

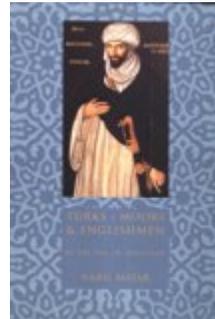
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nabil Matar. *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xi + 268 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11014-3; \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11015-0.

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As this reviewer is the editor of a scholarly review on higher education policy and administration, in addition to being a historian, he is all too familiar with the principle, almost a mantra, that interdisciplinary research gives rise to the greatest advances in science and human knowledge. Presumably this principle holds as true for the Humanities as for the hard sciences.

The question of interdisciplinarity comes to mind because the author of the book being reviewed, Nabil Matar, is a professor of English literature who has ventured into the domain of history to trace the contacts among Englishmen, Muslims, and American Indians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (“The Age of Discovery”) in order to derive certain conclusions relative to the origins of English colonialism and orientalism. A question to be asked, therefore, is whether or not the professor of English has produced a good work of historical synthesis. He has made important use of English literary works of the period in addition to the traditional sorts of sources used by historians. He has brought to the task a knowledge of several languages, including Arabic, and of the techniques of literary analysis and criticism, in addition to those of historical reconstruction.

Head of the Department of English at the Florida Institute of Technology and holder of a Ph.D. (1976) in English literature from the University of Cambridge, England, Professor Matar’s specialization and area of publication is the English Renaissance in which he has developed a sub-specialization perhaps best described as the practice, image, and influence of Islam in Britain from the 16th century onward. It is in this aspect of his scholarly interests that Matar has embraced some of the techniques of the historian, particularly those of the intellectual his-

torian searching for the reciprocal influences of thought in regard to action. Moreover, Matar, has a particular interest in explaining Islam to non-Muslims having teamed up with an illustrator, Haithan N. Haddad, to publish a primer on the subject with the peculiar title: *Islam for Beginners: A Writers and Readers Documentary Comic Book* (New York: Writers and Readers, 1992).

In his book *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), published a year before *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen....*, Matar argued that the impact of Islam on Renaissance England and the British Isles was vast but that by the end of the seventeenth century, the relationship, that had been “centripetal” had turned around, becoming “centrifugal and oppositional” (p. ix). In the present book, he explains this turn-around arguing that it came owing to the concurrent encounter, during the Age of Discovery, from the Elizabethan period to the start of the Great Migration (1630-1642), of Britons with American Indians. Despite the differences in the levels at which the encounters took place, “within the Elizabethan and Stuart discourse of Otherness and empire, the two encounters were superimposed on each other so that the sexual and military constructions of the Indians were applied to the Muslims. These constructions... made possible the ideological discourse that accompanied the conquest of Islam in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the Renaissance conquest of America lay the groundwork for colonialism and orientalism” (p. x).

In order to develop and prove his thesis, Matar has drawn upon a variety of sources and secondary works, in particular the works of the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline playwrights, but also travelers’ accounts, and

the accounts of Englishmen held captive in Muslim lands or among the Indians in America. Indeed, he lists twenty-two such accounts in "Appendix A" (pp. 181-183). Unlike other students of the subject, for instance, G. K. Hunter, who argued from literary sources that English knowledge of Muslims was only theoretical, Matar shows that there was a great deal of personal contact and interaction. He has consulted numerous archival sources, including prison and court records in England. He is thus able to prove the reality of a Muslim (North African and Turkish) presence in England and of an English presence (mostly masculine) among Muslims in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and to show how these contacts paralleled the beginning of English contacts with North American Indians.

The result is an attempt at an impressionistic and topical synthesis, the conclusion of which, given in advance in the "Introduction", and paraphrased repeatedly throughout the book, is the following:

The Renaissance witnessed the birth of a British/European discourse of conquest that preceded the development of the other constituents of conquest, namely technological superiority and capitalism. Once the Ottoman and the North African Muslim dominations began their military and commercial decline in the eighteenth century, British and other European writers turned to their discourse about America and the Indians during the Age of Discovery and imposed it on Islam, thereby producing the discourse of orientalism and the concurrent enterprise of empire (pp. 17-18).

Five chapters, devoted to specific topics more than to time periods, follow each other in fugue-like succession intended to fill in the larger picture traced in the "Introduction". The first of these presents instances in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods in which Muslims lived in England. These could be ambassadors, particularly from Morocco and the Ottoman Empire, merchants, ship crews, and finally captives and prisoners of all sorts, frequently captured corsairs. The first chapter, as might be expected, makes the greatest use of official British Government documents.

The second chapter turns the coin around and discusses the English presence in Muslim lands under the subheadings: "Soldiers", "Pirates", "Traders", and "Captives". Although not covered by a specific subheading, there was also the occasional diplomat. This chapter shows that Englishmen might be able to live good lives in North Africa. Even those at the lowest level of society, the captives, might prefer to convert to Islam and remain

in North Africa than to return to England.

The third chapter brings Britons, Muslims, and American Indians into what Matar calls "the Renaissance Triangle" (p. 82). Having first evoked the "infamous slave triangle" of the eighteenth century linking England, West Africa, and North America and an older England-Newfoundland-North Africa trade triangle, Matar develops his idea of a Renaissance triangle as a kind of ideological and geographical construct linking England, North African Muslims, and American Indians. Matar points out that, after 1607, when England began sending potential colonists to Jamestown, there were far more English and Scottish adventurers of all sorts settling in and selling their services in North Africa, and to much greater profit for themselves, than in the case of those who went to North America.

Matar evokes the irony of the situation by citing the cases of would-be English colonists on their way to conquer and ostensibly to enslave Indians in North America who found themselves captured and enslaved by Muslim so-called Barbary pirates. Then, there is the irony that "For King James, the Britons [living and working] among the Muslims were useful while the men to be sent to Virginia were not" (p. 87), even though he twice attempted, in 1605 and in 1623, to order all British subjects, particularly those in military or naval service in foreign, particularly Muslim countries, to return home.

And Matar points out that many of the grandees of American colonization, men such as Captain John Smith, George Carteret, and Sir Thomas Arundel had seen service in North Africa before going on to America. Even the *Mayflower*, he points out, had plied the maritime trade routes to North Africa before it transported the Pilgrims to the New World. Richard Hakluyt and other British chroniclers of travel wrote as much about North Africa, Central Asia, and the Far East as they did about the western hemisphere. At the end of the seventeenth century, English travelers could come across American Indian slaves in North Africa, particularly after King Philip's War (1675-1676), and North African slaves, particularly in Spanish colonial ports - all points that reinforce Matar's conception of a triangle of contact and of ideology of otherness with the twist that, in the latter part of the period under study, the "English were enslaving Indians while Muslims were enslaving them" (p. 103). Thus "English writers turned to the discourse of superimposition, whereby they yoked the defeated Indian to the undefeated Muslim", and then, "With their assured sense of Christian election, [they] imposed a total sepa-

ration from, and a moral sanction against, the uncivilized Other” (p. 107).

Conquest (or the dream of conquest) needing to be justified in “righteous terms”, Chapters Four and Five present two main categories of justification: first, the accusation that the “Other”: (Muslims and American Indians) practiced homosexuality (Chapter Four, Sodomy and Conquest), and second, the idea, going back to the Crusades, that the Holy Land (and eventually new holy lands) should be forcibly liberated from non-Christian domination (Chapter five –Holy Land, Holy War) and that therefore, the New Israel in America should be freed of its neo-Canaanites - the Indians.

In the case of the first category, “the [alleged] homosexuality of the [American Indians] conveniently rendered them immoral in the eyes of the conquerors, thereby legitimizing their destruction, conversion, or domination – whichever best served the conquerors” (p. 109). Through superimposition of models, the Muslims too were branded as Sodomites (p. 112) for which English and Scottish writers blamed “Islamic theology” (p. 115). Still, although English colonists were able to defeat Indians, the Muslim world, particularly the Ottoman Empire, remained strong, despite the sin of Sodomy, which, as Matar points out, was just as strongly forbidden by the Koran, indeed punished by death, as the author demonstrates with an excerpt from a work by “Ahmad bin Qasim on Sodomy” (constituting Appendix C, pp. 193-194). But British writers of the period ignored this inconvenient reality. In the second case, that of a holy land violated, ideological justification came from the Bible in the example of what the author calls “the most uncriticized imperialism in Judeo-Christian history – the conquest of Canaan and the creation of the ‘holy land’” (p. 129). In both cases, other arguments for conquest, dis-possession, and punishment came to overlay these basic ones.

Chapter Five, that is divided into two distinct sections, one on “Holy Land” and the other on “Holy War”, begins with the argument that the conquest of the Americas was imbued, beginning with the Spanish expeditions, with a crusading zeal and a destructiveness made all the more vehement because of the ultimate failure of the Crusades in the Holy Land and, paradoxically, the success of the Spanish *reconquista*. At the same time, Matar argues that the Protestant English, more than the Catholic Spanish or French, viewed “the American lands as the holy land that had been promised to the Israelites in Genesis” (p. 134), providing a strong religious/ideological justi-

fication for genocidal behaviour. But then, the Indians were weak compared to the English. Such was not the case with the Muslim World.

English attitudes towards the Muslim world took a turn for the worse after the accession of James I. He ended Elizabeth’s policy of friendliness towards Morocco and the Ottoman Empire (primarily, however, because he wanted a rapprochement with Spain). England not being powerful enough to attack either Muslim power, Matar traces a fascinating dichotomy of ideology and action in the period around 1610-1613 when English writers and playwrights staged elaborate pageants featuring vicarious battles between English and Muslim armies and navies. These were produced and performed for royal and well as for mass entertainment. In these pageants, the English were victorious, but when the British navy attempted to attack Algiers in 1621, the result was unsuccessful. In the same period, influential statesmen and prelates made calls for holy war against the Muslims, beginning with Francis Bacon, King James’ chancellor, and the preachers, Edmund Kellert and Henry Marsh. It seemed, however, that the shriller the rhetoric of Holy War against Muslims, the less action occurred.

Indeed, as the seventeenth century wore on, more and more British ships and seaman were captured by North African corsairs to the point, argues Matar, that a cause of the English Civil War (1642-1646) “was the anger and dissatisfaction felt by thousands of men, women, and children at the continued captivity of their kin in North Africa, and at the king’s inability or unwillingness to redeem them” (p. 218, note 98). After the Restoration, the idea of holy war, at least in England, gave way to the idea of wars based on realpolitik even if the ideology and rhetoric of holy war continued to fall on fertile ground in the New World, particularly after King Philip’s War in New England (1675-1676).

In the “Conclusion”, Matar cites several late seventeenth and eighteenth century English and American writers to prove the completeness of the transference of discourse from Indians to Muslims. In particular he cites Daniel Defoe’s call for the British colonization of North Africa. As Defoe’s rationale for such colonization was economic, Matar considers him to have been the precursor of fully developed pro-colonial British discourse. For him, Defoe marks the full transposition of the objects of such discourse from Indians to Muslims. But to confirm the reality of this transposition, Matar evokes the writings, not of an Englishman, but of the American, John Foss, who in 1798 described a period of captivity in North

Africa made 'serviceable' by his evocation of the "criteria of Indian captivity" (p. 177). Then Matar goes on to argue that the total transposition of Indian conquest to North African conquest was confirmed in action exactly a hundred years after the publication of the second edition of Defoe's *A Plan of English Commerce* when the French began their conquest of Algeria in 1830.

The strength of this book is its wealth of detail backed by the author's very evident erudition and knowledge of the minutiae of his subject. But what does it all really prove? Does it constitute good historical writing? Does this book reflect the cutting edge of an interdisciplinary study of the birth of British colonial discourse? To this reviewer, it tends, rather, to reflect the author's confusion of coincidence with causality and his marshaling of given sets of facts, including cited sources, that may have little bearing on the arguments that he purports to reinforce and even prove.

And there is a problem of setting. Although Matar makes mention of the relations of Protestant England with Catholic Spain and other European countries of the day, and of the Spanish influence on English colonial discourse, he imparts a kind of uniqueness to the British setting that the integrated nature of European history at the time does not sustain. Scattered among the marshaled facts are any number of instances of failure, on his part, to perceive the obvious. It would be possible, but beyond the scope of this review, to fill pages listing instances when Matar has drawn wrong conclusions from correct facts, when the reference cited in the note does not completely back up the statement in the text. One has the impression of an author determined to stick to his thesis, regardless of the facts.

Perhaps the incongruity of Matar's approach to historical reasoning appears most saliently in his "Conclusion" in which he evokes the full transposition of English hostility to the "natives" from Indians to Muslims by citing an American rather than an English captivity account and then by demonstrating the culmination of an English colonial urge to forcibly settle Muslim lands by evoking the French conquest of Algeria that began in 1830. The fact is that the British never founded settler colonies in Arab Muslim lands. If one cites the British Mandate in Palestine to the contrary, one has to consider that the settlers there were mostly continental European Jews, not Englishmen, and that the mandate period, here as well as in Jordan and in Iraq, was of very short duration.

Certain other examples of Matar's off-the-mark reasoning and conclusions are worth mentioning. In argu-

ing that "No other non-Christian people interacted more widely with Britons than... Muslims..." from all the regions in which they were prevalent that were relatively close to Britain (pp. 3-4), he cites possible contacts with another purportedly non-Christian group, the small community of Portuguese Jewish exiles (Maranos) in England during the Elizabethan period. However, these people had adopted Christianity. Thus, they are not a good example for Matar to cite in order to prove his point, however much their conversion from Judaism was forced. Observant Jews, as such, had been expelled from England in 1290, and almost none were to be found in Elizabethan England. By evoking the Maranos as Jews, Matar aligns himself with their enemies in Portugal and in England who doubted the sincerity of their Christian beliefs, usually without conclusive proof.

In a similar type of inaccuracy, Matar faults the way in which British writers in the period under study (as well as contemporary historians) failed to make a distinction between North Africans and sub-Saharan (*i.e.*, Black) Africans. To make his point, he cites Kim F. Hall's, *Things of Darkness* (p. 7). What Matar seems not to realize is that the first English contacts with "sub-Saharan" were with people, as in the Gambia, who were Muslims, or at least whose leadership was Muslim. And since in those days, for the English as well as for other Europeans, the real distinguishing factor among different peoples was religion rather than colour, it is not surprising that Renaissance English writing did not reflect the racial distinctions of today. The author should have consulted Philip Curtin's *Image of Africa* (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1961), among others, to understand that it took some time for the English to begin distinguishing North Africans from sub-Saharan Africans *racially*, and have understood that Hall's book, the full title of which is *Things of Darkness: Economics of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995) is only very incidentally about Africans *per se*, north or south of the Sahara. Moreover, assuming that Morocco was instrumental in forming the first British image of Africans, as Matar implies, one must not forget that Morocco is the North African country which most reflects the results of intermixing between North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans, particularly with regard to the elites whom literate Englishmen were most likely to have met. Finally, the designation of "Blackamoor" as distinct from "Moor" did in a sense indicate a perception of racial difference in English eyes among Muslim Africans in the period under study.

Still, one cannot deny – and it seems obvious – that if

a Briton were to have encountered a non-Christian during the Age of Discovery, the person encountered would probably have been a Muslim. Matar seems to emphasize this fact to the extent of trying to reinvent the wheel. Aside from his correct identification of the numbers and variety of Muslims in England and of Englishmen in Muslim lands, he does not seem to consider that part of the explanation for these contacts was the close proximity of *dar al Islam*, that it was very present, very close to Europe, including Britain, and that the Ottoman Empire, the North African regencies, and Morocco, were in fact integrated parts of the dynastic state system that was developing throughout Europe and around the Mediterranean. To a greater or lesser extent, all the European, North African, and Ottoman polities were at times trading and warring among themselves throughout the period under discussion. Queen Elizabeth I, who maintained close relations with the Sultans of Morocco, was hardly unique as a Christian monarch in this respect. Earlier, in 1525, Francis I of France had begun co-operation with Sultan Suleiman of the Ottoman Empire and had contracted a formal treaty with him in 1536 to gain an advantage in his wars with the Habsburgs, and this while dispatching the first French expeditions to North America. Indeed, the French experience with Muslim North Africa and the Ottoman Empire during the period covered by this book so paralleled that of the English as to deny Matar's suggestion of English uniqueness in this respect.

In short, the behaviour of the English who settled, for whatever reason, in Muslim countries, reflected their understanding that they were among equals, however much they might revile the Muslim religion, just as many of them also reviled Catholicism. Thus it seems normal that they would learn the local languages: Arabic and Turkish. And there was also a question of population density that Matar seems to completely ignore. English settlers could no more easily settle in and colonize North Africa than they could in any of the European continental lands. If in America Britain developed a policy of marginalizing, pushing aside, and eventually exterminating the native inhabitants it is that the population density in the parts of North America where they settled was quite small, thus rendering such practices possible. If the Spaniards assimilated the Indians, as the point is made on pp. 172-173, it is necessary to understand that the focal points of Spanish activity in Mexico and Peru were heavily populated by agricultural populations. Rather than exterminating or removing these populations, the Spaniards imposed the *encomienda* system on them and thus became dependent upon their labour; hence the eventual racial assim-

ilation of the Spanish that went hand-in-hand with the linguistic and religious assimilation of the Indians. One notes, however, that in the southern parts of South America, the sites of today's Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, in which the native populations, like those of North America, were of small density, the Spaniards followed practices similar to those of the British in North America with much the same result so far as the native inhabitants were concerned.

Another example of a belaboured argument that is partially true but that partially, also, misses the point, is that of Matar's discussion of the impact of the accounts of captives on the formation of anti-Muslim prejudice. Citing the case of John Foss's 1798 narrative, he shows that Foss, an American citizen, felt that in order to make captivity among North African Muslims seem credible, he had to evoke the "image of the savage Indian" and to "superimpose models of captivity" (p. 177) that by the late 18th century stressed savagery and suffering. Yet, it should come as no surprise that a person held against his will in captivity, regardless of the captor, would have mostly bitter things to say about his captor after he had been released, the so-called Stockholm syndrome (that the author evokes on p. 72) notwithstanding, particularly if he had been badly treated (and in most cases, the fact of capture itself would be construed as bad treatment). To make a big issue of the fact that the captors might be Muslims or Indians is really irrelevant.

The same problems of missing or of belabouring the obvious resurface in the several pages in Chapter 5, "Holy Land, Holy War" dealing with the renaming of locations in colonies. The English colonists, according to Matar, renamed the places in which they settled in North America so as to ideologically eradicate the former Indian presence. While this explanation might be partially true, there was also an attempt to recreate the old world in the new; after all, even if, in the case of Massachusetts the settlers were religious dissenters, they were still English, and some of them from Boston, in England. And it is a fact of settlement practically everywhere that incoming settlers will rename some of the places where they settle, as, for instance, in the cases of the Swabian and Saxon (German) settlers and towns in Transylvania.

Nevertheless, large numbers of Indian place names survived in North America. In some cases, the English extended the areas designated by given names, as in the cases of Massachusetts and Connecticut, so that they came to designate localities that were much larger than the original Indian settlements from which the names

had been derived. True the English did not rename anything in the Muslim world (except in Tangier that they held briefly from 1662 to 1684), for in these places, the British were foreign residents (or prisoners or slaves), not colonists. And even in India during the period of British rule, they changed very few names of localities, only in some cases anglicizing them (as in Benares for Varanasi). They did give English names to streets but usually in the "European/English" neighborhoods that they themselves had caused to be constructed. A better example of how in the Muslim world a European power might rename localities in order to destroy the memory of the preexisting independences was that of France in Algeria after 1830, but here again, one ends up citing a French example to prove a point that Matar wants to make about the English.

In order to sustain his argument about the renaming of localities by tracing the practice back to the Holy Land, Matar engages in some out-of-focus antiquarianism. He reproduces a copy of the first Turkish printed map, the *Iqleem Misr* (1729), in order to show how Arabic and Turkish sources retained the name, Filistein (Palestine), to designate the Holy Land, despite attempts by certain English writers and cartographers to revert to such a Biblical designation as "Land of Canaan". Matar's observation is no doubt accurate; however, the map that he reproduces on p. 133 portrays almost nothing of Palestine. Its focus is the Nile Delta, the northern Red Sea area, and a part of the Sinai Peninsula.

This book, as a publicity sheet produced by Columbia University press claims, is filled "with many anecdotes and details". One might add that it is based on a wealth of sources including Arabic language sources that give proof of the author's linguistic competencies, erudition, and eclectic interests. This aspect of the book is certainly its greatest strength. In a more general sense, it does clearly establish the fact that Renaissance England was very much engaged in the Muslim world; however, to attempt to yoke the English presence in the Islamic World to the start of colonization in North America is forced and makes far too much of one coincidence in the series

of events whereby England was beginning to reach out in many directions, for instance, to Muscovy in 1553, and to India. After all, Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to the East India Company in 1600 beginning that particular saga in English history. Britain was expanding commercially and economically in the Age of Discovery, even if, as Matar makes clear, it was by no shade of the imagination a colonial power in 1603, at the accession in England of James I, except for English expansion into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, if, indeed, such purely local and insular English expansionist activity at that particular time and earlier could be considered colonialism in the modern sense.

Professor Matar is clearly an accomplished literary scholar and a good story teller. But this book does not really qualify as cutting-edge, discovery-driven, and creative interdisciplinarity, at least not from the viewpoint of good historiography. The historiographical aspect of this book, as distinct from that of the literary analysis it embodies and the author's elegant writing style, is not well crafted, even if the facts that the author assembles are of great interest; the rich variety of sources assembled and cited, dazzling; and the details and the sources themselves, a highly original compilation.

Readers will enjoy and benefit from the wealth of raw fact that they can assimilate from this book, including very rich bibliographical resources. The mantra evoked above about cutting edge discovery might indeed hold true if in certain circumstances raw detail could be construed as 'cutting edge discovery'. Readers, however, would be well-advised to take the setting of the story - as if Britain during the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline periods, and the Muslim powers with which it is matched interacted in a vacuum - as well as many of the author's interpretations and conclusions - with a grain of salt.

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