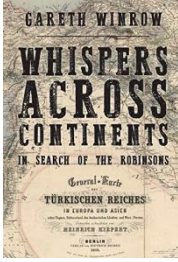




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Winrow, Gareth.¹ Whispers across Continents: In Search of the Robinsons, (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2019). 288pp. ISBN-13: 978-1445691398.

Çiğdem Balm²



Whispers across Continents is the story of a family spread over England, India, Ottoman Empire, Germany and the United States, and the period covered is from the 19th century to early 20th. It starts with Spencer Robinson (1838-1889), who was a tenant farmer from East Keal in Lincolnshire. He migrated to India to become a tea farmer and also worked on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. After the death of his first wife, in 1880 he married Hannah Rodda (1854-1948), who was raised in the slums of London's East End. Their son Ahmet (Peel Harold) Robinson (1889-1965) or Ahmet 'Robenson' was born in Bengal, lived in the Ottoman Empire and died in New York. He was one of the first goalkeepers for the Galatasaray football team, and he is also known as the person who introduced scouting and basketball to the Ottoman Empire. The German connection of the story is through Gertrude Eisenman, an 'illegitimate' daughter of Hannah before she met Spencer. Later Gertrude became a cult figure in Germany as a racing motor-cyclist and a car rally driver in late Wilhelmine Germany.

Hannah plays the central role in the family history. Apparently very little was known about her real life, and what was known was misrepresented or distorted. For example, her son Ahmed claimed that she had some aristocratic connection, which could not be further from the truth. In fact, the real life of Hannah is much more interesting and adventurous than having royal blood. After her husband's death in 1889, she returned to England from India to run a superior boarding house on Regency Square in Brighton. In 1891, she converted to Islam, adopted the name Fatima and married a supposed Afghan warlord named Dr Gholab Shah at Quilliam's mosque in Liverpool, and migrated to Constantinople with her new husband and children. Unfortunately, her husband was actually a charlatan Indian oculist (known as Eliahie Bosche), who used all her savings and threaten to use violence against her. Trapped in a foreign land, Hannah put to use her relationship with Abdullah Quilliam, who had overseen her conversion to Islam. In 1892, she wrote a letter to the Ottoman Grand Vizier, Ahmed Cevat Pasha, mentioning Quilliam, who at the time was trying to establish a close relationship with the sultan. She also wrote to the Office of the Prime minister in London. She was able to secure a divorce from Bosche and gain financial support from the Sultan Abdulhamid II. After all she was a destitute foreign Muslim woman with four small

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children- a daughter Adile (Maud), sons Yakup (Spencer Bernard), Abdurrahman (Eugene B.) and Ahmet (Peel Harold), and had to be saved. Hannah's daughter was placed in the household of Mustafa Zeki Pasha, the Field Marshal of the Imperial Arsenal of Ordnance and Artillery, who was also in charge of the military schools in the Empire³. Three of Hannah's sons, including Ahmed, would receive free education at the Kuleli military college. But she was unhappy to have sons in the military and later, the boys were transferred to the Galatasaray High School. In 1894, Hannah married Ahmed Bahri, one of the sultan's young military officers who would shortly distinguish himself in the Greco-Ottoman War of 1897, and had a son by him (Fevzi). But I must stop summarising the book and not spoil it for the readers, for at times it reads like an exciting adventure/mystery fiction.

What is just as fascinating as the history of the family is the socio-economic history that Winrow provides to enable the reader to place the characters in time and place. The reader learns of rural England in the mid-nineteenth century in some detail, as well as the colonial history of tea plantations in the Darjeeling hill stations, the birth of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, and about the lives of the British in India. We also learn about the Ottoman Empire and society before and after the WWI. We read about the first matches of the Galatasaray football club, introduction of scouting and basketball in Turkey (and even efforts to bring YMCA to Turkey), and the introduction of female motorbike and car racing in Europe. The book is the result of meticulous research. Winrow has used official documents, met surviving family members, and travelled to the countries/places where the different members of the family lived. In an impartial tone, he gives us the results of his findings, weaving a fascinating story. The family trees and photographs in the book help to bring the characters to life.

³ "Sabiha, a daughter of Mustafa Zeki Pasha born in 1895, would later marry Ali Kemal, the great-grandfather" of the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. (121).