"...ORIENTALISM, AMBIGUITY AND INTERVENTION"

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Category: Opinions

Khatchatur I. Pilikan's *Review*, Published in **The Spokesman,**
for the **Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.**
Spokesman 111 ------ 2011, pp 89-91

> ***Jo Laycock, Imagining Armenia: Orientalism, Ambiguity and Intervention, Manchester University Press,***
> ***258 pages, hardback ISBN 9780719078170, £60***

It is a challenging task to choose a pictorial or graphic front page/jacket image for a book with a title such as the above. Yet Lois Raemaekers' *Detail from Armenia* of 1917 somehow sets the tone for the contents and conclusions of this book. It is the image of a corpulent mother figure, with scarf covered head, in a quasi Rodin-esque thinking pause, lost in the dilemma of her whereabouts and 'what to do next', with her youngster beside her facing the onlooker with bewildered eyes piercing the unknown. Raemaekers' image, which appeared then as *The Lord Mayor of London Appeals for Help* poster, is also reproduced in the book. As if delineating this same image, Joanne Laycock, now a Post-doctoral Fellow in Armenian Studies at the University of Michigan concludes her impressive study, saying:

Despite the coming of independence in 1991 the ambiguous image of Armenia is still embedded in complex power relations as Armenia continues to negotiate a place in the post-Soviet world. (p.228)

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Perusing through the *Introduction*, I felt Laycock was very much engulfed in the condescending aura of some of the Armenian American historians emulating bygone *Orientalists*, those targeted by E. Said's criticism. She has quoted (p.5) the following characteristic remark of R.G. Suny:

Often directed toward an'ethnic' rather than a broader international or scholarly audience, Armenian historical writing has been narrowly concerned with fostering a positive view of an endangered nationality ... Criticsm has been avoided as if it might aid present enemies and certain kinds of inquiry have been shunned as betrayels of the national cause. (*Constructing Primordialism*, p. 2)

No surprise then the absence of Armenian history written in the Armenian language from this study, the exception being the Russian edition of A. J. Kirakossian's *Great Britain and the Armenian Question:1890s*, published in Yerevan in 1990, and the same Kirakossian as editor to *The Armenian Massacres, 1894-1896*, published in Detroit in 2004. Also, Laycock's last Chapter, *Post-war Armenia*, has three quotes from British Aid workers, found in the Armenian National Archives which leads the Primary Sources, abbreviated in the *Notes* as NAA.

My initial impression, though, did somehow yield its relevance to the impact I gathered from the multi-layerd construction of her thesis. She has essentially examined the portrayel in Britain of Armenia and the Armenians during the 19th and 20th centuries. Hence, she could have probably felt in tune with some aspects of Levon A. Bayramian's pioneering book in Armenian, published in Yerevan in 1982, entitled *Western Armenia in The Plans of English Imperialism.* Yet Bayramian's book is an absentee from Laycock's study.

Before Said's *Orientalism* became a houshold name in Academia, a couple of Armenian writers did indulge in classifying aspects of what 'others' – non Armenians -- have presented Armenia and the Armenians, the latter being in their own turn the 'other' to the non Armenians, as, for example, *Armenia Observed*, ed. by Ara Baliozian (1979), and *As Others See Us*, by Leo Hamalian (1980), both in English. Christopher Walker's *Visions of Ararat* (1997), a collection of exclusively British writing on Armenia, was a welcome addition to the *genre.* The latter book has deserved a mention as 'a notable exception' by Laycock in her *Introduction* (p.4).

While recording nineteenth century impressions of Armenian Architecture, including the admiration of Layard (*Discoveries*, 1850, p.33) and Lynch (*Armenia*, 1902, p.371), Jo Laycock has felt the importance of mentioning, in her corresponding *Notes* (p.92), the work of Josef Strsygovski, the noted Viennese professor. But, alas, the matter is discussed without the crucial Armenian primary source.

The renowned architect and scholar of Antiquities, Toros Toramanian (1864-1934), was a pioneer of architectural studies in Armenia during the late 19th century and early 1900s. It is a well known fact that Toramanian met Strsygovski twice, in Vienna and in Armenia, handing over most of his architectural research sketches and copious manuscripts of his studies to Strsygovsky, long before the appearance of the latter's monumental work, *Die Baukunst Der Armenier und Europe,* of 1918. Strsygovsky failed to indicate that major source of his research, and his work is labelled by Christina Moranci as:

highly political and offensive work which linked Indo-European thought to Architecture. (*Medieval Armenian Architecture*, p. 1, quoted by Jo Laycock, p. 92).

The necessity of such criticism was long overdue since the entrenchment of William Jones' pronouncement of 1786 that European and Indian languages such as Greek, Latin and Sanskrit must have sprung from a common proto-language, hence the name *Indo-European.* As Language and architecture were thought to exemplify both national and cultural identities, the concept of a proto-language became a major attraction for Orientalist discourse, including Strsygovsky's.

Yet, Toramanian, whose remaining research manuscripts and sketches were postumously published -- entitled *Armenian Architecture,* by the Armenian SSR Academy, Yerevan, in two munumental volumes, 1942 (v.1), 1948, (v.2) -- specifically mentions the following in his own Introductory Notes:

It is obvious that nothing decisive yet exists pertaining the proto-language of today's many existing languages, but for which hypothetical assumptions more than certainties abound. (v 2, p.3):

Such crucial differences of opinion between primary sources indicate the importance of not neglecting crucial Armenian original sources, such as Toramanian and many others, especially when dealing with, and even *Imagining* about, a country, its people and its culture. That might have perhaps somehow lessened the projected *ambiguity* of the tale, even when narrated skillfully through the notes of 'others', distinguished as they were.

Significantly, Laycock's *Imagining Armenia* is an imaginative study of the permutations of the concept of the 'other' in relation to Britain and Armenia during a turbulant historical period, culminating in the First World War and the Genocide of the Armenians. She uses, perhaps unwittingly, but surely with much profit, what Edward Said, the renowned author of *Orientalism* (1978), had suggested in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) to read history and culture 'contrapuntally'. Laycock's contrapuntal analysis of her theses is enlightening, notwithstanding occasional repetitions of the same in various chapters as if paying her debt to counterpoint's initial style of 'imitation'.

Imagining Armenia consists of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. With all the scholarly sophistication, judiciously manipulated to write her book, the author has not failed to tell us a fascinating story about a land, a country and its people as percieved and portrayed, often with ambiguity, by the British, whether writers, travellers, historians, philanthropers and government officials, not forgetting the effect of the contradictory colonial politics of the British empire on the destiny of the land called Armenia and the future of its people, the Armenians.