1 The American Experience

Iran and indeed the entire Middle East attracted little attention in the United States prior to World War II. To be sure, there were bursts of concern, such as the Perdicaris affair in Morocco during President Theodore Roosevelt’s first term, or the scheme to establish a mandate over Armenia in 1919. But such events were spasmodic and only confirmed in American minds stereotypes of Middle Easterners as uncivilized, even barbaric, hardly capable of managing their own affairs. Such notions developed out of centuries of Christian-Muslim conflict on the borders of Europe, which left a legacy of mistrust. European expansion into the region in the nineteenth century exacerbated these animosities.

Reports from American travelers to the Holy Land often strengthened prejudice. Authors such as Herman Melville, John Ross Browne and Mark Twain wrote disparagingly of the land and people. Melville, the least critical, noted that ‘No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine – particularly Jerusalem. To some the disappointment is heart sickening.’ Browne first met Arabs at Zanzibar, years before he traveled to the Middle East, and concluded they were ‘second to no people in the art of loafing . . . of all the shameless libertines I ever saw the Arabs are preeminent.’ At Damascus he ‘saw nothing but . . . lazy dogs and lazier Arabs, basking by the roadside “showing mutually the luxuries of dust and flies.”’ All this led him to conclude ‘how much better are American ways than those found abroad.’ He neatly forgot that American cities in the nineteenth century were hardly places of scenery worth remembering – for years pigs rooted in the streets, and even in the century’s last years the smell of manure from the horses hung over everything. From Twain, of course, criticism of ‘foreign’ places abounded. He poked fun at them. Of the scene between Damascus and Tiberias, he wrote, ‘the people of this region in the Bible were just as they are now – ignorant, depraved, superstitious, dirty, lousy, thieving vagabonds.’ In Samaria he slept with ‘lice, fleas, horses,
The Middle East remained far removed from American concern – it might, to use a popular phrase, have been on another planet. Whether for travel or intellectual curiosity, not to mention business, US interest centered on Western Europe and some select parts of Central and South America and, to be sure, the islands of the Caribbean.

In the unformed, uncivilized, smelly Middle East, so far as Americans measured the area, the US government naturally had little reason to interfere, and such impressions as the nation’s people made upon the area were largely by what one might describe as unofficial personages, who were usually missionaries or archeologists. In a real sense they were chosen instruments for what little diplomacy existed. They chose themselves. Their personal interests brought them to the area and then, once they were in residence, affected their outlooks and actions. Missionaries proved the most important national presence. They had come out of the early nineteenth-century revivals to establish missions in the Ottoman Empire at Smyrna, Constantinople, Beirut and lesser cities in eastern Anatolia, and later in Iran at Urumiyya (1835), Tehran (1871), Tabriz (1873), and Hamadan (1881). They may have exercised as much influence as their better-known colleagues in faraway China. Forbidden to proselytize Muslims, they worked among the isolated Christian minorities – Armenians, Nestorians and Orthodox – and Jews. Their schools fostered local nationalisms. In Anatolia fear aroused by missionary activity may have contributed to the Armenian massacres. Creation of a Maronite-led Lebanon under French tutelage in 1920 owed something to missionary schools. It is easy to exaggerate, for Muslims avoided missionary institutions, believing ‘a Muslim who sent his sons to a Christian school was equivalent to a man who commits adultery in public.’ Nonetheless the influence of the schools was there.