

Prospect Place

By Gillian Mueller © 2012

Kismet—a term that was coming into circulation as George Baker made his way out to Constantinople in 1848—is a Turkish word to describe the myriad incidents and details of a man’s existence and lot. For ill or good God doles out one’s destiny, and in George’s case God was especially generous.

Prospect Place is the true and curious story of a boy who started out a waif in the northern suburbs of London and defied British class divisions to become a Victorian Gentleman and a prominent and beloved merchant in the Ottoman Empire. His grandson summed him up as “one typical of that band of enterprising young Englishmen who, as worthy successors to the traditions of Elizabethan times, and in the spirit of risk and adventure, carried on Pioneering and Colonizing the world. It is to men such as he that England owes her greatness and gratitude.”

George’s origins were as humble as *Oliver Twist*’s: When his mother became pregnant out of wedlock, her father banished her to the workhouse in shame. Two years later he summoned her home and forced her to marry George’s father, a laborer in his nursery business and the presumed culprit. Seizing the illegitimate child, he claimed him as his son and sent the pair back to the workhouse. George’s parents always struggled and would have gone to the workhouse to die, had he not supported them in their old age. To his children, though, he revealed nothing of his family secrets and took them to the grave, where they stayed buried until recently exhumed from public records on the internet.

On or about his twelfth birthday—in the same year Dickens started writing *Oliver Twist* to protest the New Poor Laws—George ran away from home and his parents’ shameful troubles. He took nothing but the clothes on his back and a shilling in his pocket. He might have been plucked off the street and thrown into the workhouse, but found shelter in the conservatory of nurseryman William George Middleton. Middleton took him in and under his wing. He saw to his education and guided his career as a master gardener in training, at a time when Britain’s exploding garden industry was a national obsession and just reaching its peak.

Middleton brought George to the attention of Joseph Knight, a notable London nurseryman and horticulturalist. Knight saw something of himself in George and got him a job as head gardener to the British Embassy in Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman Empire. At 25, George escaped England and his regrettable past to make something better of himself than his father, a garden laborer with a drinking habit perhaps. George never spent the shilling his mother might have slipped him; deciding it brought him good luck, he attached it to his watch chain so as to have it with him in his every waking hour.

On reaching Turkey, George’s wits, hard work, droll humor, and lucky shilling sent fortune his way. British Ambassador, Sir Stratford Canning, and the reigning Sultan Abdul Mejid took a shine to him and a personal interest in his prospects. They went out of their way to promote his entrepreneurship as a promising tradesman, despite stiff competition. In the aftermath of the Crimean War (1853-1856), scores of young Englishmen just like George were determined to seize the day and ride the wave of the most favorable geo-political alliance between any two empires—Britain and Ottoman Turkey. But Canning and Mejid had a soft spot for George, and it gave him the edge. And so, while Mejid’s reign ultimately impoverished Canning and bankrupted the nation, it rendered George a very rich man.

George never returned to England except on business. When he died in 1905, he was held in high esteem and renowned throughout the City and region. He is buried with his wife at the Crimean War Memorial Cemetery, an English Garden he likely laid out in his earlier capacity as the embassy gardener. His grandson wrote, “His funeral was attended by men of all rank, condition, race and religion, who had come to do honour to the worth and integrity of the Englishman, who had lived so long among them and whose word was his bond.” A great grandson added, “His impact had crossed all ethnic and cultural divides, and it was noted that never before in the City’s history had such a group of mixed faiths gathered in peace for a common purpose.”

The author returned to Turkey in 2022 to discover that George’s name still ripples on the air and in the collective memory of Istanbulites. In the spirit of poet W.B. Yeats, George Baker had Sailed to Byzantium and left an indelible mark, his kismet unique among his countrymen.