

# **Our Levantine Heritage**

*“How extremely curious are the vicissitudes of families! Here am I, although an Englishman, a representative of this old Byzantine Venetian family, settled by the chances of fortune in the twentieth century in a city which my ancestors left in the twelfth...” Sir J. William Whittall, August, 1901.*

**Whittall Family Reunion**

**September 19, 2015**

**London**

Preparing for this trip to England, I was asked by colleagues and acquaintances:

“Where are you going?”

“Well I’m going to London for a gathering of our family.”

“So your family is English?”

“Well, no, that is not strictly right; it’s a gathering of our family whose forebears settled in Turkey.”

“Oh, so you are Turkish?”

“No, no, that is not right either; we are the descendants of Europeans who settled in Turkey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Levantines.”

“Levantines?”...“What is a Levantine?”



Fair question. Very good question. In fact, the more I thought about this question, the more irresistible the answers became as a discussion for our gathering today: “What is a Levantine? Does our Levantine heritage have any relevance in today’s world?”

A clue to the answer is in the name itself: Levantine. *Le Levant*. From the French word *lever*, to rise. And from an Occidental, a perspective: the far horizon, the origin of the rising sun: the East. The Levant was for centuries, the name given by Europeans to the entire region east of the Mediterranean, from Istanbul in the North to Mecca in the south. If the people in those regions were distant and mysterious enough to earn such a name, we were no less distant to them. Looking west to their farthest horizon, the Arabs called the place of the setting sun, *Al Maghreb* (المغرب), the West, and the people of *Al Maghreb*, they called the *Maghrebi*. And for many centuries, these people of opposite horizons remained mythical, mysterious and, when confronted one by the other, largely hostile. Even after the crusades, the affairs of those people called ‘the Turks’ remained so remote and unknown to most Englishmen, that the fall of Constantinople and the defeat of the Greek Byzantines by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 drew no headlines in such English journals and papers as existed in that day.

To the English, the Venetians and Genoese were the face of the east. Using ancient Adriatic and Ionian trade routes, they had established trading treaties called capitulations with the Greek Byzantines as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century and had settled and developed their own communities, dependencies and even kingdoms in Crete, the Peloponnese and north all the way to Black Sea cities like Trebizond where they established consulates and special trading terms and extraterritorial laws for their citizens. To the south and east, they used the Red Sea and Euphrates trade routes of the Phoenicians. These Europeans, who settled in the east, familiarized themselves with the customs, languages and laws of the east and were ambidextrous as both traders and diplomats, were the first

Levantine. Among them were our forebears the Cortazzis, Byzantines who became Cretan princes, who resettled in the Peloponnese, were granted Venetian nationality and outlasted wars and regimes to establish themselves as traders and trade consuls along the Mediterranean and Aegean coast.

North, along the river routes of Europe, the Venetian galleys delivered the wares of these Levantine traders to Marseille, Paris, Bruges and London until the scale of this trade was so great that Venice's Arsenal shipyard became the largest industrial complex in Europe. As the rich commodities of the East were delivered by galley in ever larger quantities to the West, Turkey, its mysterious sultans and the Levantine traders entered the western imagination and became a favored theme for Elizabethan playwrights: "Brothers, you mix your sadness with some fear" the new King Henry tells his princes in Henry the IV. "This is the English, not the Turkish Court; Not Amurath an Amurath Succeeds, but Harry, Harry." Six years later, in 1605 Shakespeare's plot in The Merchant of Venice pivoted on the fate of Antonio's ships and their eastern merchandise:

"Should I go to church  
And see the holy edifice of stone,  
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,  
Which touching but my gentle vessel's side,  
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,  
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks..."

Shakespeare could equally have portrayed an English Levant Company merchant because it is a fact that after being established and armed by Queen Elizabeth in 1579, the company lost one of its first ships in 1583 to Barbary coast pirates who confiscated both ship and cargo and enslaved the entire crew. Two hundred and thirty years later, in 1809, when the Levant Company merchant Breed and Company sent Charlton Whittall to Turkey, security had not greatly improved and Breed may justifiably have shared Antonio's anxieties about his ship and his merchandise.

The Napoleonic wars had made life precarious for the Levantine merchants and consuls and crushed their trade. In fact, the English consul and the English merchants had abandoned Smyrna in December 1806, when Turkey's war with Russia ruptured British relations with Constantinople. The English Consul Francis Werry was in temporary exile with his family in Malta. In Aleppo, location of the second most important Levant Company factory, the Consul John Barker had fled the city and was hiding with his wife and two daughters in the mountains of Lebanon under the protection of the Emir Bashir (أمير بـ شـهـاب), Prince of the Druze. Breed's schooner was not a well-armed Levant company ship and if Charlton held his breath in anxiety as he passed under a European Mediterranean coastline completely held by Napoleon, he may have exhaled a mighty sigh of relief, turning to wonder, as he entered the eastern Mediterranean.

Stopping to provision in Malta, a 122 square mile patchwork of Africa, Europe and Asia, he caught his first sight of truly amalgamated Levantine Architecture: the *Castrum Maris*, a British military installation since 1800 whose Hospitaller towers, gates and barbicans, rise over rich 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish architecture, 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian military engineering, medieval Angevin and Arogonese Chapels and the nearly invisible foundations of a 9<sup>th</sup> century Arab castle.

Running east from Malta, he entered the Ionian Sea and navigated the straight between the Peloponnese Peninsula and the easternmost of the Ionian Islands: Kythira, whose multicolored Greek, Venetian and Ottoman architecture might have distracted his eye from the crumbling ruins left by the violence that periodically erupted between these overlapping civilizations. Rounding the southeast tip of the Peloponnese he passed Cape Maleo, the point at which the Greek geographer Strabo advised contemporary travelers in 40 BC: “When you have rounded Malea...forget your home.”

Passing Strabo’s landmark, Breed’s schooner began the 135 kilometer passage to Milos, the first of the Cyclades Islands in the Aegean Sea. The islands were politically unstable, rebelling against Ottoman rule, and the line between Greek pirates and Greek patriots was at that time very blurry. Both Consul Werry and Consul Barker had faced violence at the hands of Greek brigands who, depending on one’s perspective, either sheltered in the islands or were refugees who had been forcefully repatriated there. In either case, both consuls had written numerous dispatches warning of the dangers to British trade of uncontrolled piracy in the Aegean.

With this set-up, you will not be surprised to hear that at Milos, Charlton was indeed awoken by his ship’s Captain with the news that their ship was being pursued by a pirate brig. Although Breed’s schooner had twelve portholes and was painted like a man-o-war, it had only one real cannon, the other eleven being wooden fakes. Pursued throughout the day, the crew filled a host of uniforms with hay, stationed them on the decks, and as night fell, they turned onto the brigantine and fired a single shot as if measuring the range. The ruse worked; the pirates turned and fled.

When Charlton at last arrived in Smyrna, the European quarter that spread out before him presented a foreign and, one imagines, unsettling picture. The beautiful European merchant houses of Frank Street looked new, recently rebuilt, but they were empty of people. The promenades and alleys were deserted and overgrown with grass. The English had barely returned from their sequestration at Malta and most other Europeans had left more recently due to a vicious outbreak of the plague. In the Levant Company history by A.C. Wood, the number of outbound company ships from Smyrna is recorded to have dropped to just one in 1806. In a table with 24 years of British shipping data from Smyrna from 1800 to 1830, the years from 1807-1813 are simply omitted. Charlton had arrived in a wasteland.

He was directed to follow *le champs des émigrés* to Bournabat and to take refuge there in the home of Helen Cortazzi, daughter of the Venetian Consul Lui Cortazzi, widow of the merchant and Austrian Consul Jean-Baptiste Giraud, and mother of Charlton’s future wife, Magdaleine Victoire Blanche Giraud. The irony would not have been lost on Charlton that Jean Baptiste had been a royalist

émigré fleeing the French revolution and that the Cortazzi's adopted Republic of Venice had been extinguished by Napoleon at about the same time. Although the Venetian twilight in Smyrna had passed and Bournabat was now being called the French Village, the ancient republic's influence was still everywhere to be seen. The currency of the day was the *piaster* and the passport issued to Charlton by Consul Werry was written in Italian.

From Madame Cortazzi, Charlton would have discovered the reason why most of the merchant houses were new. She would have told him how twelve years before, in 1797, during an exhibition of rope dancers, a Greek Christian from the Island of Cephalonia, under the jurisdiction of the Venetian Consul, had been roughly handled by some Turkish janissaries after he was caught trying to enter the show without a ticket. Inflamed with indignation, perhaps religious...perhaps nationalist...perhaps that of a delinquent Cephaloniot brigand...perhaps that of a vengeful Cephaloniot refugee..., he returned with several Greek friends and, in the ensuing scuffle with the Muslim janissary, killed him.

In the riots that followed, the entire European merchant neighborhood of Smyrna was burned to the ground. In his letter to Spencer Smith, the British Chargé d'affaires in Istanbul, Consul Werry wrote: "My house, and those of Mess. Franel, Lee, Hayes, Perkins, and Maltass, are totally destroyed. The direction of the wind prevented the flames spreading to Mess. Wilkinson, and Barker's, whose are the only British houses unburnt. All the Consularian dwellings, and the French, Dutch, and Italian churches, are burnt."

These were eighteen year-old Charlton Whittall's first days in Smyrna: piracy, plague and pandemonium, Pan-European war and Pan-Hellenic nationalism. Under Helen Cortazzi's roof, he was introduced to what Tom Rees has called "The Levantine Paradox". England was at war with France, but because Helen Cortazzi's husband was a royalist opposed to Bonaparte and because the republic that Helen Cortazzi's father served had been extinguished by Napoleon, the Anglican Charlton Whittall was welcomed under Jean Baptiste Giraud's Catholic roof in a Muslim country far away from home. Indeed, four years later he married Jean Baptiste's daughter and spent the next fifty-six years making alliances, friendships and convenient, if not strategic, intertwining family marriages with people whose countries and religions were nominally at war with his own.

If the Levantine world that Charlton entered seems exceedingly complex, it was. His lifetime was at least as complex as our own and very much more dangerous. But he got on with life and by 1811, only two years after his arrival in Smyrna, and at the age of just twenty, he founded the firm of Charlton Whittall and Company, which succeeding generations of his sons entered and successfully expanded. In a part of the world which remained separated from England and Europe by months of travel and by deep language and cultural barriers, the Whittalls, Girauds, Barkers and other Levantines developed deep family networks whose utility went far beyond the development of their business. They became a destination and attracted the company of famous poets, writers and travellers like Byron, Lady Esther Stanhope and Gertrude Bell to name but a few.

Their knowledge of Asia Minor and the Arabian Peninsula made them an invaluable resource for explorers and a reservoir of talent for the foreign intelligence service. Before the European explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt crossed Arabia in disguise and visited Mecca and before General Chesney launched his expeditions down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to open them for navigation, their staging area was Consul Barker's house in Aleppo where they provisioned, refined their Arabic and were guided over extended stays in all their preparations and negotiations by the expert advice of Consul and Mrs. Barker.

In the last days of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was no longer obscure and unknown to the west. Instead it was the object of rival western powers who were lurching toward the first world war, struggling to understand the revolution of the Young Turks and the emergence of a shadowy pan Islamism causing uprisings in India and Egypt and throughout the Near East. The Whittalls were involved in intelligence gathering throughout the war and were heavily recruited and used by MI6.

What patterns of life did our European ancestors follow to achieve, in such a seemingly short period of time, such a fixed and authoritative position in this eastern landscape? How did they quietly cross from being foreign visitors to deeply rooted locals, without ever losing their European sensibility? How did they establish the networks, all over the near east, that kept them on the leading edge of commercial, social and political life in the region? Looking back on them today, spread out all over the world as we now are, can we achieve a deeper understanding of a common inheritance that our Levantine heritage has bequeathed to us and to understand its enduring relevance?



We can infer that Charlton Whittall was a sturdy and not easily daunted traveller, but it is also clear that he was willing to take initiatives and risks that other Europeans of his day simply would not consider. Who was heading to Smyrna at just the moment when the consuls were in exile on islands and mountaintops, war and piracy were an effective epidemic and the plague was an actual epidemic? Answer? Not many people. Today we call such people first-movers; in Charlton's day they were considered in the "van", or the vanguard. Charlton Whittall was one of them. John Barker, who accepted his appointment to Aleppo in 1799, just as Napoleon was massing 30,000 soldiers on Syria's border, was also one of them. But they have something else in common. Their wives were not just passengers travelling reluctantly alongside them; they were already there. If Charlton Whittall, John Barker and John Baptiste Giraud found civilization in their adopted new homes in the east, that civilization was their wives.

John Barker's wife Marianne was born in Aleppo. Her mother was the daughter of Thomas Vernon, a well-established Levant merchant of Aleppo and she married not one, but two Levant company consuls in Aleppo: Consul David Hays and, after his death, Consul Robert Abbott. A Scottish visitor to Syria in 1789, Dr. Julius Griffiths, stayed with the Hays for several months. He accompanied Consul Hays and Marianne on a 750 mile caravan trip from Aleppo to Basra from

where they were to sail to India. Dr. Griffiths described Marianne as: “a child of uncommon quickness of comprehension, and of most retentive memory. At the tender age of seven years she spoke fluently the Arabic, Greek, French, Italian, and English languages.” She was evidently also unusually resilient. Thirty nine days into the journey, in 108 degree heat outside of Baghdad, Marianne’s father the consul, with blistered lips and face and unable to drink, passed into delirium and then passed from this world. Dr. Griffiths records the child Marianne kneeling resolutely in the sand as he offered prayers.

In 1800, when Consul Barker married her, Marianne Hays was the eighteen year old heiress of £10,000, and as much in jewels and landed property (forty times more than his annual Levant Company salary of £500). She had been raised in the center of Aleppo’s consular world in the regular company of visiting diplomats, merchants and the many local functionaries of the Ottoman Empire’s bureaucracy. She was probably one of the best informed if not best connected Europeans in Syria. It is not hard to draw a parallel both with Jean Baptiste Giraud who married Helene Cortazzi, daughter and co-heiress of Lui Cortazzi the Venetian Consul at Smyrna and Charlton Whittall who married Magdaleine Victoire Blanche Giraud, daughter and heiress of Austrian Consul Jean Baptiste Giraud.

These were not just gainful alliances. When he met Marianne Hays, young Consul Barker, representing both the East India Company and the Levant Company in greater Syria, had already been a London banker and the private secretary of his country’s ambassador in Constantinople in which capacity he endured, as they then did, an audience with the Sultan. He was every bit the suitable match for his wife. The partnership that the early Barker, Giraud and Whittall marriages built, the combining of their respective diplomatic and commercial networks, the nourishment of the social patterns and relationships they inherited and their love of the people and physical landscape around them characterized our families for the next 150 years.

They were not sedentary expatriates simply living a cloistered life in foreign consular compounds. Consul Barker was constantly in motion. Maintaining communications between London and India during the Napoleonic wars, he had a string of couriers between Bombay, Bagdad and Aleppo on his southern axis, between Aleppo, Malta and Alexandria on the western axis and north along the caravan route from Aleppo to Smyrna, to Constantinople and overland to London. He was in daily communication with these mounted couriers (who he called his ‘tartars’) even as he was in the field, developing Syria’s silk industry, traveling through Syria’s cities introducing the smallpox vaccine, or deep in the desert near Palmyra, bargaining with Bedouin Sheiks for Arabian horses to sell to the King of Württemberg.

Meanwhile, he and his wife were tireless entertainers and their houses in Aleppo and Suedia were always open: for local and foreign guests, formal diplomatic dinners or the extended stays of the explorers, naturalists and the *bon vivants* who were naturally drawn to this fount of local knowledge. The visitors found in Consul and Mrs. Barker, just the right historical, cultural and political lens through which to understand the apparent chaos of the Ottoman Empire. “It appears all discord

and confusion”, Consul Barker wrote in 1803, “but on a better acquaintance, it will be found to contain a harmony rising out of discordant materials.”

The Whittalls, Girauds and La Fontaines in Smyrna had that same intimate acquaintance with the apparently chaotic world around them. To the uninitiated foreign visitor, the markets and caravans below the merchant factories on Frank Street presented a scene of disarray. One French traveler described it as: “a narrow street, a polluted stream, hordes of all colours, shapes and sizes, a badly cobbled surface on which no vehicle ever passes, booths which serve as shops on left and right, large sheets of canvas or cotton overhead which serve as canopies, throwing square shadows on a street, flooded with light, vegetable peelings and squashed melon skins underfoot, big yellow dogs dragging half eaten bones through the mud; a multi-coloured slipper-shod crowd, walking noiselessly, hurrying without confusion, an unimaginable mixture of Turkish turbans, beaver hats, red fezzes and burnouses; porters who shove you, donkeys whose pack saddles bump into you, sometimes a file of camels walking in a straight line, without looking where they’re going, stepping regardless either on the cobbles or the careless passer-by...”

To successive generations of Whittalls, however, the camel caravans were the opposite of discord and confusion; they were the musical background score that signaled order in their life. Charlton’s granddaughter remembered them in Bournabat to be “a daily sight as the village lay on one of their direct routes to the sea... Camel bells tinkled gaily through the village...A string of camels would fill the whole road as the camels zig-zagged, choosing their way with ponderous slowness, stopping every now and then to lean over a garden wall where a tempting morsel on tree or bush was growing within their reach...I could not hear their bells without thinking of my father’s story... ‘Their tune is always the same’ he said...he loved caravans”.

The caravan leaders (the caravan *bashees*) led the camel trains past Bournabat by the road to the east across the Caravan Bridge, east from Smyrna over hills of quartz and limestone, through the rich olive plantations of the Lydian plain. Many generations of Whittalls, Girauds and other Levantine merchants learned these routes, and how to stop in the *caravanserai* and *kehans*, each one with its own fountain for the use, equally, of commercial caravans or pilgrims. They left their European ways and melted into the countryside. Ray Turrell described the way when her father left Bournabat to go “up-country”: “his appearance underwent a drastic change: he wore a black Astrakhan cap called a *Kalpak* and a huge coat with a fur lining...when he stayed in the houses of his Turkish colleagues, he merged into the surroundings and was perfectly at home. He was used to their ways and their conventions...sitting cross-legged on the floor, he would eat from the communal dish.”

After four days on the caravan route, they could see the foothills of the Bozdağ Mountains. Through fields of figs, cotton, saffron and vines they approached Sart or Sardis, the ancient capital of Lydia. They might have travelled here in August when the Meander Valley figs ripen to see the fallen fruit gathered and spread on sheets to dry under the sun in fields shared with collapsed brick arches or marble columns with intricately carved Ionian capitals tumbled on the ground around them. They were fascinated by the native flora amidst the ruins and became experts in both. Perhaps it was here

in Sart, where Croesus reputedly first minted gold coins, that Charlton's son James (one of the world's leading collectors of Hellenic coins) developed his interest.

Continuing further "up country" they came to Alaşehir, the City of God, ancient Philadelphia. Here, under the cover of a field guard armed with a long musket and adorned with an obvious belt of ammunition, they might inspect their sultana raisin crops as they were sprinkled with sulfur to prevent blight or mildew. They picked up the latest local news by chatting with the workers, local men in black trousers and sashes, white cotton shirts and colored vests and caps who cut the vines, dipped the sultanas into a strong lye made of boiling water, potash and olive oil and passed them to women who spread them out on great sheets in the sun to dry. After being collected into bundles and hauled by camel caravan back to Smyrna, the raisins were sorted, cleaned, and boxed at the Whittall and Giraud warehouses before being sent to the wharf, along with the up-country intelligence, and loaded onto lighters.

Continuing eastward, even further "up-country", they passed flocks of sheep and regions where wool was collected, cotton grown and carpets and dyeing activities were prevalent. As they gained altitude, ten to fifteen days outside of Smyrna, they crossed the border of Lydia and entered the more wild and mountainous region skirting the city of Aphiom-Kara-Hissar (literally, opium black castle) ancient region of poppy cultivation and mart for the production of opium, morphine and medicinal drugs. In this mountainous province of streams and great lakes like the Eber and Akşehir, they took advantage of their location to hunt birds and larger plains game. Charlton's grandson Sir William recalled his fifty years of: "constant sport in the far interior, and of business in all parts of Turkey" during which, dressed as a local person, he was in continuous relations with the people of the countryside, Osmanlis, Armenians, Albanians and Greeks whose stories he listened to and took joy in recounting, translating and publishing.

A few more days and the caravan route came into Konia, ancient Iconium, residence of the Seljuk Sultans, home of the Whirling Dervishes and one of the most important centers of commerce in the interior of Asia Minor. Here they picked up more intelligence on supply, demand, pricing, politics and perhaps a local fable. One of Sir William's favorites concerned Hassan Aga, a rich camel dealer who, upon his deathbed faced the judgement of his 4,000 camels. They forgave him for selling and trading their children, overworking them and under-feeding them, because they, after all, were camels and it was their *keismet* to suffer, but they could not forgive him for allowing them to be led by an ass. This was apparently an old Turkish parable of bloated government and weak leadership, the kind of story that Sir William delighted in foisting in local dialect onto his unsuspecting Turkish business or hunting companions.

The final stage of the southern caravan brought the merchants north past the Taurus Mountains and through the Cilician Gates, the historic pass to the Mediterranean, Syria, and Aleppo, back to the other end of their nexus where successive generations of Smyrniot Barkers and Werrys held post as consuls and completed this vast family intelligence network.

Onward to Alexandria and Cairo, generations of the Whittalls' extended Aegean and Mediterranean family met and married, raised their children, carried on their commerce and pursued their great fascinations and enthusiasms under the shadow of the minarets. Over Byzantine battlefields and Roman ruins, from Istanbul to Tripoli, they built churches to their own god and chose to live for over 150 years to the melody of the camel bell, the muezzin (مؤذن) and the nesting bulbuls until the deeper, less frequent, but more violent reverberations of the Levant returned to cast them out.



Aristotle said that Homer's mother was captured by pirates and brought to Smyrna where she gave birth to Homer along the banks of the Meles River. He was called *Melesigenes* for his birthplace, and it is there that he is thought to have written the Iliad, epic tale of a Greek invasion of the mainland, of plague, of ships, of treasure and kings and refugees and the fight for land... the story, it would seem with no end.

We too are sons and daughters of the Meles. We have spread over a still dangerous world. Bankers, fund managers, lawyers, designers and entrepreneurs, we are in London, Geneva, Singapore, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Vancouver, Montreal, San Francisco, and Sydney. We are teachers in England, art historians in New York, hunters in Africa...humanitarian aid workers in Syria and the Sudan. There are some who still carry on the family business and name in Smyrna and Istanbul.

In a world that feels suddenly ablaze with mass displacement, forced migrations and fences, we remain an effectively borderless tribe; permanent émigrés, accustomed to calling a new shore our home. We speak Mandarin, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, Japanese, Shona, Swahili, Nepali and other tongues and have retained a lasting comfort between the east and the west. Our nose for business, our interest in the arts, and our impulse for charity have not left us. I know from deep personal experience that our doors remain forever open to each other and our common history is reflected in our common humanity and good humor. Our Homeric instinct to tell a good story has not left us either; John Whittall has edited at least two volumes in the past four years to add to the large collection of our family's writings.

Finally, above these tangible traits which bind us together is an intangible but essential humility, a civilization and an adventurous, borderless curiosity about our past and present world that I recognize in my Whittall cousins and know to be our Levantine heritage.

Thank you.

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