

'M.E.R.' visits the Whittalls in April 1882

Readers of the *Levantine Heritage Foundation Newsletter* will doubtless be familiar with the Whittalls who spent most of the nineteenth century establishing themselves as the pre-eminent Levantine family trading throughout the Ottoman Mediterranean and beyond. Established in 1811 within two years of his arrival in Smyrna (Izmir) from Liverpool by Charlton Whittall (1791-1861), the firm of *C. Whittall and Co.* became so successful that, in 1883, the poet Constantine Cavafy declared Charlton's third son James (1819-1883) to be 'the wealthiest merchant of the Levant.'

Cavafy was by no means the only notable guest to be entertained by the Whittalls at what was known as the 'Big House' in Bornova. The Scottish painter David Wilkie was a guest in 1841, just months before he died, leaving behind a fine portrait of James's first son, James William (1838-1910) resplendent in oriental costume. In 1863, the Ottoman Sultan Abdulaziz, an Anglophile with a personal interest in ships and shipping, spent a day visiting the Whittalls, admiring the Big House and gardens, and later conferring the Order of the Medjidie on Charlton for his hospitality. In 1886 James's fifth son Edward (1851-1917) hosted the Prince of Wales (later King George V) at Bornova. In 1902 the celebrated traveller and diplomat Gertrude Bell stopped by to visit, later reporting that Edward, by now an eminent botanist, was also an advisor to another powerful Ottoman Anglophile, Mehmed Kamil Pasha who served as Grand Vizier several times between 1885 and 1913.



Sir James Whittall as a boy depicted in oriental fashion, a portrait executed by Sir David Wilkie shortly before he died on board ship on his return to England.

To this list of distinguished guests of the Whittalls, I wish to add a more modest but nevertheless interesting visitor, one Mary Eleanor Robinson (1845-1924) whose epistolary memoir, *Letters from the East in the spring of 1882* (1883) recounts a day spent at the Big House as a guest of James Whittall and his wife Magdalene Blanche, nee Giraud (1823-1912).



The 'Big house' house back at the turn of the century.

During the course of the nineteenth century, travel to the 'East' – usually meaning Egypt, Syria, Palestine and the Levant – had become increasingly popular. Following Nelson's victory over the French at the Battle of the Nile in 1798, Egypt had been firmly on the public mind. By mid-century, travel to Egypt had become so regular that the publishing house of John Murray issued the first *Handbook for Travellers in Egypt* (1847). When Mary Eleanor Robinson, accompanied by her brother James, travelled in mid-February 1882, their itinerary followed what had become a fairly standardized pattern. They sailed from Marseilles to Suez, headed overland by train to Cairo where they stayed (of course) at Shepheard's Hotel while taking excursions to visit the Pyramids and Heliopolis. They did not venture up the Nile, but took ship in late March from Alexandria to Jaffa for visits to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, then set to sea again stopping in Beirut, Larnaca, Rhodes and Chios before landing in Smyrna on Sunday, 16 April. The following morning Mary writes: 'We are leaving to-night for Constantinople; and are going to have a long drive this afternoon with Mr. Whittall, who came to see us this morning.' Since it is unlikely that James Whittall – however hospitable he might have been – would have troubled to invite any and all transiting British travellers, we might wonder what made Mary and James Robinson deserving of special treatment. For one thing, the Whittalls and Robinsons were both mercantile families and may well have known each other as neighbours in greater Liverpool.

At this point, I should confess that I am only 99% certain that *Letters from the East in the spring of 1882* was written by Mary Eleanor Robinson since the book was 'Printed for Private Circulation' and no author is named. There is, however, pretty solid evidence of who the writer was and why James Whittall might have troubled to seek [them] her and her brother out and invite them to visit. The book opens with a dedication to 'My Dear James' who requested a record

of their travels together. It is signed off 'Your Affectionate Sister, M. E. R. Holmfield, Aigburth, June 1882.' This led the cataloguers of WorldCat and the British Library Catalogue (since corrected) to suppose that the author was 'Mary Elizabeth Royden.' However, the Royden family home was Holmfield House, not Holmfield, a different property in the nearby community of that name, both houses falling within the wealthy Liverpool suburb of Aigburth. Mary was the youngest child of William Fothergill Robinson (1801-1870), a hide merchant and broker who moved from Everton to Holmfield, Aigburth in 1851, where he died leaving an estate of under £70,000. Among his children were his eldest son James George (1833-1890), who inherited the hide business, and Alfred (1841-1895), who became bursar of New College, Oxford. Mary's letters often refer to James, and may well have been originally addressed to scholarly Alfred since they frequently offer displays of learned and bookish observation. On seeing the Sphinx, for instance, Mary observes that she thought 'Martineau's raptures over it are a little extreme,' referring to Harriet Martineau's *Eastern Life* (1848). On another occasion she regrets the absence of 'information about the items on display' in the Cairo museum since, 'Mariette being dead, everything seems to have got into confusion,' referring to Auguste Mariette, the founder of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, who had died in 1881. Mary and James are also evidently well connected. While in Heliopolis they were entertained by Sir Auckland Colvin (1838-1908), a colonial administrator from India who [was] had been recently appointed comptroller general to Egypt and a financial advisor to Khedive. In Constantinople they lunched with 'our old friend Maria Castellain,' the wife of the Austrian ambassador – the redoubtable Grafyn Maria Louisa van Calice née Castellain de Vendeville (1843-1943). Hailing from a prosperous merchant family from Aigburth, outside Liverpool – the home of the Whittall family – and with such connections, the hospitable James Whittall would have had every reason to hear that Mary and James Robinson were stopping in Smyrna on their way home from their Egyptian adventures and [think] wish to invite them to visit the Big House.

The visit took place on 17 April and is described in a letter from Constantinople:

I ended my letter from Smyrna rather abruptly, just before we started for a drive. It was a most brilliant day, the sun too hot, as we drove about five miles into the country on a very bad but very pretty road to a village where the English residents live, where we were to call on Mr. Whittall, who had invited us to come and see his house and his curiosities. One of his sons drove with us, telling many anecdotes about brigands, which made us not sorry that our stay in the country was to be short.

The Turkish Government is weaker than ever, and little or nothing is done to keep the country in order; and Lord Dufferin's recent proclamation, that English people are to look out for themselves, and to expect no help from our Government, has made the brigands bolder than ever. Mr. Whittall, however, drew a great distinction between Greeks and Turks; the former, who come over to Asia Minor when Greece has become rather hot for them this time, being much more formidable than the Turks, who do not carry people off in order to extort a ransom, but only levy blackmail on a village, after Rob Roy's fashion.

At Bourkabat, where old Mr. Whittall lives, we stopped at a gate which opened into a lovely garden, with some of the finest cypress trees in it I have ever seen, one of them, in particular, without a single irregularity, tapering to the height of between ninety and a hundred feet. A flight of marble steps brought us to a verandah, on to which a pleasant drawing-room opened, where we were received by an old lady, who gave us tea, and talked to us of more horrors.

The Circassians seemed much more on her mind than the Greek brigands we had just been hearing about. Expelled by the Russians from their old quarters in Georgia, their hand now seems to be against every man, and it was terrible to listen to the histories that she recounted. The only thing to do with them, she said, was to “shoot them like mad dogs.”

She is a very energetic old lady, and gave us many particulars of what had been done to help the sufferers at Scio at the time of the earthquake last year, when 3,400 people were killed in the space of ten minutes; many persons were injured, and her sons had evidently been foremost in getting up ambulances and giving them what they could. It was rather a relief to turn from all these horrors, and go into Mr. Whittall’s sanctum, where he showed us many valuable things – statues and busts that had been found in the neighbourhood, old gems, and rare coins. A complete set of jewellery, which had belonged to a Byzantine empress, made me rather envious. A cameo of the bust of Paris, and another of the head of Socrates, were very beautiful too. The collection of coins was very large; the gold coin of the time of Philip, the father of Alexander, lovely, with a head of Apollo on one side, on the other a chariot with four horses. Our time was limited, and we only saw enough to make us anxious to see more, but we had to get back to Smyrna early, as we expected to sail at six o’clock. I could not help feeling sorry that we were leaving such a lovely country without seeing more of it; and if the day ever comes for it to be really safe, I should think tourists will visit Asia Minor in shoals.

Mary’s account is interesting for several reasons. It corroborates much that is otherwise known of the Big House with its celebrated cypress trees, the ‘lovely garden’ already showing the influence of Edward’s planting of specimen flowers and shrubs, and the marble stairs leading to a veranda that features in family group photographs. Equally characteristic is Mary’s account of James’s delight in displaying his assorted antiquities and especially his ‘very large’ collection of coins. Since the 1850s James had been actively collecting and dealing in rare Hellenic and pre-Hellenic coins; photographs of more than five hundred coins sold from his collections at various auctions can be found on the British Museum website. So too Mary’s characterisation of Magdalene certainly confirms other accounts of how her strong convictions and forceful character combined with delight in entertaining guests.

Mary’s description of her visit is also curious given its silences and historical contexts. While it is clear that the ‘old Mr. Whittall’ who collected coins can only refer to James, and the ‘very energetic old lady’ who was proud of how her sons had helped the ‘sufferers at Scio’ (Chios)



following the earthquake of 1831 can only be Magdalene, it is by no means obvious why Mary omits their given names. We can only guess that the son James elected to send to drive Mary and James to the Big House was most likely to have been Richard (1847-1920), well-known for being sociable and such a keen driver that he imported the first motor vehicle to Turkey. It might, of course, have been the botanist Edward, but hardly Herbert Octavius (1858-1929) who was held to be rather grave of manner. Surely it would have been Richard, rather than the more sober scientific Edward, who entertained and discomfited his guests with 'anecdotes about brigands' on the drive from the docks to the Big House.

But why Mary did not name her hosts is surely odd. Equally puzzling is Mary's sense of their disparate ages: Mary herself in 1882 was 37, while 'old Mr [James] Whittall' was 63, and Magdalene, 'a very energetic old lady,' was 59. It is worth recalling that Magdalene had given birth to thirteen children, the first of whom – James William (1838-1910) – was born when she was still 15, and her last child – Charlton Francis (1864-1942) – when she was 41. Attitudes toward age change over time, of course, yet it is also true that life in the nineteenth century, however idyllic it might seem today, involved physical hardships beyond the strains of frequent childbirth.

More generally, Mary's observation concerning 'Lord Dufferin's recent proclamation' is intriguing since Anglo-Ottoman relations had been under strain for several months, certainly all the time that Mary and James had been travelling. Dufferin's appointment to represent Great Britain at the Porte in early 1881 was initially designed, among other things, to resolve disputes concerning the treatment of Ottoman Armenians. But that problem was swiftly overshadowed in September by the nationalist uprising in Egypt led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi that aimed at deposing the Khedive Tewfik Pasha and ending British and French economic power in the country. By early October, the *London Evening Standard* announced 'The Crisis in Egypt' and reported that Britain and France were planning to send 'ships of war' to occupy Alexandria and protect the Khedive's authority. In Constantinople, such challenges to Ottoman power in Egypt continued to infuriate Sultan Abdulhamid right up to July of 1882 when British 'ironclads' finally arrived and bombarded Alexandria, thereby initiating an occupation that would last until 1956. In such circumstances, Dufferin was wise to advise British nationals living and travelling in Ottoman territories that they should 'expect no help from our Government.' One can only wonder, though, why Mary had not worried about safety amidst the 'Crisis in Egypt' while travelling there, suddenly becoming anxious on landing in Smyrna and learning about local brigands from the Whittalls. After all, Smyrna brigands had been a feature of reports regularly published in *The Illustrated London News* from the 1840s and beyond, but it was not until hearing first-hand 'anecdotes about brigands' from the Whittalls that Mary felt 'not sorry that our stay in the country was to be short.' On another matter, why Magdalene should have developed so strong a particular dislike of the Circassian refugees, some of whom had been settled nearby in Manisa back in the 1860s, must also remain a puzzle.

Yet in the end Mary could not help feeling that her meeting with the Whittalls and visiting the Big House and gardens in Bornova left her 'feeling sorry that we were leaving such a lovely country without seeing more of it,' and she was certainly prophetic about those 'shoals' of tourists.

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