

**THE SYRIANS IN AMERICA**

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BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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## INTRODUCTION

Syria and Syrians constitute the first land and the first people in Southwestern Asia who have entered into modern civilization. They stand alone in this. If Syria were an islanded-land, instead of being for four thousand years a thoroughfare of conquering peoples, swept by many tides, it would be, in its place, as striking an example of progress as Japan.

Southwestern Asia begins with the fringe of the vast tableland of the Central Asia steppes, lifted into an Arctic air, a vast desolation. The Khanates of Turkestan have changed the drill of their soldiery and are responsive to Russian administration; but they are as they are, imitating and not well the flaming architecture of the days of Tamerlane and still walking in the track of the Institutes of Bokhara. The book shops in the city of that name are still the great center of the book-buying of Islam. If the Emir of Afghanistan has his aeroplanes, Cabul could neither make nor repair them. Beluchistan is where it always was. The lithographed pages of the newspapers of Persia are a pathetic proof of a land still in the age and bondage of the written word, not having attained the full liberty of print. Mesopotamia, were the English troops withdrawn, would be where Mosul was when, as a child, I saw its gates nearly seventy years ago, as far as the real life of the desert, the town and the rivers twain are concerned. The Armenian Soviet Republic has far more self-government than the Russian province of Erivan in 1913. Armenians are scattered over the trade of the world. They almost

monopolize in some of the cities in Europe and America the trade in Asiatic rugs, but they have not taken a place in European banking as has Greece, nor is their trade as far-flung as that of the Syrian merchant. Nor has the Armenian created a new literature on the same scale as has Syria and the Syrians. The strength of Angora is to-day the strength of the past rather than of to-day or to-morrow. To me, the Angora group as I meet the few I have come in contact with, follow their work and see their utterances, remind me more of the old Turkish Pashas whom I saw as a boy after the Crimean War, than of the young Turks of the past fifteen years, whom we once believed and hoped, alas, in vain, would recast the Ottoman rule. I am strongly inclined to think the Mustapha Kemal Pasha would have felt much more at home with Barbarossa, or the greater viziers of the past, than he has with Envers Bey or even Talaat.

The Syrians have in the last seventy years added a new chapter to the loftier tone of Arabic literature. I can myself remember seeing even Moslem eyes brighten as the poems of Nasif el Yaziji were adequately read; how hard a task and how difficult to achieve. A new field of fiction has been created in Syria which influences the Arab world as a whole. Modern journalism in Arabic has been almost wholly created by Syrians. A Syrian edits the organ of the Shareef of Mecca, who sits in the seat of Muhammad. The leading magazine at Cairo, foremost in the Arab world, was brought into being by Syrians. Wherever there are newspapers in Arabic, they are generally, not always, edited by Syrians. The new literature of the Arab tongue, in science, in history, in the discussion of modern issues, is by no means as large, as effective or as widespread as the like literature in the newly awakened peoples between the Ægean and the Baltic, but the output of

Syria on modern topics and the progress of to-day exceeds that of any land or people in Southwestern Asia.

This is not due simply to access and position. Egypt has access and position as much as Syria. Persia has as lofty a tradition. Intellectual ability is still high in Mesopotamia. Narrow as is its intellectual tradition, cramped as it has been by fanaticism, yet no one can fail to see that the Khanates have powerfully influenced Moslem legalism. Let us not forget, this is one of the great systems of law, the weight of whose codes, statutes, traditions, decisions and precedents are still cited and argued, and establish property and personal rights, from the Judicial Committee of Privy Council of Westminster to the far-flung fringing palms of the Malaysian Archipelago.

But the trading instinct of the Phœnician has carried the Syrian trader over both North and South America as well as Africa and Southern Asia. He has penetrated to the head-waters of the Amazon, he is to be found in all parts of the West Coast of Latin America and more than one national legislature and city ordinance has acknowledged the superior commercial ability of the Syrian by trying to exclude him altogether. The trade of Brazil passes more and more into his hands and every year there appear at Beirût from the very ends of the Western world and the outer Eastern coast of Asia, the sons of the alumni of the American University at Beirût returning each autumn to share the education of their fathers, at the site of the greatest university of the Mediterranean, since the Roman Empire reached its utmost bounds from Bactria to Britain, from the Great Atlas to the North Sea.

This cosmopolitan note lends significance and weight to the Syrian migration of our day. I know no American city where I have not spoken Arabic

and no port on the Gulf or the Caribbean where the Syrian is absent. Twenty-five years ago, I found a Syrian in command in the Southwestern corner of Morocco, north of the Atlas, of an outpost, awaiting an attack from the locally independent tribes of Wad Sur. No more intellectual immigration has come to us in the past forty years. None more swiftly feels the American spirit or retains more tenaciously the spirit of Syria and the Syrian. No melting pot is the United States. It never has and it never will reduce our population to a common amalgam. The stocks of many European peoples and most of the Mediterranean races have been grafted on our national stock. There they will remain and retain their old life, strength, genius and flavor. They all, if they abide in belief in liberty, shall be grafted in and grow, maintaining an identity through centuries to come.

So after three centuries, Hollander, Huguenot, men of the Palatinate and both banks of the Rhine, of Brittany and of Sweden and Switzerland retain their identity in their descendants. The descendants of Baron Graffenreid of Berne who founded Newbern are still among us. What would we not give if we had a close and contemporaneous study of the Huguenots who came here two centuries ago in such throngs that a sixth of Philadelphia spoke French when Franklin began his work there as a printer? A like service has Dr. Philip K. Hitti done in this volume. Scholar and historian, he has given us the best narrative from original sources of the foundations of Islam, he made himself his own place in New York and might have remained here. He preferred to return to his own people and serve Syria and the Syrian at home. His knowledge of its early past, his intimate acquaintance with Syrian immigration, his sympathy with the life from which this addition to American life comes, all these things



enable him to understand, to appreciate and to describe the Syrian in America. For all these Syrian traditions I have the deepest sympathy. There I was born and there to-day the youngest of my father's descendants are passing their childhood days.

TALCOTT WILLIAMS.



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