
BACKGROUND BOOKS

TURKEY

"Westward along the high Eurasian steppe, from the borders of China across Turkestan and beyond it, there flowed through continuous centuries waves of nomad peoples. Widespread among them were a vigorous people who became known as the Turks. To the Chinese and other neighbors they were the *Tu-Kueh* or *Dürko*, a belligerent race deriving the name (so it is said) from a hill in their region which was shaped like a helmet."

So begins Patrick Balfour's **The Ottoman Centuries** (Morrow, 1977, cloth; 1979, paper), a fast-paced and authoritative history of the rise and fall of the Turkish empire. Balfour (Lord Kinross), a British scholar-traveler of the old style, has produced numerous books on Turkey, including **Europa Minor** (Murray, 1956, cloth & paper) and **Within the Taurus** (Morrow, 1955). His biography of **Atatürk** (Morrow, 1965, cloth; 1978, paper) is by far the best available and, though not always flattering to its subject, has long been a best seller in Turkey.

According to legend, Kinross writes, the Turks were guided in their ancient wanderings by a gray wolf. As Islam spread north and east from Arabia after the sixth century, the Turks, dominated by the Seljuk tribe, moved from Central Asia into the Middle East, eventually substituting the teachings of the Koran for their own pagan shamanistic worship of earth, air, fire, and water. In 1071, a date as important to Turks as 1066 to Britons, the Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslan humbled the Byzantine Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes at

the battle of Manzikert, gaining a permanent Turkish foothold on the Anatolian peninsula.

The Ottoman Turks, led by the charismatic Osman, replaced the Seljuks during the 13th century. "Osman's historical role," observes Lord Kinross, "was that of the chieftain who gathered around him a people. His son Orhan was to weld the people into a state; his grandson Murad I to expand the state into an empire." Constantinople, last bastion of the Byzantine Empire, fell to the Ottomans on May 29, 1453.

Kinross follows the Ottoman Empire in detail up to its collapse at the end of World War I. More concise accounts of the Ottoman period may be found in Geoffrey Lewis's **Turkey** (Praeger, rev. ed., 1965) and Bernard Lewis's **The Emergence of Modern Turkey** (Oxford, 1961, cloth; 1968, 2nd ed., paper).

The Ottoman Empire at its height was an innovative, tolerant state. "Religious persecution as such," Geoffrey Lewis observes, "was a rare occurrence." Rather, the *millets*, or religious communities (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Armenian Christians, Jews) were left to look after themselves.

In modern Turkish, the word *millet* is translated as "nation," but the word has not entirely lost its Ottoman sense. "If you tell a Turk that your *millet* is *İngiliz*," says Lewis "he will assume not only that you have a British passport but that you are a member of the Church of England."

Some of the flavor of life in Ottoman times is captured in **Turkish Art** (Smithsonian and Abrams, 1981), a

lavishly illustrated volume edited by Esin Atil. During the 15th century, Atil notes, a *nakkashane* or imperial studio was established "to undertake all forms of decorations and arts and crafts required by the state." Talented youths were recruited and trained. The artists of the *nakkashane* always accompanied the sultan on his military campaigns, leaving to posterity a wealth of superb "documentary" paintings.

Americans and Turks have been doing business since the early 19th century. Americans built much of the empire's Navy and introduced the Turks to cotton, rum, and Christian missionaries, coming away with opium in return. U.S. relations with the Turks during this period are chronicled in James A. Field's **America and the Mediterranean World 1776-1882** (Princeton, 1969, cloth; 1976, paper).

The fine travel and guide books written about the Ottoman Empire and Turkey during the past 300 years would fill a small library. Three volumes deserve special mention.

John Freeley's **Companion Guide to Turkey** (Collins, 1979), enjoyable as armchair reading and useful on the road, blankets the country with good maps and good local history. His earlier **Strolling through Istanbul** (Istanbul: Redhouse, 1972, paper), written with Hilary Summer-Boyd, surpasses all previous introductions to the city.

Thanks to the extension of the national highway system, eastern Turkey is now far more accessible than it used to be. Gwyn Williams's **East-**

ern Turkey: A Guide and History (Faber & Faber, 1972, cloth) not only indicates the appropriate scenic routes, but also provides concise historical summaries of the 20 different peoples who have lived and ruled in the region.

Perhaps the greatest modern traveler in Turkey has been Britain's Freya Stark, a contemporary (and friend) of Lord Kinross. Her writings, spiced with allusions to the classics as well as bits of conversation with people met along the way, are to be savored slowly, like a selection of Turkish *mezeler* (appetizers).

Five of her books cover the western and southern parts of the country: **A Quest** (Harcourt, 1954), **The Lycian Shore** (Harcourt, 1956), **Alexander's Path** (Harcourt, 1958), **Riding to the Tigris** (Harcourt, 1960), and **Rome on the Euphrates** (Harcourt, 1967).

The reader with time to peruse only one book on Turkey should obtain David Hotham's **The Turks** (Murray, 1972). Hotham, longtime correspondent in Ankara for London's *Economist*, distills a millenium of history, politics, economics, and culture into 220 pages. The result is impressionistic, opinionated, and colorful—yet grounded in deep familiarity with the land and people.

As a foreigner, Hotham is more aware than most Turks of the general ignorance (if not indifference) in the West about the country. He recalls one visit to a London doctor shortly before heading off for Ankara. "So, you're off to Turkey!" the physician said. "Going through the Canal or round the Cape?"