Not drunk enough in the garden

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OTTOMAN LYRIC POETRY
An anthology
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Studies of Ottoman poetry in the West have been transfixed by the figure of Elias John Wilkinson Gibb, whose six-volume *History of Ottoman Poetry* has overhung subsequent work. Gibb was born in Glasgow in 1857, like Ruskin the son of a wine merchant, and used his wealth to work on studies of Turkish literature. There are studio photographs of him wearing a fez, and in a Turkish uniform, but – like Arthur Waley – Gibb never actually visited the country whose earlier literature he admired. Most of his work was done in London, though his "tall slim figure with erect carriage" was often to be seen in Glasgow's Great Western Road "striding along with lengthy steps, conning to himself the verses he was in the midst of translating from the Ottoman poets". He died in 1901, having caught scarlet fever at the Glasgow International Exhibition, with only *Ottoman Poems* and the first volume of the *History of Ottoman Poetry* published in his lifetime.

Gibb, however, did not do for Ottoman poetry what Waley did for Chinese. Undoubtedly a great scholar, he unfortunately subscribed to thoroughly Victorian views of how poems should be rendered in English – the verb is sadly appropriate – and his book did not achieve the same influence as Waley's *170 Chinese Poems*. *Ottoman Lyric Poetry: An anthology* refers to translations into "Gibb-erish" – a term I had not seen before, but one knows what is meant. Walter G. Andrews quotes the extract "Before thy form, the box-tree's lissom figure dwarfed would show / those locks of thine the pride of ambergris would overthrow".

The only other attempt to get Ottoman poetry across to a wider audience was *The Penguin Book of Turkish Verse* where the Ottoman translations were provided by John Walsh. He knew this poetry thoroughly, but again the attempt to communicate the potential excitement of court poetry or of Mevlevi poets like Seyh Galib did not come off. "Must it still concealed remain, where on earth is it, pray tell?" Where indeed. Coming out in 1978, the Penguin book was also too early to take advantage of the interest in Turkey that has come from its popularity as a holiday destination.

Professor Andrews is well aware of this problem, and this is his third attempt to do something about it. *An Introduction to Ottoman Poetry* came out in 1976. *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song* (1985) moved on to explanations of social and religious context, and the tradition of the *gazel*. Some of this was excellent stuff, pointing out that the context of Ottoman poetry was often highly drunken (but interestingly erudite) garden parties. But there was also a certain amount of party-pooping with long-winded explanations that left one without much incentive but to go home early from that particular poem. One often felt like Byron faced with Coleridge – "I wish he would explain his Explanation" – when confronted with "the cosmic extensions and essential interpretation of the garden can be systematized, for purposes of discussion, by a simple theory of interior and exterior space". One got the drift, but one was no longer puzzled why Ottoman poetry had still to catch on.

Andrews is, however, a formidable scholar and a genuine enthusiast, and he has returned to the charge aided by a poet and a Turkish colleague. He starts from the same point: "I know of no one who argues seriously that Ottoman Turkish poetry is not a neglected literary phenomenon." Various explanations are given for this, with Gibb a prime suspect. The suggestion that the trend of history has made us prefer to see the Ottomans as implacable enemies rather than sen-

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