Mahon Murphy

The British in Jerusalem 1917-1920: The Imagined City

Unlike the other areas discussed throughout the period 1792-1920, Palestine and especially Jerusalem did not have to be introduced to the European public imagination. Although it was to gain its fame as a musical number during the First World War, William Blake's poem *And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time* was first published in 1808 had helped spread ideas of a connection between the pioneers of the British Empire and the image of Britain as the spiritual successor and therefore protector of Jerusalem. Coupled to poetry, photography in the years before the First World War presented Jerusalem as a biblical site most relevant to Europe. With the arrival of British troops as an occupying force in 1917, the reality of Jerusalem had to compete with an ingrained image of the Holy City that ignored the city's modernity. To deal with this encounter of the lived city, British urban planners the city attempted to re-design Jerusalem in accordance with their own preconceptions rather than the realities that were placed before them.

The British occupying troops in Jerusalem were in many ways able to view their experience through the same lens as their French counterparts in Rome a century previous. The nineteenth century had seen the rise in interest across all strata of British society in Jerusalem and the visual imagery of the city was very much influenced by the development of photography. Photographic reproductions of the city were well known to most soldiers and gave them their first glimpses of the city.

Jerusalem itself modernised in tandem with nineteenth century technological innovations. Under a modernising Ottoman regime, the city became the administrative seat of the district under its own name. The population grew as the new trend in tourism created an industry to cater for guests and produce souvenirs for them to bring back home. Jerusalem in the nineteenth century moved with the times and felt the effects of social and political transformation and of the rising globalisation that was enabled through the development of steam and electrical power. The prime symbol of modernity came with the completion of the Jaffa-Jerusalem railway in 1892.

However, to most nineteenth and early twentieth century European tourists the modern Jerusalem was blotted out from memory in favour of classical biblical images of the city. European photography represented the city as an ancient place unchanged since biblical times. An aspect common to photography of sites of religious significance is the lack of people;

photographs detailed the historical site but documented the city as empty and untouched by the modern innovations of the industrial age.

Curiosity in the Holy Land was aided by the rise in popularity of the Cook's tour and tourism boomed in Jerusalem in the years before the First World War. Travel to the Holy Land remained the reserve of the rich, but the desire to see the country for oneself did not necessarily mean a physical visit to Palestine. The extension of fighting into Palestine during the First World War then gave ordinary British soldiers the chance to be tourists in a land whose geography was already very familiar to them from the bible and crusader legends. Tens of thousands of British, Dominion and Indian soldiers, predominantly drawn from the working class and therefore had little opportunity to visit the Middle East before the war were now exposed to its culture and heritage en masse.

These soldiers fighting in Palestine felt they were on familiar ground. Many attested that they were witnessing a literalisation of familiar biblical images and parables. The corroboration of the Scripture in the never-changing landscapes of the East was an Orientalist commonplace, but due to their living conditions; camping, seeking fruit to complement their rations and crossing the Sinai on foot to enter Palestine, soldiers came more and more to identify with the biblical imagery. This imagined following in the footsteps of biblical characters meant that soldiers fought on two different plains, the fields of combat were converted into scenes from the bible when discussed in letters to wives and mothers back home in Britain.

As well as being related in letters, the fighting to take Jerusalem received an eager audience in Britain coming at the end of perhaps the most testing year of the war for the Allies, 1917. Under the new implicit rules of propaganda warfare, the British were conscious of Jerusalem's importance and the public relations disaster that would be accompanied by any damage to any of the Holy Sites. Germany had after all been painted as the supreme villain for the destruction at Louvain, where one sixth of the town's buildings were destroyed including the university library which housed a huge collection of early books and medieval manuscripts in late August 1914. Jerusalem was taken virtually intact with the British refusing to shell the city walls. Alleged German barbarism was echoed in the ceremonial entrance of General Allenby through the Jaffa Gate in December 1917. In a pointed comparison with Kaiser Wilhelm's visit in 1898, General Allenby chose to enter the city on foot and through the gate rather than charging in on horseback through a hole that had been purposely blown in the city walls.

However, once the city was taken, eager urban planners scheduled an architectural overhaul intended to alter the landscape much more drastically than punching a hole in the city walls (plans were drawn to repair the breech in the walls but they were never completed). Ronald

Storrs, the British Military Governor, of the occupied city developed plans that seemingly went against the modern innovations in the city and attempted to revert the urban landscape of Jerusalem to an image more in line with the European imagination. Storrs established the Pro-Jerusalem society specifically for the purpose of 'preserving' the city's architecture. The society acted as a way to get around the ban on any redesigns or alteration of property rights that was enacted as part of the military occupation. The prime example of this redesigning of Jerusalem to fit the perception of its new occupants was the dismantling of the clock tower above the Jaffa Gate. Storrs, a keen reader of the bible, found the clock tower jarring to his sensibilities and very much out of keeping with what the Holy City *should* look like. It was not enough to preserve the city's architecture it was also necessary to remove any modern, or more importantly, Oriental influences that took away from the biblical aesthetic. This removal of the clock tower served to re-familiarise the European gaze with a site that was very much part of the European consciousness.

General Allenby entrusted William McClean to develop the *City of Jerusalem Town Planning Scheme* in 1918, shortly after the city's occupation. The goal McClean, claimed, was 'to protect the old city of Jerusalem and the Holy places in its vicinity from modern encroachments and to preserve their amenity.' While the rest of Jerusalem would have to be modernised and made more orderly, more 'European', the Old City was faced with a return to its religio-historical roots. Recent local developments were to be stripped away to reveal the Old City's idealised past. McClean's plan divided the city into four zones; the first contained the old city where new constructions were prohibited and a medieval aspect was to be maintained. The second zone involved an area of non-construction around the old city, where undesirable buildings were to be levelled and the area left to its natural state. Building in zone three in the north and east of the city was heavily restricted. Only in zone four to the north and west were modern developments to be allowed.

This effort to redesign Jerusalem to fit with European preconceptions of the city, interrupted the city's natural rhythms. The bars, dance-halls and brothels of the old city were quickly closed down, areas that were declared archaeological sites were made of off limits and the prohibition of major industry and commerce within the walls shifted Jerusalem's centre to the north and west where development was still allowed. The Old City of Jerusalem was to be remade in the image of what British urban planners, influenced by paintings and photography, imagined the 'Holy City' to look like.

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