



Alev Scott, *Ottoman Odyssey. Travels through a Lost Empire*, Riverrun, 2018, 292 p.

Alev Scott explores how Turkey has been reinventing itself by reclaiming the legacy of its Ottoman past and, in the meantime, boosting nationalism. To this aim, she undertakes a journey through a dozen countries, in a region that came to be identified by Turkey's conservative strata as “the lands and peoples close to our heart” (*gönül coğrafyamız*), referring to ex-Ottoman territories, diasporas, and communities that are believed to share a common history and culture with Turkey.

Turkish-British author Alev Scott studied Classics at New College, Oxford. In 2011 she moved to Istanbul and taught Latin at the Bosphorus University. Alev published her first book, *Turkish Awakening* in 2014 focusing on issues such as mass migration, urbanisation and economics in modern Turkey. *Ottoman Odyssey*, her second book, published in 2018, was followed in 2019 by *Power & the People*, co-authored with Andronike Makres, which investigates the causes of democracy's descend into populism. In the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup attempt, she was documenting the deteriorating situation of Turkey and, as a result, Alev received many death threats. She left the country temporarily and found herself barred from returning with no explanation. Alev works as a freelance journalist and writes for numerous publications, including the *Guardian* and *Financial Times*, primarily reporting on Turkish domestic and foreign politics.

Shortlisted for the Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year Award in 2019, *Ottoman Odyssey* falls into the genre of travel memoir. However, Alev's detailed historical account and sociological inquiry, brings a noteworthy contribution to (post-)Ottoman history and contemporary Turkish diaspora studies.

The idea of the book was born in 2014, when the author was reporting from south-eastern Turkey, near the Syrian and Iraqi borders, where she could catch a glimpse of Ottoman Empire's former glory which is still preserved in local traditions, religious practices and culture. Thus, she initially decided to write a book on the social legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the region, but as radical militants from Syria crossed the border and established cells in some south-eastern Turkish towns, her fieldwork turned too risky. She continued her research in Turkey and after the 2016 coup she headed to Greece,

from where she was unable to return due to the Interior Ministry's entry ban on her passport.

Alev took her research off the beaten track. Not only she used a mosaic of sources to build her hypotheses: Ottoman and Turkish history books, Turkish and international media reports, novels published in former Ottoman lands, primary historical sources such as Evliya Celebi's *Seyahatname* or the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and interviews with locals and stakeholders, but she also incorporated her own journey of self-discovery. While uncovering the roots and surviving bonds of the Ottoman heritage in present-day Turkey, Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus she traces her own ancestral origins (her mother is Turkish-Cypriot). Her interviewees embody the diversity of the former empire, ranging from Turkish car mechanics in rural Kosovo, Armenians in Jerusalem, Lebanese warlords to professors in Turkish universities in Sarajevo, turning the book into a culturally immersive and thought-provoking experience. Besides questions of religious coexistence, she inquires about forced migration, genocide, exile, diaspora, collective memory and identity.

The author remarks that "sometimes a lost home persists more strongly in memory than in reality" and asks herself: "If home is where your people are, what is left for those who stay behind?" To answer this question, she starts her journey from the „heart of the empire“, Istanbul, where she talks to a Russian Turk "left behind" at the outbreak of the Second World War, and assesses the metropolis' dying cosmopolitanism and its fading Ottoman social and architectural legacies. The author's travels through Turkey leads her to members of less known minorities, as the Afro-Turks, remnants of the Ottoman empire's oppressive slave trade with Africa, or the *dönme* community, respectively "crypto-Jews" disguised as Muslims.

Considering the author's personal experience and the book's genre, objective analyses are, as expected, infused with the author's subjective observations, resulting in at times in unintentional biases. While the diversity of interviewees is precisely aimed at countering a stereotypical depiction of the ex-Ottoman dominions, it has a slightly different effect, especially when it comes to the depiction of the Balkans. The chapter "Minarets in the West" is particularly problematic as it builds on the views of rather eccentric, nonmainstream characters, zealous supporters of Turkey's involvement in the region like the Bosnian professor teaching in the Turkey-founded International University of Sarajevo or the Serbian president of the Novi Pazar branch of the Friend of Sandzak - an organization that facilitates language classes, marriages and support networks for Serbians who emigrated to Turkey and Serbia-based self-identifying Turks -. Scott overestimates Turkey's positive image and even economic engagement in the region. In this regard she writes

that Bosnia-Herzegovina “is now occupied to a surprising extent by Turkish money”, turning into a study of “modern wannabe imperialism”, although Turkey has not even made it to Bosnia-Herzegovina’s top 5 trading partners in 2020 according to Trading Economics.

However, despite some inaccuracies and the inherent subjectivity of the genre, “Ottoman odyssey” offers a valuable account of post-Ottoman identities and the legacies of a multicultural Muslim empire. Both those who are interested in the politics and history of ex-Ottoman lands and those who are keener to discover the cultural fabric of the region and plan to travel through the “lost empire” will find the book equally intriguing and enjoyable.

At the end of her physical “Ottoman odyssey” and introspective journey to uncover her own identity, Scott concludes: “There is an interdependence between geography and culture which is strong enough to last millennia (...) whether real or imagined, the relationship shapes people’s identity. Homeland is where the collective heart is, and all the turmoil contained therein – and sometimes that is a place, not just a concept.”

Iulia-Alexandra Oprea