

John Porter Brown, Early American Orientalist (1814–1872)

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John Porter Brown was a diplomat who served at the American Legation in Constantinople from 1832 to 1872. This is a brief account of his diplomatic career and largely forgotten contribution to early American orientalism.

In 1841 Edward Salisbury (1814–1901) was appointed Professor of Arabic and Sanskrit Languages and Literatures at Yale University. He thus became the first American professor of Arabic in the United States and was probably the first genuine American “orientalist.”¹ Traditionally, the “Orient” was composed of those regions of Southwest Asia in which Arabic, Turkish, or Persian was the predominant language, and an orientalist was one who knew at least one of these languages and used it to conduct original scholarly research.² Salisbury played an important part in expanding Oriental Studies in the United States—emblematic of this was his role in helping to establish the American Oriental Society. Although he seems to have had few students, he coached others outside the classroom. One American whom he encouraged and assisted in this way was John Porter Brown, a diplomat in Constantinople who made a noteworthy contribution to Oriental Studies in his own right. The following is a brief sketch of Brown’s career and his place in the history of American Oriental Studies.

BROWN, THE DIPLOMAT

John Porter Brown was born in Chillicothe, Ohio, on August 17, 1814.³ When his father died in 1828, his mother, Mary Porter Brown, was left destitute, but she had strong family connections. In 1829 she moved with her son to Tunis where her brother-in-law, Dr. Samuel Heap, was the US consul. He had been a Navy surgeon who had served many years with the American fleet in the Mediterranean. The young Brown was sent to school in Tunis with his cousins, where he studied French, Italian, and Arabic.

Meanwhile, in 1831, Mrs. Brown’s brother Commodore David Porter, a renowned officer in the US Navy, was appointed America’s first minister (ambassador) to the Ottoman empire, a post he held until 1843. In 1832 he invited his nephew to Constantinople to serve as his

1. Roberta Dougherty has compiled a brief biography of Salisbury, with bibliography (*Christian-Muslim Relations Online II*, Brill). For earlier accounts of him, see B. Foster, “Edward E. Salisbury: America’s First Arabist,” *al-ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā: The Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists* 9 (1997): 15–17, and his entry on Salisbury in the *American National Biography* (ed. 1999). For Salisbury in the context of orientalism, see K. P. Foster, ed., *Ex Oriente Lux et Veritas: Yale, Salisbury, and Early Orientalism* (New Haven: Yale Babylonian Collection, 2017). There were a few Americans before Salisbury who published scholarly works related to the “Orient.” For example, George Bush (1796–1859) published *The Life of Mohammed* in New York in 1831, the first biography of the Prophet Muḥammad written by an American, but it was compiled from secondary sources or works in translation as Bush did not know Arabic. The flood of books published in the nineteenth century by American tourists and missionaries to the Ottoman empire (especially to Palestine) are outside the scope of orientalism.

2. On this traditional view of orientalism, see G. and P. Leiser, “Antoine Galland’s Declaration of Orientalism in 1697,” *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* (Athens) 17 (2008): 27–62.

3. The following description of Brown’s diplomatic career is distilled from C. C. Conn, “John Porter Brown, Father of Turkish-American Relations, an Ohioan at the Sublime Porte, 1832–1872” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1973), available online.

secretary. Subsequently, Brown was given a tutor to teach him Turkish. He soon mastered that language, as well as Persian, thus having command of all three major languages of the Muslim Near East. In 1834 Commodore Porter appointed him consul at Constantinople—at no salary. In 1836 Brown asked President Andrew Jackson to appoint him dragoman (interpreter) for the American Legation. The president soon agreed, on Porter's recommendation, and Brown became the first dragoman in Constantinople who was a native citizen of the country that he represented. With the exception of a few very short intervals, he served in this capacity for forty years. As an appointee of the president, he was actually independent of the minister.

Upon Porter's departure in 1843 Brown was directed to serve as chargé d'affaires as well as dragoman, which he did for nine months. By then his knowledge of the functioning of the Ottoman government was excellent. He came to know almost every high Ottoman official. He even had direct access to Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861) and later Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876). Indeed, as the only member of the American Legation who knew Turkish, he was the sole link in communication between the Legation and the Ottoman government. He therefore became indispensable to the Legation, especially because he was privy to all of its business.

On several occasions he ventured out of Constantinople. He visited Belgrade in 1845. He spent three months in eastern Turkey in 1847 dealing with problems caused by the clash of proselytizing American missionaries with Armenian religious authorities. While there he met James Redhouse (1811–1892), compiler of the famed Ottoman-English dictionary, who was serving as British consul in Trebizonde. He also made a long excursion to Nicomedia (Izmit) and its environs in 1848.

Generally sympathetic to Ottoman problems, Brown worked to strengthen American relations with the Turks. The Porte, which wanted to free itself from pressure from the Great Powers, often turned to the US for assistance. Brown was able to play an important role in this, serving as the central figure in the expansion of Turkish-American relations. In 1850 he accompanied the first envoy of the Ottoman empire, Emin Bey, to the US and served as his interpreter. They sailed to New York and traveled together in America for seven months, making a "grand tour." They met President Fillmore and attracted large crowds and the press, who were excited to meet a "Turk." Their travels took them to the famed Fairmount Water Works in Philadelphia, a Jenny Lind concert, the home of Daniel Webster in Marshfield, Massachusetts, and to factories, hospitals, prisons, and poor houses in and around Boston. They went to Ohio, where they met the governor, and sailed down the Mississippi to New Orleans. From there they went to Pensacola, Savannah, Charleston, and eventually back to New York.⁴

After returning to Constantinople with Emin Bey, Brown held from two to four positions at the American Legation and Consulate simultaneously. He was Secretary of Legation and dragoman for nine years, consul or consul general for six and a half years, and chargé d'affaires for two and a half years. Nevertheless, he was never fully compensated for this and often had to dip into his savings to get by. This period marked the height of Brown's authority. In addition to his "normal" duties, which included serving as judge in criminal cases and arbiter in civil cases, issuing passports, collecting commercial fees, and helping Americans

4. On Emin Bey's journey to America, see, for example, M. D. Fullerton, "A Reminiscence: Emin Bey's Visit," in L. W. Renick et al., *Che-le-co-the: Glimpses of Yesterday. A Souvenir of the Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of Chillicothe, Ohio, April 1896* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1896), 240–48, online at babel.hathitrust.org; D. Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2000), 117–18.

who needed assistance of one kind or another, he was the American contact for international events that affected the Ottoman empire. For example, when the failed revolutions of 1848 in Europe sent thousands of refugees from Poland, Hungary, and Italy to the Ottoman empire, Brown facilitated the resettlement of many in the US.

Brown hoped to become the American minister to Turkey or Persia, but this ambition was continuously thwarted. His accumulation of positions and power had an adverse effect on his relationship with the minister, increasing the possibility of conflict between the two men. This undermined his ambition. Furthermore, apart from the minister, many of those appointed to the Legation begrudged Brown's influence and linguistic ability, and their personal animosities also militated against his promotion. The hostility of Minister Edward Morris (1861–1870) toward Brown was particularly intense. Morris was the wrong person to be appointed minister to the Porte. He was paranoid, inflexible, jealous, extremely self-righteous, unsympathetic to the Turks, and a promoter of Greek interests concerning Crete. He even objected to the new British ambassador in 1867. He was a man who “nurtured hatred with a smile.”⁵

Resentful of Brown's abilities and influence, Morris was determined to have him removed. He schemed against him in Washington and went so far as to claim, to Secretary of State William Seward, that a notorious brothel kept by a Greek woman named Aniki enjoyed the protection of the Legation, and that Brown was responsible for this. Moreover, the brothel was on the Bosphorus opposite Büyükdere, in direct view of the summer residence of the diplomatic corps. From time to time Brown had issued papers to stateless persons for humanitarian purposes, giving them American protection—apparently, Madame Aniki had been one such person. In any case, Morris failed to mention that Aniki's “house” was where the archives of the Legation were stored. Brown endured Morris's behavior with great presence of mind despite the stress. Seemingly surrounded by enemies, Morris finally resigned and later had a mental breakdown.

Brown also became the target of a number of other intrigues in Washington. There were those who coveted his position or who attacked him because he would not serve as a tool of special interests, mainly speculators or industrialists, who hoped to profit from, or swindle, the Ottoman government. Fortunately, Brown enjoyed the continued support of the State Department and their efforts came to naught.

With the departure of Morris, Brown became *chargé d'affaires* for the last time in 1871. Shortly thereafter William Seward arrived in Constantinople and Brown served as his interpreter in an audience with the sultan.⁶ The following year General Sherman and President Grant's son visited the Ottoman capital. Brown again acted as interpreter with the sultan. A few days later, on April 28, Brown died from a heart attack. With his pay in arrears and his brother-in-law in the US having squandered his savings, he died penniless. For almost forty years he had been the embodiment of Turkish-American relations and the official intermediary between Washington and the Porte. The Sultan paid for his widow Mary Ann's return passage to the US.

5. Conn, “John Porter Brown,” 187. A glowing uncritical account of Morris is found in H. N. Howard, “President Lincoln's Minister Resident to the Sublime Porte: Edward Joy Morris,” *Balkan Studies* 5 (1964): 205–20. Howard gives Morris credit for work actually done by Brown.

6. For Seward's visit to Constantinople, see O. R. Seward, ed., *William H. Seward's Travels around the World* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873), esp. 686–707.

BROWN, THE ORIENTALIST

When not burdened with diplomatic duties, Brown found time to pursue certain scholarly interests. His long tenure in Constantinople and knowledge of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian made it possible for him to conduct research on certain aspects of Islamic civilization and related subjects. He did not have a university education, so in this respect he was largely self-taught. He had great curiosity and powers of observation. In addition, he frequently visited book shops, libraries, and Muslim scholars, who served as mentors. As a result, through great diligence, he was able to publish a number of works that were noteworthy for his time and suffice to rank him as a leading early American orientalist.

Over many years, Brown corresponded with Salisbury in the US; and the Yale professor helped him with some of his publications. It is unclear how the two initially came into contact or if they ever met. Their correspondence included a testimonial for Salisbury, translated by Brown, from an Ottoman academic society.⁷ From time to time, Brown did meet various European orientalists. As mentioned he met James Redhouse in Trebizonde. In Constantinople, he met the German scholar Andreas David Mordtmann (1811–1879), who specialized in “modern” Turkish studies.⁸ In 1867 Brown took leave for several months to tour Europe with his wife—and escape from Morris. In Budapest he met the Hungarian Turcologist and traveler Arminius Vámbéry (1832–1913).⁹ Together they visited the *türbe* (tomb) of Gülbaba in Buda.

Brown’s first publication, “Eṭ-Ṭabary’s Conquest of Persia by the Arabs,” appeared in the newly founded *JAOS* in two parts: 1 (1849): 435–505, and 2 (1851): 209–34. In the latter part, pp. 223–34 were devoted to the “Death and Character of ‘Omar.” This article was a translation of an extract from the Turkish translation of the Persian translation of al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 923) voluminous Arabic work *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*. Salisbury, who was then the Corresponding Secretary of the AOS, wrote a long introduction to Brown’s first part, pp. 435–47, which was meant to compensate for the lack of an apparatus criticus. In the same journal Brown later published “On the Tesavuf, or Spiritual Life of the Soffees” (8 [1866]: 95–104). He says this was translated from a Turkish work by “Mohammed Missiree,” but he gives no other details.¹⁰ It is an explication of Sufism in question and answer format.

In 1850 Brown published in New York a translation of Ketkhüdā Aḥmed ibn Ḥemden’s *ʿAjāʾib al-maʾāthir wa-gharāʾib al-nawādir* as *Turkish Evening Entertainments: The Wonders of Remarkable Incidents and the Rarities of Anecdotes*. This Turkish work was published in Constantinople in 1256/1840. Salisbury found a publisher for Brown’s translation and provided an introductory note, in which he wrote that Brown “was encouraged by the approbation of the celebrated orientalist Baron Von Hammer (1774–1856), who characterized the work as ‘by far the most interesting book that has been published at Constantinople for a long time’.” This suggests that Brown and Von Hammer were in communication. Salisbury went on to say that this work was “the first ever introduced to readers of the United States directly from the East.” *ʿAjāʾib al-maʾāthir* was itself a Turkish translation of extracts from the works of about two dozen well-known medieval Arabic and Persian writers, such as al-Masʿūdī, Rashīd al-Dīn, Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, Niẓām al-Mulk, Vaṣṣāf, and Juwaynī. By

7. Note to the author from Roberta Dougherty. Salisbury’s papers are housed at Yale.

8. For Mordtmann, see his entry in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 18 (1997): 92–93, online at www.deutsche-biographie.de (search under Erweiterte Suche).

9. For Vámbéry, see his autobiography, *Arminius Vambéry, His Life and Adventures*, online at babel.hathitrust.org.

10. Bill Hickman has suggested to me that this may be the Ottoman poet and mystic Meḥmed Niyāzī Miṣrī (d. 1694), for whom, see “Niyāzī” (F. Babinger), in *EI2*, 8: 65.

translating this work Brown hoped “to entertain and instruct the unlearned” (about Islamic history and civilization). At the beginning of his book, Aḥmed ibn Ḥemden says he dedicated it to Sultan Murād IV (r. 1623–1640), son of Aḥmed I. Nevertheless, Franz Babinger asserts that he dedicated it to Aḥmed I and probably died in 1610.¹¹

In 1868 Brown published with Stevens Bros. in London a translation of the French version of Patriarch Constantius I’s (1770–1859) *Κωνσταντινίας παλαιά τε και νεώτερα*, ἦτοι Περιγραφαί Κωνσταντινουπόλεως as *Ancient and Modern Constantinople*. Written in 1824, this was a guidebook to the city to which Brown appended certain practical information about hotels, restaurants, and the like. Frequently citing Byzantine sources, the Patriarch walks the visitor through the Byzantine capital as well as the contemporary city. It is an informative work even today.

In the same year in which *Ancient and Modern Constantinople* appeared, Brown also published in London, with the assistance of the secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, his most enduring work, *The Dervishes or Oriental Spiritualism*. This was a work of genuine original research. It was the first book that attempted to provide a comprehensive account of the leading Sufi brotherhoods, *turuq*, in Constantinople. Brown was the first to describe in considerable detail such brotherhoods as the Bektāshīyya, Naqshbandīyya, Mawlawīyya, Qādirīyya, Rifāʿīyya, and Malāmiyya. He based his account mainly on original sources: manuscripts, informants, and personal observations. His manuscript sources, not always clearly identified (the book has no annotations), included authoritative works by Ibn al-ʿArabī and Rūmī. Brown also cited the observations of other contemporary or near contemporary Westerners such as Sir William Jones, Edward Lane, and the Franciscan missionary Tommaso Ubcini.

Brown systematically described each of the leading dervish brotherhoods that he found in the Ottoman capital, and their location there. He paid close attention to their beliefs, rituals, spiritual exercises, symbols, clothing, terminology, and prayers, some of which he translated. With respect to rituals, he described their initiation ceremonies and séances (sing. *dhikr*) and the use of music, dance, and even hashish. Furthermore, he pointed out the differences and commonalities among the brotherhoods in all respects. And he provided the personal account of the journey of a Qādirī novice to spiritual enlightenment. He took a humanistic approach to his examination of Sufism and often tried to draw parallels between the traditions and beliefs of Sufis and European Christians. He even found evidence of Freemasonry, so he believed, among certain mystics.

Later scholars, such as Duncan MacDonald, Friedrich Giese, and even H. A. Rose (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 2 [1922]: 341–44), who edited the second edition of *Dervishes* in 1927, pointed out that Brown approached his sources uncritically and sometimes was even a bit credulous with respect to his informants. The original work suffered, in fact, from many errors. Brown thought, for example, that the ʿAlawīs were Bektāshīs and that they believed in metempsychosis; and he overemphasized the role of India in the development of Sufism. Rose corrected most of Brown’s errors in the second edition. Despite its shortcomings, however, *Dervishes* was, and is, important for providing first-hand observations on the practice of Sufism in Constantinople in the nineteenth century and describing the status of the brotherhoods within the Ottoman empire. In this respect, its importance today is perhaps more anthropological than theological and is therefore unique.¹²

11. F. Babinger, *Die Geschichtsschreiber der Osmanen und ihre Werke* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1927), 162 n. 4.

12. See my introduction, in Greek, to the recent Greek translation of *Dervishes*: Οι Δερβίσηδες ή Ο μυστικισμός της Ανατολής (Athens: Myrmidones, 2010), 11–16.

Brown made one other, and to my mind far more important, contribution to Oriental Studies and one that is almost completely unknown. Every few months beginning in 1836, he published a "letter" from Constantinople in the *Scioto Gazette*, the newspaper of his hometown of Chillicothe. He continued to do this until his death in 1872. Altogether he contributed more than one hundred letters describing life in the Ottoman capital. His sketches included the wedding of a Turkish princess, a Turkish fair, Gypsy life and manners, Pera, a journey to Nicomedia, the Black Sea and Circassia, the Crimea, "Turkey and the Osman-les," the "streets of Stamboul," and political commentary on many subjects, even on the reaction in Constantinople to the news of the death of President Lincoln. In addition, between 1842 and 1861, Brown contributed dozens of articles to the *Knickerbocker*, a monthly New York literary magazine, and to *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*. The former included a description of an audience with Sultan Abdülmecid, Ramadan in Constantinople, Turkish etiquette, and other aspects of cultural life. The latter concentrated on commerce with the Ottoman empire and covered such topics as trade in the Black Sea and with Trebizonde, trade on the Danube, American trade with the Turks, and cotton culture.

Covering almost forty years, these letters and articles are the only personal American observations and commentary on general life in Constantinople and surrounding areas during the intensive years of the "Eastern Question." Brown was there during the European Revolutions of 1848, the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the expansion of American trade, growing missionary activity and its many problems, and the strains of increasing Westernization. All of these events are reflected in his writings. Furthermore, as Conn writes, "The spontaneous nature of these letters makes them more valid sensors of the times than the books and memoirs written by missionaries and others long after the passage of events. Not only do the articles provide the historian with greater material for a more balanced appraisal of the period, but [they] furnish the general reader with literature of a highly animated style, and lasting interest."¹³ Collected and properly edited, they would constitute a major source for students of the Ottoman empire in the nineteenth century and further justify considering Brown to be one of America's leading early orientalists.¹⁴

13. "John Porter Brown," 244.

14. Conn has listed these writings in his dissertation, pp. 295–305.