REFLECTIONS ON BOOKS, CENTRES AND PHILANTHROPY

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Dikran Abrahamian BA, MD, Ontario, Canada, November 7, 2007

Communities and nations are often measured by their cultural contributions. Studying recorded history, analyzing how the present has evolved from the past is part of that endeavor and helps us to better understand ourselves. To this end, the creation of cultural and educational centres through philanthropy to promote such studies is a noble and enlightening cause.

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I have been pondering this line of thought these past couple of months after attending two book presentations, a funeral of a person whom I knew only by name, and exchanging casual greetings with another person with whom my contacts were limited to emails. I sometimes wonder how the mind draws comparisons between events which seemingly have no relevance to each other.

For example, a few weeks ago I attended a lecture sponsored by NAASR (The National Association for Armenian Studies and Research) and the local chapter of AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) in Toronto. The one hundred and sixty kilometers journey was definitely worth the effort! George Bournoutian, recipient of IREX, NDEA and Mellon Fellowships and a Professor of East European and Middle Eastern History at Iona College, captivated the audience like a performing artist. His skill in simplifying and presenting complex historical concepts promoted an intense mood. The experience was akin to being in front of the desktop and enjoying an interactive program which you don't want to end.

The first book he analyzed was *Tigranes II and Rome* by the eminent Armenian historian, H. Manandyan. The book, a new interpretation based on primary sources, describes the dealings ancient Rome had with the Pontic and Armenian Kingdoms during the first century BC. The parallels of regional control demonstrated between this classic period and the present was almost stunning! The audience, like me, was enthralled! Anyone studying this period will find this book a most valuable resource which I highly recommend.

Then Prof. Bournoutian analyzed *The Travel Accounts of Simeon of Poland.* Those who are interested in Ottoman History will be fascinated by this book. The lecturer underlined that European travelers have left numerous accounts on the various provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century, but this book differed from all others, because as the professor points out, Simeon's travels "not only span an uninterrupted period of twelve years, but his accounts are also most detailed on both the places he visited and the people he met." I myself can readily attest that the author's writing style makes you unable to put it down! I finished it in two nights! My humble recommendation

would be to bring this book as a traveling companion and reference tool, to help you fully experience the history and flavor of Alexandria, Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo, Antioch, Istanbul and elsewhere in the Middle East on your next visit there.

And just this past Sunday, I fully enjoyed another intellectual experience. I attended the Hamazkayin Cultural Association's book launch of the Montreal writer, Razmik Panossian's: *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* held at the Armenian Community Centre in Toronto. Panossian's book is based on his PhD dissertation on Armenian identity and nationalism. It won the Lord Bryce Prize for Best Dissertation in Comparative and International Politics in the UK, granted by the UK Political Studies Association. Panossian obtained his PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2000. The book has earned praise from many scholars including Anthony Smith of the London School of Economics and Political Science who wrote that the book is, "a lucid, penetrating, and always fascinating inquiry into the nature of national identity in general and a massive and multifaceted sociological history of the foundations and development of the Armenian nation."
At the launch, Khachig Tölölyan, a Professor of Literature at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, and founder and editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, analyzed the book in an hour's long presentation. He strongly commended the book's style, content and its value as a superb resource in the study of national identity. In addition to his contribution to the study of Armenian history, Tölölyan dissected the meticulous scholarly journey that Panossian had undertaken while exploring the various elements of nationhood that were created, preserved and carried in multifocal centres as far apart as Vienna, Moscow, Tbilisi, Constantinople, Moscow and Madras: all away from a homeland and in the absence of a national state. He underlined the fact that unlike other nations that were created "from above", through actions of states, here was a heterogeneous identity lacking many of the attributes of a "nation" but one that continues to persevere towards a path to nationhood. Panossian's book is a valuable contribution in the study of national identity and will certainly interest students and scholars alike of various branches of humanities.

The organizers of the above events are commended for their excellent choices of presentations. They were worthy of being held at the highest level in a university setting. My only disappointment was the absence of scholars of non Armenian descent. I am sure that many of them, especially from the Metro region, would have enjoyed and appreciated being invited.

A final thought about the centres themselves. Many waves of Armenian and various other immigrants have come to Canada. We have all contributed to enrich this pluralistic, multicultural society. Our various, rich and intertwining histories are being celebrated by and through these various cultural associations and centres. They play a vital role in providing an atmosphere and forum to hear such rich, enlightening and eminent personalities as those mentioned above.