College, Charles Tracy, emphasized that he and his colleagues were always patriotic. The Fourth of July was never forgotten at Marsovan and usually celebrated with a picnic. "Wherever the gathering is," Tracy pledged, "'Old Glory' is sure to overhang the group at feast."²³

²³ "Good Times" 1904, 108.

Since first arriving in the 1820s, American missionaries in Anatolia had modified their endeavors to fit changing circumstances. As their work evolved over the course of the century, they constructed establishments to realize their purposes. When W.J. Childs visited Marsovan, decades of fluid progress had produced an impressive compound with diverse facilities.

Reflecting on the environment inside this complex, Childs captures its essence:

The whole compound, in fact, with its . . . gardens and dwellings, its cleanliness, order, and happiness is a most powerful silent agency . . . It provides a standing and surprising contrast which fails to strike no one who sets foot within the gates. You pass at a step from . . . narrow alleyways to the bright compound, and seem to have got into another world.

Doing this again and again a curious impression grows upon you. It is that the compound is a walled village of another race, established in these surroundings by some unexplained cause. And a walled village it is . . . an American walled village at that.²⁴

When Childs made this observation, America's missionary enterprise in Turkey was, as we now know, at the pinnacle of nearly a century of development. American missionaries had built imposing edifices of their civilization to reshape Anatolia's society in its likeness. Their portrayal of this undertaking, its successes and its needs, as well as those they sought to enlighten, generated abundant support from the United States to fuel their effort. But the walls that encircled the mission compounds, delineated their nature and purpose, and stirred patrons back home to invest in further construction formed a barrier that ultimately hindered the relationship between the builders and the larger world outside they wished to uplift. After Anatolia's Christian communities diminished or disappeared through exile, flight, or massacre during the First World War, the immense mission stations became unsustainable.

Some American missionary institutions endured in Turkey in the twentieth century—reinvented in the aftermath of the war to suit the political and social conditions of a new age. Yet, within a few years of Childs' visit and the violent upheavals that soon followed, the citadels

²⁴ Childs 1917, 52-53.

erected by America's missionaries across Anatolia's landscape would prove, for the most part, to be as ephemeral as huts in a jungle clearing.

Epilogue

Anatolia College continued to operate during World War I, until the Ottoman government requisitioned the campus for a military hospital in 1916. Thousands of wounded and ill soldiers were cared for there up to 1919, when the property was returned to its owners and the educational program resumed. Turmoil during the Turkish War of Independence forced the school's second closure in 1921. Five years later, in 1926, Anatolia College reopened in Thessalonica, Greece, where it still operates today.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was dissolved in 1961. Currently, three high schools in Istanbul, Izmir, and Tarsus, as well as a hospital in Gaziantep, trace their origins to institutions founded in Anatolia by the ABCFM in the nineteenth century. "American" in name, these establishments are owned and operated by a private, non-profit, secular Turkish foundation. As with all schools in the Republic of Turkey, the high schools' curriculum and other programs comply with national standards and regulations set by the Turkish Ministry of Education.

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