On July 7th, 2005, fifty-six people lost their lives in a series of terrorist attacks in London. The three of the four young men responsible were Muslims of Pakistani origin but were also, crucially, British citizens. Along with the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 and the Madrid bombings in 2004, the attacks in London influenced and informed a broad debate not just about the ‘War on Terror’, but the relationship between ‘the West’ and Islam. Academics and commentators from all points of the political spectrum weighed in on the matter. Some, notably Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes, were eager to draw upon a broader historical context, claiming a threat to Europe from the Islamic world comparable with the Ottoman invasions of the seventeenth century. In the United States, sentiment reached a fever pitch in 2010 over the so-called ‘Ground Zero Mosque’, with Republican leaders and commentators comparing its construction to the Islamic expansion into Spain in the eighth century and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in the mid fifteenth century.

The constant drawing upon, and in many cases the relentless misinterpretation of, history makes the need for rigorous, scholarly assessments of relations between the western and Islamic worlds all the more vital. In their work *Britain and the Islamic World 1558-1713*, Gerald Maclean and Nabil Matar provide a timely reminder of the complexities of these relationships and demonstrate how some attitudes have remained with us since the early modern period. The mission statement of the book is to show ‘a wide range of exposures and conflicts, sources and texts, people and objects, that were instrumental’ in the process of shaping British attitudes towards the Islamic world, and indeed the shaping of Britain itself. (pp.2-3)

The book is divided into six sections:
1.) Muslims and Islam in English Thought
2.) First Diplomatic Exchanges
3.) British Factors, Governors and Diplomats
4.) Captives
5.) The Peoples of the Islamic Empires
6.) Material Culture

The authors caution that it is very difficult to generalise about British attitudes towards Islam. Different classes and groups within Britain held different views across the period, in part because the Islamic world itself was so diffuse. Three great Muslim empires existed during this period: the Ottoman Empire in what is now Turkey, Saudi Arabia and eastern Europe; the Safavid Empire in what is now modern Iran; and the Mughal Empire in what is now Pakistan and India. Within these empires there were a range of different ethnic and religious groups containing not only different permutations of Islam, but Christian and Jewish communities as well.

At the start of the period, it was the Ottoman Empire that attracted most attention, not only by in Britain, but Europe more generally. The mid to late sixteenth century was
the height of Ottoman expansion, and it was these Muslims, or ‘Turks’, who were objects of fear, much more so than the Safavids and Mughals. While politically the Ottomans were seen as tyrannical, much greater fears lurked in the English mindset about the impact of Ottoman culture, particularly the notion that one might ‘turn Turk’. The Ottoman threat towards Christianity was also seen as universal, with Ottoman crescents included in depictions of Christ’s crucifixion, and a sixteenth-century version of the King Arthur legend had Sir Gawain fighting a ‘Sarasin.’ The proliferation of captivity narratives also reflected the threat not just from the Ottomans, but from north African Muslims, particularly in regards to captives who may have converted to Islam in captivity. Even though such conversions were feared, contemporary accounts reflect a greater fear of Catholicism, with a notable account from Richard Hasleton, who:

Displayed greater fear and hatred of Catholics than of Muslims, declared himself better treated by the latter than the former, and described being offered tempting propositions to stay among the Muslims, prosper, marry, grow rich, and settle in a grand house. Catholics threatened to take his life; Moors offered him a job and a better life. (p.135)

By the early eighteenth century and the start of the Ottoman decline, the British focus had shifted to the Mughal Empire, with ‘the peoples of the Islamic … being viewed as a means to a British imperial end.’ (p.30)

However, as the authors point out, conflict and misinterpretation was not the defining theme in the relationship between Britain and the various parts of the Islamic world. Most of the time, trade and political cooperation trumped the distortions disseminated by some English writers about Muslims. This period was the era of the great English trading companies that spread out across the middle and far east. The Turkey Company (renamed the Levant Company after 1581), the Barbary Company, and most famously the East India Company, provide the most comprehensive records of contacts with the Islamic world. As trade grew, these companies would become increasingly powerful and influential in setting the agenda for English and Islamic relations. Politically, relations with the Islamic world were defined by rivalries with other European powers. For the English, it was at times better to ally with Muslim leaders in order to check Catholic advances, as was the case in Elizabeth I’s reign. English factors and ambassadors also attempted to influence policy within the Islamic world. These alliances led to some interesting exchanges:

During the 1570s and 1580s, William Harborne in Istanbul constantly entreated Sultan Murad III for naval support against the Spanish fleet. Pleading that the Protestant religion was far closer to Islam than the idol-worshipping Church of Rome, the earliest English ambassadors were often able to take a lead in religious and political disputes involving Christian communities under Ottoman control. (p.81)

*Britain and the Islamic World* contains a number of anecdotes such as this one to illustrate the complexities of these contacts. It was an era of cooperation and conflict. Extensive end-notes provide a wealth of additional information and sources for the interested reader, vital in a book whose only significant flaw is its brevity. Gerald Maclean and Nabil Matar’s work is vital for understanding not only Islam during the
period 1558-1713, but for deepening understandings of western relations with the Islamic world today.

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