



31st Levantine Heritage Foundation dinner gathering in London, with guest speaker Gareth Winrow and Prof Gerald MacLean

### **Patriot and Liberal Internationalist? The Life of Ahmed Robenson – Gareth Winrow**

Ahmed Robenson, the celebrated sportsman and a pioneer of the scouting movement in the late Ottoman Empire, is a well-known figure among Turkish commentators. However, much of the details of his life are surprisingly unknown, and some of the information that is readily available has been manipulated by official propaganda and has even been deliberately distorted by Ahmed Robenson himself.

Arriving in Istanbul from England as a young child in 1891, Ahmed Robenson was originally educated at the Kuleli military school. He later became a popular teacher of physical education at the Galatasaray Lycée, introduced basketball and other sports to the Ottoman Empire, and was one of the first goalkeepers for the highly successful Galatasaray football team. In spite of being suspected of involvement in espionage at the end of the First World War, Robenson later briefly served as a president of the Galatasaray sports club and played an instrumental role in the construction of the Taksim sports stadium. Developing a close relationship with the American Methodist pastor, Asa K. Jennings, in the 1920s Robenson worked as a translator and intermediary for the Turkish-American Clubs Project and helped establish the Smyrna Welfare Council. Apparently frustrated and disillusioned, Ahmed Robenson eventually abandoned Turkey in 1929 and spent his final years in New York.

Ahmed Robenson remains a folk-hero among sporting and scouting circles in Turkey, but his life was a complicated one and has been the subject of much controversy. Contesting the arguments of his critics, a case may be made which recognises that Ahmed Robenson was both a patriot and a liberal internationalist.



Ahmed Robenson



Gareth Winrow is currently a writer, independent researcher, and part-time tutor for the Department of Continuing Education at Oxford University. His latest book, *Whispers Across Continents: In Search of the Robinsons* - [cover](#), is about to be published by Amberley. He previously worked in Turkey for twenty years where he was a Professor in the Department of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University. A recipient of two NATO Research Fellowships and a US Institute of Peace Fellowship, he has worked as a consultant for Eurasia Group, is a member of Chatham House, and serves on the editorial board of the journal *Turkish Studies*. He has published extensively on Turkish foreign policy and on energy and regional security issues. The holder of a scholarship to study Modern History at Keble College, Oxford University (BA Hons.), he also has an MA in International Relations and Strategic Studies from Lancaster University and a Ph.D in the Department of Government from the University of Manchester.

## Ottoman Aleppo Through British Eyes - Prof Gerald MacLean

Among the oldest continuously inhabited urban areas, with origins dating at least as far back as 5000 BCE, Aleppo is substantially older than Damascus and was, until the devastations of the continuing civil war, the most populous city in Syria. By the opening of the second millennium BCE, Aleppo 'was already a major market center ... when the archives of the Hittites and of those of the kingdom of Mari recorded its name as Halab or Khalappa' (Masters, 1999: 19). However, the arrival of the Ottomans in 1516 transformed the city from a regional trading centre into a major international entrepôt. Within fifty years of Ottoman rule, the commercial core of the city more than doubled to rival Cairo: new mosques in the Ottoman style were funded from 1556, and in 1574, Sokollu Mehmed Paşa established the caravansary known as the Khan al-Gümruk (Masters, 1999: 19). Ottoman investment in the city attracted foreign trade: in 1545, the Venetians moved their consul here from Damascus; the French arrived in 1557, and, with the establishment of the English Levant Company in 1581, Aleppo became the headquarters of British trade until the Company was dissolved in 1825.

This presentation explores how British visitors represented the transformation of the ancient city during the Ottoman era, and suggest some of the ways that the presence of British residents in Aleppo contributed to the city's cultural activities, social and religious character, and economic growth. British merchants resident in Aleppo greatly increased the city's commercial wealth and prosperity. They were accompanied by chaplains who introduced Protestantism to the city, leading to conflicts with Catholics and other Christian sects. They supported a substantial wine-producing business, introduced the eating of beef, established jackal-hunting in imitation of fox-hunting, and founded a Masonic lodge. At the same time, they commented on the prosperity of the city, its population, its buildings and gardens. After the dissolution of the Company in 1825, later British travellers commented on the apparent decline of the city's infrastructure and the increasing corruption of tradesmen. Sources will include accounts by British travellers and residents who testified to the city's transformation into a cosmopolitan palimpsest under Ottoman rule.



Portrait of Henry Lannoy Hunter in Oriental Dress, resting from hunting, with a manservant holding game, by Andrea Soldi. Henry Lannoy Hunter was a merchant with the Levant Company in Aleppo, Syria. Soldi had been persuaded to work in England by members of the Levant Company and it is uncertain whether this work was painted in the Levant or was one of the first portraits undertaken by Soldi on his arrival in England.



Professor MacLean is founding co-director of Exeter Turkish Studies. As a founding member of the Evliya Çelebi Way Project, he pursues research on historical re-enactment and reconnection. The Evliya Çelebi Way Project promotes knowledge of the great Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi (1611-c.1683) and public awareness of Ottoman history, while developing trekking routes for sustainable tourism.

24 July 2019, 6.00 pm start (meet in the Britannia Bar), talks start 6.30 pm, ending 8 pm, event end 10 pm  
Royal Thames Yacht Club, 60 Knightsbridge, London SW1X 7LF

Talks are free for LHF members but booking essential: <https://31st-lhf-gathering.eventbrite.co.uk/>

Optional informal dinner after the lectures in the venue where guests pay via booking, but for numbers please still register even for lectures only, which are free. For gentlemen jacket and tie is required in this venue.

Dinner tickets costs £35 for LHF Members, £40 for non-Members, plus Eventbrite booking fee.

Please support these events by becoming a sponsor. We provide these talks for free as part of our mission to preserve and promote the research and public understanding of Levantine heritage. Sponsoring the talks helps cover the LHF's costs in arranging these talks in central London. For sponsorship packages, please contact [chairman@levantineheritage.com](mailto:chairman@levantineheritage.com). All sponsors will be recognised at events and on our website.