

Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters, with an afterword by Dervla Murphy*, London: Eland Publishing Ltd, 2021, 262 p.

The Turkish Embassy Letters written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu are one of the most famous examples of epistolary travel texts from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While her works were first published more than two centuries ago new editions and redactions are constantly published quite regularly. Along with dozens of editions of her writings, there is a large number of articles and books written about Lady Mary and her work. The latest edition of the Turkish Embassy Letters was published in 2021 by Eland Books with a new biographical afterword by Dervla Murphy and text annotations by Barnaby Rogerson.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu born Pierrepont in 1689 and died in 1762 was a famous English aristocrat, traveller, poet, and writer. She is mostly recognized in today's society as one of the first female travel writers as well as one of the best historical accounts of the Ottoman Empire, especially the everyday life in the court of the Ottoman Sultan and the Grand Vizir. Her openness and sincerity towards the Ottoman way of life and their culture were not present in other contemporary writers of Lady Mary's era. She was the wife of Sir Edward Wortley Montagu, a prominent politician, businessman, and Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during their rising conflicts with the Habsburg Empire. He became Ambassador of King George I in 1716 and spent the next couple of years living in the Ottoman Empire. On this trip, he was accompanied by his wife and young children. Since he was tasked to be the Ambassador this meant that he did not have a lot of time to devote to his wife and children. As a consequence, Lady Mary was left with an abundance of free time to spend in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople, with other wealthy and aristocratic wives from the West, as well as the wives of the Ottoman dignitaries. This meant that she was able to observe and relay the intimate details of the Ottoman private life, especially that of the everyday life that the wealthy Ottoman women lived.

While she did in some cases write about politics, her main focus was the everyday life in the Ottoman Empire and the interconnectedness of their society. Lady Mary was especially interested in learning more about the lifestyles, architecture, manners, and customs, and she based her research on different sources, most of which were inaccessible to other writers of the time. One key element of her book is the constant comparison between the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire, more precisely the comparison between the Ottoman and the British. In Lady Mary's writing, she is almost exclusively fonder of the Ottomans than she is of the British. This can be attributed to two factors. The first one is her growing affection towards the 'Turks' as time passed by and her keen interest in constantly exploring the unfamiliar and learning new things, especially those uncommon for her and nonstandard for women of that time. She was one of the main proponents of smallpox inoculation in England. The second reason for this can also lie in the format of the book.

The distinct feature of her book is the fact that it is an epistolary travel text composed exclusively of private letters which Lady Mary sent to her closest family members and friends. Because of this, she was keen on representing either familiar events and customs which her readers were accustomed to, or quite the opposite those events and customs they were quite unfamiliar with, and which were by the standards of Lady Mary quite superior. For example, the treatment for smallpox disease in the Ottoman Empire.

This format of Lady Mary's writings also meant that the tone and narrative, as well as the focus of the writings, and the content of the letters changed depending on who the receiver was. This meant that we are sometimes given an incomplete overview of certain events and cannot follow them chronologically. Nevertheless, her attention to detail and ability to write meant that the most interesting elements of Ottoman society could not be omitted in the fifty-eight letters which comprise the book. The book can be also divided into three distinct parts. The first part of the book focuses on the travels of Lady Mary and her family through continental Europe to

Constantinople. In these letters, Lady Mary talks about her travels as well as how she perceived the Habsburg Empire and its social elites. The second, and largest part of the book covers the stay of Lady Mary in Constantinople and the life of her family in the Ottoman Empire. The last part is composed of the letters written by Lady Mary on her return voyage from the Ottoman Empire back home to England.

As previously mentioned, Lady Mary was one of the first modern female travel writers who explored the everyday life and practices of her hosts and people she got acquainted through her travels. Her work represents one of the pinnacles of travel literature on the Ottoman Empire. Primarily because of her openness towards new experiences and secondly because of her stature as the wife of an English Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. In the two years she stayed in the Ottoman Empire she carefully observed their society and even participated in local events without any prejudice.

Besides the fifty-eight letters written by Lady Mary, the book ends with a fascinating and detailed biographical afterword by Dervla Murphy and with a comprehensive text annotation by Barnaby Rogerson. Similarly, as her travel writings were quite interesting and intriguing, Lady Mary's life is also quite fascinating. Murphy points out that while Lady Mary was a free spirit and an early feminist, who was a self-educated intellectual, she was at the same time a member of the high society with numerous friends at court and was an entitled aristocrat.

All in all, the life and writings of Lady Mary are of great interest to any scholar who is interested in studying the Ottoman Empire, especially the everyday life and social interactions in the upper class. While Lady Mary lived and wrote 300 years ago her letters still have a great impact on our perception of the Ottoman Empire. This work is also a key source that openly questions and refutes earlier writings that viewed and observed the Ottoman Empire as an exotic and rather uncivilized realm.

Omer Merzić