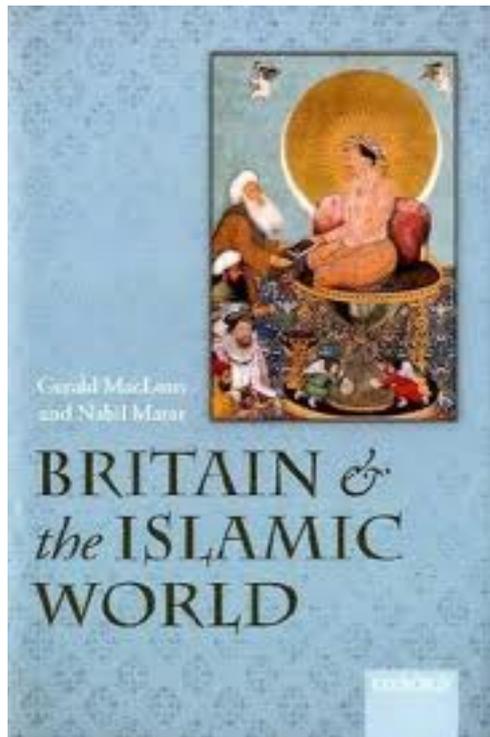


## Britain and the Islamic World 1558-1713, By Gerald Maclean & Nabil Matar

*Reviewed by Barnaby Rogerson*



This is a book centred on the enterprise of five generations of British seamen and merchant-venturers exploring the Islamic East. It is a well-known story of British achievement but, instead of staying within the stately mansion of this progression towards glory and empire, the two authors keep throwing open the windows to offer us fresh insights, new horizons of inquiry, as well as skipping out through a back door to give us a witheringly close examination of the fabric. This is an uplifting, intriguing and inquiring survey, which leaves the reader grateful for the breadth and depth of their scrutiny.

The first wall of misconception to come tumbling down is the notion of Islam existing as a coherent subject of inquiry. The British did not, for better or for worse, engage themselves with either recognising or confronting an adversarial civilisation. Instead, they divided the East into distinct regions, which each had its own temper – not to mention a British trading company. So that for centuries, any inquiry into the truths of Islam took a very fifth place to inquiry into the balance of trade with Barbary (Morocco and the regencies of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli), the Levant (Ottoman Istanbul, Izmir and Aleppo), Sophy (Persia) and the Indian trading stations of Calicut, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta.

The second wall to fall is the conception that Britain was interested in scientific exploration and the pursuit of knowledge. Britain was an irrelevant offshore island. British merchants travelled the world purely as a means of acquiring wealth, and had to be adaptable, compliant and patient if they were going to achieve this. In large part England remained a banana republic, or rather a wool monarchy, with but one product, cheap woven cloth, with which to dress her stall in the world marketplace. So instead of the Great and Good of British exploration, Maclean and Matar suggest we relabel the Needy and Greedy.

In terms of knowledge, the British were 500 years behind the experience of the Italians and but a century or two behind their principal rivals: the Portuguese, French and Dutch. In the Indian Ocean, it was these European rivals, much more than the local dynasts, who were the enemies to be attacked. Britain first attracted the attention of Iran as an ally who would aid it in expelling the Portuguese from Hormuz.

A third shibboleth to be undermined by Maclean and Matar is the literary record of British travel narrative, which is revealed to be very partial. Although vast fortunes were made by the Levant Company, none of the key players in this lucrative trade created reliable portraits of the Ottoman Empire they knew so well.

Instead, it tends to be the salaried chaplains of the Levant Company who dominate the literary field, leaving us with a very unrepresentative record of their own professional interest in the Holy Land. In a similar way, there is virtually no literary evidence of the lucrative armaments trade with Barbary (when England broke the embargo of Christendom to trade armaments for saltpetre), apart from a few fascinating letters exchanged between Queen Elizabeth and the Moroccan Sultan. A century later, a stream of "captive accounts", by Britons enslaved by Barbary corsairs, would fill the publishers' schedules. But we see that these accounts are highly selective with an underlying storyline of bravery and (Christ-like) redemption at least as theological as it is factual.

These populist accounts also avoided all reference to British slave raiders, Muslim captives in Britain (and the negotiations for their release), not to mention the tens of thousands of Britons who decided to "turn Turk", "take the turban" and assimilate. From India, by contrast, there was

a vast corpus of observant and analytical reports from British agents and consuls. But this stream of market and diplomatic intelligence, though avidly read by the directors of the East India Company, was far too useful and confidential to be published and disseminated.

So it is fitting that this pair of literary historians should conclude their survey by putting books behind them and look at the actual commodities of trade. They reveal that the fabric of what we believe to be iconically English, whether a four-poster bed lovingly swagged in printed cottons, sipping tea from a pottery saucer at five o'clock, or even our national affection and infatuation for horses, is a long-assimilated gift from the Orient.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/britain-and-the-islamic-world-15581713-by-gerald-maclean-amp-nabil-matar-2298466.html>