

Posted to (and from) Aleppo: My Father in Syria, 1930–33

Griffith Thomas Couser

DURING most of my youth and adolescence, my father, William Griffith Couser, was a high school English teacher. In fact, he was the chair of the English Department at Melrose (Massachusetts) High School, which my sister Jane and I attended. I was aware that much earlier in his life, not long after he graduated from college in 1927, he had taught at Aleppo College in Syria. After he died, relatively young at sixty-nine in 1975, I discovered among his papers a cache of documents from the three years he taught there. It was only in perusing these documents that I learned that my father was not merely a teacher but, nominally, a missionary: from 1930 to 1933 he was employed by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a body founded in 1810 by New England Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The first American foreign mission, it sent missionaries far afield—to Japan, China, Africa, and Southeast Asia—but also to American Indian tribes during the nineteenth century.

One of the documents I discovered among my father's papers was the program of a church service at the Franklin Street Congregational Church in Manchester, New Hampshire. It revealed to my surprise that on Sunday morning, 29 June 1930, my father received a formal send-off to Syria; the missionary dimension of his work was highlighted by the responsive reading, drawn from Romans 10:

The congregation:

“How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how learn without a teacher? And how shall they teach except they be sent? And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send and who will go for us?”

Mr. Couser:

“Then said I, here am I, send me.”

The implication of this reading is that Dad was heading off to bring the gospel to unbelievers in the tradition of Christ’s disciples.

My initial discovery of these documents in the aftermath of his death raised a number of questions in my mind, questions that seem even more pertinent today, when the United States is embroiled in a conflict its president has undiplomatically referred to as a crusade, and which many regard as a worldwide struggle against a radical form of Islam. As it happens, Aleppo has a minor but intriguing connection to this conflict: before he led the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, Mohammed Atta wrote a thesis in urban planning at the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg on the preservation of Aleppo as an ancient Syrian city. In his thesis he inveighed against alien and disruptive Western influences there, as represented by high-rise buildings—a verbal attack on the Western culture that he followed up with a devastating physical one. When I first found and read my father’s papers in 1975, I could not reconcile my memory of him with my mental image of a missionary. Dad did not seem a very religious man, much less one driven by evangelical fervor. Becoming a missionary in his mid-twenties seemed an uncharacteristic choice for the man I knew much later. (He was slow to marry, and I was not born until 1946.) But careful rereading of his papers, archival research, and reflection on his life trajectory has helped me to make sense of this decision and understand the significance of this short, discrete, but important phase of his life.

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Born in Bessbrook, Northern Ireland, in 1906, my father was brought to the United States in 1910 when his father, Isaac, who was skilled in jacquard weaving, took a position as a foreman in a textile

mill in New England. Over the next decade the family grew as it moved from mill town to mill town, settling eventually in Manchester, where Isaac took a position at the Amoskeag Mill and the family lived in mill housing. Much of the mill architecture survives long after the textile industry moved south, and the long curving Amoskeag facades along the Merrimack River and parallel canals have become iconic images of that era. After graduating from Central High School in Manchester in 1923, Dad went on to the University of New Hampshire; after his freshman year, however, he transferred to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.



William Griffith Couser in Wesleyan yearbook photo, 1927

His going to Wesleyan is remarkable because he was the oldest of five children born in just fourteen years. Although his parents were middle class, they lived modestly and could hardly have afforded to send their oldest child to an expensive private liberal arts college. Dad must have received substantial scholarship aid, which suggests that he must have been an outstanding student at Manchester High. He was not a good student at Wesleyan, however. Although I know him to have been a very bright man, he was evidently an underachiever at college; his transcript reveals a spotty record, mostly C's and D's, with a few incompletes. His short bio in the 1927 yearbook highlights his lackadaisical attitude in the arch style of the day: "Griff's [*sic*] greatest genius lies in the musical art. He developed a magnificent snore with a crescendo climax in Hughie

Smith's music course last spring." Part of the explanation for his fecklessness as a student may lie in his having been a member of DKE (Delta Kappa Epsilon), a fraternity that ranked dead last in the "scholarship" competition his senior year. He seems to have taken advantage of being away from home to cut loose a bit, majoring in Greek figuratively as well as literally. In his final semester, however, his performance changed significantly; he seems suddenly to have applied himself, earning A's and winning two prizes for excellence in his major.

After graduation, he returned to Manchester, where he worked for a year as the membership secretary of the YMCA. Founded in 1854, the Manchester Y had initially "offered Bible-study classes and educational programs for young men working in the mills in rented space," according to its website. In the early twentieth century, however, it moved to new quarters and adopted a more secular and physical mission; its new facilities included the state's first indoor pool, a gym, and an indoor track. The new Y was a very important resource for my father and his friends during their adolescence; it seems to have served as a home away from home, a place to make and meet friends as well as to exercise.

It must have been there that he learned to swim, an ability that gave him lifelong gratification. His Wesleyan yearbook profile lists the varsity swim team as one of his extracurricular activities. He may have lacked the raw speed to excel in racing—his name does not appear in any meet results—but he had the most graceful, effortless crawl I have ever seen. Its efficiency was such that his body seemed to move through the water faster than his slow, rhythmic arm strokes could possibly propel it. Swimming—indoors or out, in fresh water or salt, smooth or rough—was his preferred form of exercise all his life. I remember when I was ten, his venturing into high post-hurricane surf at a beach in Maine, unable to resist the challenge, as my mother beseeched him to stay on shore. I watched with a mixture of admiration, excitement, and fear as he was tossed about by the waves. When he came ashore, he was reprimanded by a lifeguard for ignoring signs that the beach was closed. Even in his final decade, when he struggled with depression and related alcohol abuse, there were periods when he would swim regularly at the YMCA in Melrose, Massachusetts, winning ribbons in the master's category.

The Manchester Y continued to be an important retreat for him when he was a married father of two. One of my few distinct memories from my early childhood in Manchester is accompanying my father to the Y one evening, a memory cemented in my mind by

two distinctive smells. As I recollect it, my father and I fled the house, where my mother was washing floors with ammonia, whose odor I found repellent, to take refuge in the Y, with its characteristic smell of chlorine, which I have always found appealing. I did not join him in the pool; rather, I watched from a balcony as my father and other men swam (in the nude, I think). In fact, I recall watching my father dive into the pool from that balcony. But I question this memory not because its athleticism seems implausible—when it came to aquatic sports, my father was a bit of a daredevil—but because it seems out of character for him to display risky behavior to a young son; he was generally quite careful to set a good example. I wonder whether, before he dove, he told me never to try this myself. He needn't have; although in my college years I got my Red Cross Water Safety Instructor badge and taught swimming to day campers, I have never felt at home or adept in the water. I eventually surpassed him in the other sports he taught me—tennis and skiing—but never in swimming. For him, however, swimming was a lifelong resort and resource: recreation in its etymological sense.

After his year at the Y, he taught English for two years at Concord High in New Hampshire. By today's standards his preparation for the classroom was very scanty and his credentials unimpressive. Although he had started out as an English major at Wesleyan, he inexplicably switched to Greek. Beyond the introductory composition sequence, he took only four courses in the English major: two two-semester sequences in Old English and Shakespeare, averaging D+. These courses would seem barely adequate preparation for teaching in New England, and even less so for teaching in Syria. But, although I have little direct knowledge of his first years of teaching, he seems to have done well enough; at least, some word of mouth praise, mostly from appreciative female former students, has reached me long after the fact (in the 1970s) by way of a cousin who practices law in the Concord area.

My discovery that Dad had been a missionary came as such a surprise because his religious convictions were never clear to me. And his religious preparation for his stint as a missionary is even less obvious than his academic preparation for teaching English as a second language. My father's parents were born in Northern Ireland, where the family included members of a quite strict Presbyterian sect known as Covenanters. But in America, Isaac, his wife, Maria Jane Griffith Couser, and their children seem to have embraced a more relaxed form of Protestantism—not evangelical, not Bible-thumping, not anti-Catholic (two of my father's siblings married Catholics), not

even strict temperance. Nor was there any indication in his college activities of developing interest in missionary work or the Near East. (By comparison, Dad's contemporary, Alford Carleton, who was a teacher at Aleppo in 1931–32 and later president of the college, had expressed interest in missionary work while still in high school and got involved in related work with the Student Volunteer Movement while at Oberlin.) At Wesleyan my father was not a member of the Christian Association, nor did he take any courses in religion. His transcripts only hint of any interest in religion is his course in New Testament Greek, and that was a language course, not a religion course.

According to the program of my father's send-off service, however, my father had been a member of the Franklin Street Church for seven years, his college and postgraduate years. The same church was an important part of our family life when we lived in Manchester after World War II, when my father, just out of the Navy, worked for the Veterans Administration. I remember going to Sunday School and church suppers there. And I remember being baptized there at the advanced age of seven. When we moved south to Melrose, a Boston suburb, in the mid-fifties and my father resumed teaching, we continued in the Congregational denomination. But, aside from singing grace before formal meals, religion was something we practiced in church on Sunday, not at home during the week. And my parents' commitment even to church attendance seems to have diminished after my sister Jane and I went off to college. My point is not that my parents were insincere church members, but that, at least in Melrose, their religious observance seemed more conventional and habitual than committed and conscientious. In Manchester, because both had roots there, church membership had a stronger social dimension; they never developed strong social ties with the Melrose congregation. They seemed impelled not by piety but by the desire, in the formula of the day, to be a family that stayed together because it prayed together.

There was an unconventional aspect to their church going, however. When Jane and I were in high school, the entire family would occasionally drive half an hour to attend the Sunday service at the nondenominational Memorial Church on the Harvard campus. Attending church there was a matter of going highbrow rather than high church; it certainly did not raise our social standing in Melrose. My parents were intellectually ambitious, rather than upwardly mobile, churchgoers. I once heard Paul Tillich preach at Harvard, although I don't recall a bit of his sermon, which I am sure was over

my head. In any case, if either of my parents was fervently religious, I had no sense of it, then or later. Outside of ritual prayers, I never heard either express belief in God or personal immortality.

I have no idea where, when, or how my father was recruited to be a missionary. But from references in his letters, I gather that he had met the director of Aleppo College, the Reverend John E. Merrill, PhD, before he went to Syria; perhaps Merrill had spoken at the Franklin Street Church—or even at Wesleyan, which had a tradition of preparing missionaries—and Dad had stepped forward. But wherever and whenever they met, Merrill made a powerful impact on my father, who was not a hero worshiper: in a letter written to his former high school history teacher at the end of his stint in Syria, Dad remarks that his commitment to the work “has outlasted the personal inspiration of Dr. Merrill, whose influence might have accounted for it largely at the beginning.”

Merrill’s inspiration seems to have been more personal than spiritual, and it seems highly unlikely to me that my father was drawn to the Near East by specifically religious motives. Certainly, proselytizing was not part of his curricular duties; his primary responsibility was to teach English as a second language in the Junior School, the Preparatory School, and the College. His extracurricular responsibilities dealt with bodies not souls. He directed athletics; coached football (i.e., soccer), tennis, and track; organized a basketball league (playing on a faculty team himself); and even—implausibly, in Aleppo’s dry climate—taught students to swim, using local farmers’ irrigation pools, which were filled, as he writes, “from adjacent wells by chain-bucket wheels turned by blind-folded donkeys or camels.” He also introduced an informal kind of handball that proved very popular. His students at the time were almost all Armenian refugees from the Turkish genocide, and his fundamental concern seems to have been to give them the educational wherewithal to improve their individual lives—and thus their collective prospects—materially and intellectually, but not spiritually. In a letter to his parents written on 19 October, 1930, he writes,

One has a feeling of contributing much more than is possible in an American school. For most of these boys who come from very poor homes, the school is absolutely their only chance of providing themselves with the means of advancing. They are the raw material out of which their civic leaders will come. Much will depend on the leaders because as a new people here they are faced with hundreds of problems in adjustment.

He noted with pride, too, the marked difference between students new to the school and their older schoolmates.

Three aspects of the school probably account for this gratification. One was that it considered itself an "Opportunity College," that is, one geared to students of limited financial means. Thus, tuition was low, scholarship money was available, and fully half of the students took advantage of various work-study opportunities. Second, the educational philosophy was remarkably progressive. Rather than the standard lecture and recitation method, which emphasizes the transfer of information from teacher to student, the basic instructional method of Aleppo College was "supervised study," or the "conference plan" as described in its bulletin (which was printed on campus by work-study students); the goal was a "constant, continuous, cooperative, democratic, friendly, and human relationship between teacher and student." It was the pedagogical equivalent of Congregationalism, an anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian denomination: like Congregational clergy, teachers were to be Socratic guides rather than dictators. Individuals were permitted to proceed at their own pace, even allowed to complete a course early and transfer their energy and time to another subject. Classes were small and, as much as possible, run as workshops. Third, the school was very ecumenical, especially for a "mission school." Although students were compelled to take a religion class, the curriculum covered not only Old and New Testament (or Hebrew and Christian scripture) but an introduction to the Qu'ran.

Somewhat ironically, my father's letters home suggest that, if anything, his stint as a missionary enabled him to achieve some critical distance on American Protestantism. In one letter he speaks somewhat apologetically of feeling that he was less involved in church work in Aleppo than his family was in Dover, New Hampshire, to which the family had moved when Isaac took a job there with the Pacific Mill in the late 1920s. In Dover, each family member was involved with the Presbyterian church, as his father took pride in reminding him in a letter: Isaac himself was a "nominator" (i.e., a member of the hiring committee) and a sponsor of a scout troop to which Dad's young brother Jim belonged; Isaac and the second oldest son, Tom, raised money for the church; Jim and sister Irene appeared in church plays; the youngest boy, Ken, attended Sunday School "willingly," and his mother Maria attended women's meetings.

Interesting light is shed on the mind of this missionary by a letter he addressed solely to his father. In it, Dad refers to Isaac's having subscribed on his behalf to the church weekly, *The Presbyterian Outlook*. First, he tells his father that this was redundant, as he had his own subscription through the ABCFM, and he insists that Isaac ask for his money back. Then Dad says that he intends to cancel his own subscription:

"The Outlook" seems to have lost much of its appeal. Now it seems too strictly national in character; out here one wishes something more international. Then too it is becoming a bore on the prohibition question. The question is important surely, but I object to reading its propaganda on every page. (15 November 1930)

That my father was no teetotaler in these years is evidenced by a letter to him from a Manchester friend, Howard Russell; working in Hamburg for the German branch of an American firm, Russell looked forward to reconnecting with my father in Europe and "checking up on the development of our comparative abilities at welfare work among the appreciative brewers of beer and wine" (24 June 1931).

More surprising to me, given Dad's Protestant Irish roots, was his appreciative report of midnight Mass at a Franciscan church on Christmas Eve, 1930: "The service was most impressive. Especially I enjoyed the deep rich voices of the monks singing sacred music" (4 January 1931). This may help explain a reference, in an earlier letter, to an Ulster Covenanter missionary in the port of Alexandretta (modern-day Iskenderun), about ten miles from Aleppo, as "so orthodox as to prohibit the use of hymns in any church service he leads. Or is it that the hymns must be psalms?" (1 November 1930). This is not a sympathetic account, and it suggests that his parents would have shared, or at least not minded, his disdain for such punctiliousness. Altogether, it sounds as though his own religious stance was quite ecumenical.

In any case, he objected strenuously to being thought of as a self-sacrificing missionary by anyone at home. The reasons he gave for resenting unsolicited gifts reflect his sense of himself as teaching abroad rather than as ministering to downtrodden heathen at risk to his health and welfare. He expresses real dismay at the news from home that his high school history teacher, Elsie D. Fairbanks, with whom he had stayed in touch, had sent him a gift. And he goes on to discourage anyone from sending him anything he has not requested:

I shall be particularly sensitive about receiving anything from America. One suspects himself of being the object of the kind of feminine sympathy given to the missionary, fantastically imagining them all to be martyring themselves in some barbaric hinterland. I don't think you at home imagine such a thing or that you have such sympathy akin to pity—yet I do not want you to be sending me anything unless I ask for it. (14 December 1930)

So the portrait that emerges from his letters is of a man who was a missionary *malgré lui*, someone who sought to define himself against the received image of his role.

In fact, he was probably not anomalous, not a closet secular humanist among evangelists. As the YMCA seems to have downplayed its religious dimension as its clientele became more middle-class, so in the early twentieth century the ABCFM had become non-sectarian, an aspect that may have helped it penetrate regions where overt evangelism was unwelcome. Some proselytizing among Muslim students in Aleppo was evidently done at a school run by Presbyterians, but Aleppo College was open to students from any religious background. Indeed, a brochure from this period boasts that the staff included people of six nationalities and six “religious communities.” Further, the easy association among the Westerners in Aleppo suggests that the various denominations were not jealous of each other's projects. For example, my father played tennis occasionally with the director of the Presbyterian School (1 November 1930). The camaraderie among the various missionaries suggests that they felt their purposes had more in common than not.

In the twentieth century, the ABCFM often founded and staffed institutions such as hospitals and schools that served humanitarian more than spiritual needs. And Aleppo College arose not out of a proselytizing impulse but out of response to local demand. One of a number of ABCFM educational institutions spread across the Middle East, Aleppo College was a successor to Central Turkey College, which had been founded in 1874 and located in Aintab, in Cilicia in the Ottoman Empire (now Southern Turkey). The mission of Central Turkey College seems to have been to educate Armenian “evangelical” Christians, i.e., Protestants, rather than members of the Armenian Apostolic (Oriental Orthodox) or Armenian Catholic Church. These “evangelical” Christians were a minority within the Christian minority in what had become a Muslim empire. Armenia claims the distinction of being the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state

religion, in the fourth century A.D., but it became part of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century A.D. During the Armenian genocide (1915 to 1923), the College was forced to close. The majority of Armenian survivors fled to Aleppo, where they numbered about 100,000, of whom some 10,000 were Protestant.

With the end of the First World War, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the League of Nation's establishment of a French mandate over Syria in 1922, the Armenian community in Aleppo took root and established its own institutions. The Protestant Armenian community established its own schools, including separate secondary schools for girls and boys. Two higher grades comprising Aleppo College were added to the boys' preparatory school in 1927, and Aleppo College was accredited as such in 1930, when it formally became the successor to Central Turkey College. Although the native population of Aleppo was two-thirds Muslim Arabs and (according to a letter Dad wrote to his church) the student body included Arabs, Assyrians, Greeks, and Jews, the vast majority of his students were Armenians.

Later, during Alford Carleton's presidency (1937-53) the student population evolved to the point at which one third of students were Armenian, one third Arab Christian, and one third Muslim. But as Carleton acknowledges in his autobiography, *Vagaries* (1983),

In actual practice very few students changed their religion, though points of view might be greatly affected. The point is that the religious community was the "nation" to which one belonged, and a change of faith was not apostasy but treason! In fact, the "convert" to any faith was regarded with some suspicion even by the community to which he came. It proved some instability of mind. If a man would change once he might again! (27-28)

Clearly, then, the aim of the College and its related schools was not to make Christians out of infidels but to foster the talents and faiths of students from different religious backgrounds and to encourage mutual understanding among members of separate "nations."

The humanistic rather than sectarian nature of my father's mission is reflected in a letter of appreciation of his work written aboard ship by Dr. John Merrill as he returned to the States in May 1931 for a scheduled furlough year in Hartford, Connecticut. The letter's only remotely spiritual reference is found in Merrill's gratitude for the "quiet whole-souled way in which you have given yourself to the work in Aleppo and to each piece of work as it came along" (May

1931). There is no overt mention of God. Nor is there any in the first letter written to him by Wallace Anderson, minister of the Franklin Street church, which was his partial sponsor. Each year, church offerings during April and May services went toward Dad's salary; Miss Fairbanks tried to stimulate donations during those services by reading excerpts from his letters. Anderson's letter thanks my father for stamps he had sent him, requests additional stamps for a philatelically minded church usher, refers to a Sunday evening course the minister was teaching called "Psychology in Service of the Soul," recaps the most exciting plays of a recent Harvard–Michigan football game, and bemoans the poor prospects of his alma mater, Amherst College, in its upcoming football game with Williams. Some of this exhibition of muscular Christianity may be a matter of (over)compensating for what some perceived to be the unmasculine nature of his profession, rather than a true representation of the values of either correspondent. My father evidently did feel a sense of vocation, but not a primarily spiritual one; more likely, my father's "call" brought together some of the threads I have traced in his life so far: an enjoyment of sport as a builder of character and teamwork, a species of low-intensity Protestantism, and an appreciation for the social and economic, as well as the intellectual, advantages of education.

The obverse side of Dr. Merrill's gratitude to my father is my father's sense of indebtedness to him; he refers to him as genuinely inspirational and as the best man he had ever worked for. My father took to "the work" readily and well, and I suspect it proved more gratifying than any other work he did in his lifetime, with the possible exception of his Navy service during World War II. In fact, as my father concluded his stint there, he seriously considered extending his term and even making a career out of missionary work. He expresses this in words that come as close to religious language as any I have found in his papers. In a letter to his parents begging their indulgence as he deliberated staying for a fourth year, he wrote,

This work has become very significant to me during these three years, but I hardly knew that its influence would be so strong until it came to making this decision. In my letters I haven't said much about it, but perhaps you have had some idea. Is it altogether a surprise when I say that this feeling as I have become aware of it during the year has had almost the strength of a *conviction*. [. . .] I am indeed very busy here, but it is a kind of duty that does not present itself as work. I become completely absorbed in this or that

phase of it but am not conscious of any effort required to do this. [. . .] One is called upon in so many ways to produce, that when I think of teaching again in America, it seems like taking on only half a job, like using only half of myself. (May 1933, emphasis mine)

As this letter suggests, however, whatever sense of mission he felt about his work seems to have followed from, rather than led to, his initial decision. In any case, the sense of mission that characterized his service in Aleppo seems very much in keeping with Alford Carleton's comments in his memoir "What Is a Missionary?":

There is, actually, no such profession as "missionary," though the term is often used and appears on the passports of many church employees engaged in "missionary work," who are on the staff both at home and overseas. A "missionary" actually engages in a special trade or profession, but works under "missionary" auspices. In the Near East Mission our passports carried as "profession" such terms as "teacher" or "school principal," or "agricultural expert" or "nurse" or "medical doctor." (*Vagaries*, 31)

My father, then, was a teacher under missionary auspices.

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I believe that a powerful motive, however unconscious, behind his choice to spend his middle twenties not only abroad but in a remote and alien environment must have been sheer wanderlust and curiosity about the larger world. Of provincial origins, my father had grown up and been educated entirely in New England; to my knowledge he had not been out of the country before he went to Aleppo. Presumably his college years, especially after his transfer to Wesleyan, broadened his awareness of the larger world. At Wesleyan, he would have become more aware of the possibility of missionary work as a career, even if he manifested no interest in it. Another, very different, stimulus may have been the publication, in my father's senior year, 1927, of T. E. Lawrence's account of his exploits during World War I, *Revolt in the Desert*. I did a research paper on Lawrence in high school, and although I don't recall that Dad suggested the topic to me (more likely I was inspired by *Lawrence of Arabia*, the David Lean film of 1962, which I remember attending *en famille* at a grand movie house in Boston), he was an interested and informed reader. And I know now that one of the

people he knew in Aleppo, Dr. Ernest Altounyan, had known T. E. Lawrence from the Englishman's archeological work at Carchemish from 1911 to 1914. According to a memoir by his daughter Taqui, Ernest was quite devastated by Lawrence's death in 1935; he expressed his grief and his admiration in a poem sequence, "Ornament of Honour," published in 1937. I imagine that my father took the opportunity to query Altounyan about the legendary Lawrence.

Even if travel was not his primary motive in going to Aleppo, he took every advantage of his position there to travel widely. To begin with, he seems to have taken a leisurely, exploratory route to his destination. First, he stopped off en route to see relatives in Northern Ireland. Bearing gifts, and the first member of the family to return to their country of origin, he must have seemed an American prodigal son. He does not list the gifts, but he refers in a letter home to the reported failure of the Irish relatives, the Rosses, to communicate their thanks directly to the Couser household in Dover, who were concerned that the gifts had not been appreciated; Dad reassures them that the gifts had gone over well. While in Northern Ireland, Dad seems to have bonded with Fred Ross, his cousin and contemporary. Like Dad, Fred was a schoolteacher, but, as evidenced in the letters they exchanged over the next couple of years, the bond may have been more a function of mutual interests in travel and in culture than in their shared profession. Fred Ross had earned a Ph.D. in chemistry at University College, London, and gone on to work as an industrial chemist in the north of England, but the state of his health—and the industry's pollution—caused him to return to Northern Ireland, where he became headmaster of a religiously mixed private secondary school, Ballymoney High School (later Dalraida School), in Ballymoney.

Despite living in a seeming backwater, Ross comes across in correspondence as very cosmopolitan, and despite having been trained almost exclusively in science, he shows great interest in the arts. When my father inquired as to the possibility of meeting him again in Europe the summer after they first met, Ross replied that he had "dallied with the thought of going to Majorca," which he characterized as "a suburb of Chelsea" and where he said he had "many friends [. . .] mostly artists." According to his son Keith Ross, Fred Ross had "links" to the Bloomsbury group. An opera fan, he bemoaned the fact that a bout of flu had prevented him from hearing Elizabeth Schumann, whom he considered "the greatest singer of all time," in Belfast in 1932, and he offered to introduce my father to

George Sheils, whom he characterized “as the best box office playwright of the Abbey Theatre” if he returned by way of Ireland.

In one of Fred’s letters, there is an intriguing passage that suggests that Dad’s wanderlust may have entailed sexual desire, as well. Ross writes,

I noted rather with surprise—your remarks re Lydia Coles [the sister of a friend of Ross’s]. May I, in confidence, advise you not to take her too seriously. She has slightly hysterical tendencies and her home life has been rather unfortunate. She is extraordinarily impressionable and takes on, like a garment, most of the clichés of her environment. (16 July 1931)

More intriguingly, he goes on to encourage Grif to look up friends of his, Mr. and Mrs. William Monk, in San Remo:

Tell Mrs Monk, née Zara, that you are a cousin of mine and I can assure you of a hearty welcome. . . . In spite of her face she was one of the toasts of Bloomsbury and Chelsea and I don’t quite know how much importance she attaches to the marriage bond.

My father had apparently not struck his cousin as an ascetic who would sublimate his libidinal impulses in missionary endeavors.

From Ireland, he traveled through Europe with his Manchester friends Bob Riedel and Howard Russell, stopping in Vienna and Budapest. Bob seems to have accompanied him as far as Turkey; Dad finally arrived in Syria by train from Istanbul. He described Aleppo later, in a letter to his church, as follows:

From the first Aleppo struck me as the real thing, a “real” Eastern city, fascinating beyond words. Though the day when I thrilled to find it so is long past, I venture even now to say that it is comparable only to what one may imagine. Not what I dared imagine Aleppo would be, but like the rare and romantic places one’s imagination has a special suggestion for.

Densely built, the city spreads widely over the bottom of a great basin the lip of which is a circle of low, bare hills. Conspicuous on a mound in the center is the citadel, aptly described by Lawrence of Arabia as like a cup bottom up in its saucer. About it spreads the mysteriously intricate pattern of flat grey roofs giving a common color effect that accounts for the name “Aleppo the grey.”

After passing through the city one sees that a line may be drawn between what is genuinely and what less genuinely Oriental. Native Eastern costume of all cuts and colors is met throughout the

city, even in the Franco-Syrian quarter where the newer shops and the tram-line are. Eastern dress prevails in the oldest and largest section, the Moslem or Arab quarter. The Great Bazaar is in the Moslem Quarter, in the heart of the old city, and there one's senses are simply filled with the East. I shall not attempt any more of this; really the bazaars beggar one's descriptive powers.

While based in Aleppo, he exploited his location and long vacations to explore the surrounding territory. At some point in his first year he managed trips to Djerablus (Carchemish) and to Baghdad, where he purchased a number of prints and other objects of art or craft to send home. Much of several letters is taken up with describing these items, explaining their function and value to his parents and saying how and by whom they might be used. Not always plausibly: it's a little hard to imagine the family homestead in Dover being adorned with an evocative print of the minaret-pierced skyline of Aleppo or any of his siblings actually wearing the exotic garments he sent home.

At the end of his first year, he visited the College's new acting president, Alford Carleton, and his wife, Mary, at their rented summer bungalow in the village of Sogukoluk in the Amanus mountains north of Aleppo. The village overlooked the port of Alexandretta. After a few days decompressing with them, he boarded a cruise ship in the port below. To conserve his funds he took deck passage, which involved providing his own food and sleeping in a hammock slung on deck. The same hammock hung between a cherry tree and an apple tree in our backyard in Manchester in the 1950s. The itinerary took him along the northern Mediterranean coast with stops in Turkey, Cyprus, Rhodes, and Athens. He disembarked in Brindisi, on the heel of Italy's boot, then traveled up the peninsula to Geneva, where he observed the opening session of the League of Nations Assembly, with which he was much impressed. He considered enrolling in French classes there, but found Switzerland prohibitively expensive and traveled on to Grenoble, where he spent a month studying French. Following that, he returned to Geneva with Bob Riedel before sailing back from Genoa to Alexandretta.

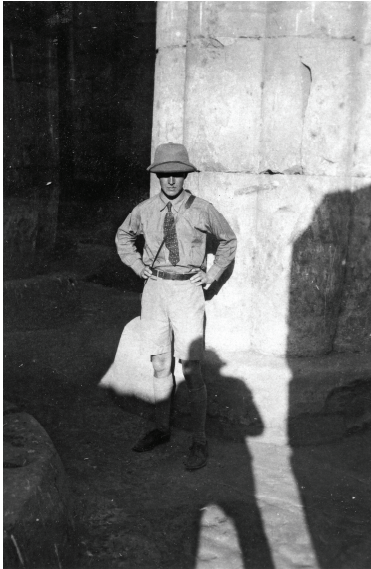
During Dad's middle year in Aleppo, 1931–32, he lived with a fellow teacher, Ernest Bille, a Francophone Swiss from Neuchâtel. Improbably, the two men shared not only an apartment but a birthday, March 24. They seemed to get along well despite a language barrier; this was made easier by my father's summer study of French (perhaps undertaken in part for this reason). The two men took

advantage of school vacations to travel on an Indian motorcycle to various sites in Syria, including Palmyra, Hama, and the famous crusader castle Kalat el Husn (Crac des Chevaliers) studied by T. E. Lawrence. During the Easter vacation of 1932, he and Ernest took a more formal and ambitious trip. The itinerary took them by train from Aleppo to Beirut, where they stayed on the American University campus. From there they drove, with two women teachers, to Jerusalem, driving literally on the beach from Acre to Haifa. After a brief tour of biblical sites, they took a train through the Sinai desert to the Suez Canal, ferried across it, and continued by train to Cairo. After viewing the pyramids, they trained on to Luxor, Thebes, and Karnak. Following that break, he and Ernest spent a weekend in Antioch, visiting missionaries there. In a letter home, he mentions Antioch's New Testament significance—"In Acts, it is mentioned that here the disciples were first called Christians" (17 April 1932)—but he spends most of his time describing its traces of more ancient cultures.

He postponed his summer travels in 1932 to care for Ernest, who was hospitalized with typhus. Dad visited at least once daily, and they used the time to work on Ernest's English. This attention earned him Bille's undying gratitude, which he reiterated in poignant letters written after his return to Switzerland to "Mon Cher Griff [*sic*]," whom he described as his best, indeed his only true, friend. On the very day that Ernest was discharged, he and my father left Aleppo for the mountain resort of Sogukoluk; a week later they embarked from Alexandretta for Naples, stopping at some familiar ports, such as Athens, but also at new ones, such as Smyrna (now Izmir), Turkey. Dad reported that much of it remained a gray ruin dating back to the Turks' expulsion of the Greeks in 1922. Despite Ernest's recent illness, the two men took deck passage, which my father had talked up. When Dad's three-year stint was over in 1933, he traveled home by a direct and economical route, skipping Switzerland, much to Ernest's dismay.

For the most part, these travels are recorded only in unlabeled photos, unfortunately. Although a diary Dad kept while in Syria has been lost, I know that he reveled in the opportunity to explore this ancient and multicultural environment. And, after all, even when Dad wasn't "traveling," he was in Aleppo, and that in itself was delightfully different from the world he had known growing up in New England. One of the world's oldest continuously occupied cities, Aleppo is mainly Arab in look and feel but bears traces of Roman, Hellenistic, Muslim, Byzantine, Ottoman, and of course

French culture. The city was divided into various “quarters”—for Muslims, Jews, Christians, and foreigners. It is clear from letters from M. Bille, who was very nostalgic for Aleppo after his return to Switzerland, that he and my father greatly enjoyed the exoticism of the souks and the local food.



William Griffith Couser at the Temple of Luxor in Egypt, 1932.



Bob Riedel (left) and William Griffith Couser in Bavaria, 1930.

I do not think that this travel was an afterthought or an unanticipated perk of his position; rather, he may have chosen the missionary stint as a way of enabling such travel. Indeed, I think that Dad’s decision to take the job in Aleppo arose out of many of the same motives, and brought the same rewards, that characterize people’s decisions to join the Peace Corps—the opportunity to “see the world” in a nonmilitary capacity and the opportunity, while doing so, to “do some good.” In any case, once he married, settled down, and had children in the 1940s, his opportunities for travel were greatly reduced. Aside from escorting a wealthy young man on a Grand Tour of Europe and Russia in the mid-1930s and a tour of duty as a Navy officer in the South Pacific during World War II, as far as I know, he did not leave the United States again until we took a family tour of Europe in the summer of 1961, camping all the way. At that time, he luxuriated in reminiscences of earlier travels in a way that

suggested that he had found them deeply gratifying and had missed the opportunity to extend them. So, both at the time and even more in retrospect, this phase of his life must have seemed an extraordinary opportunity to “see the world.”

Another factor that may seem to have played a role in his decision, given its timing, was the Great Depression. But the impact of the national economic collapse on his life course should not be overestimated. After all, he already had a teaching job, and teaching was a relatively secure profession during that era. That security may help to explain why Dad’s younger sister Irene and my mother, who graduated from college in 1929, chose to become teachers. As far as I know, his job in Concord had been secure, and he resumed teaching, in Manchester, apparently without difficulty, when he returned to the States in 1933. Although many of his contemporaries struggled to find or keep work, he does not seem to have been fleeing a bad job market when he chose to teach in Syria. Judging from letters to him from his father and his brother Tom, the Dover Cousers did not suffer any particular deprivation during the Depression. Despite cutbacks by both of their employers, Isaac retained his job with the mill and Tom his with a utility firm, and both seem to have been compensated adequately; my father characterizes Christmas gifts from the mill to the family by saying that it was “considerable to be remembered in this way with conditions what they are” (24 January 1932). Further, various investments—the “Woonsocket Cooperative” and one in Franklin, New Hampshire—were reported to be maturing successfully. Letters from home also noted the acquisition of a new car by Tom and a Kelvinator by the family, its first refrigerator.

The impact of the Depression, however, may be felt in my father’s insistence on his frugality as a traveler. Despite the fact that the family did not need him to be a breadwinner, he did not want to appear extravagant at a time when many at home were out of work. And when he sent gifts home, as he regularly did, he emphasized what bargains they had been and often specified whether they were liable to custom fees on receipt in the United States. If so, he offered to pay the duty himself on his return. When, during his first summer’s travels, his father sent him more money than requested (and, my father suspected, more than the entire balance of his Dover bank account), he reacted with protestation but also deep gratitude and went on to boast of his ingenuity in traveling on the cheap—although he does not go into detail, except to note that swimming in Lake Geneva at a municipal bathing facility was free (11 August 1931).

Despite the attraction of travel, one might also wonder, however, why an employable, red-blooded male—later described as dashing by some of his former female students to a cousin of mine who practices law in Concord—would want to relocate to a place where the number and availability of women his age would be limited. With one intriguing exception: under the French mandate between the world wars, Syria had legalized prostitution, one aspect of Western culture that gave it a bad name with Muslims. One gets a sense of his impact upon impressionable female students from a fan letter sent to him by Esther Hunt, then a freshman at the State Normal School in Keene. She retails all the reading she’s doing, how much she’s benefiting from having taken her senior high school English course with Dad, and concludes:

I’m afraid I’ve raved terribly in this letter. Somehow it seems so natural to be writing something for you to read but I don’t really expect to get this back with a mark on it. But I did want you [to] know that I appreciate all that you did for us last year, that it’s helping us now and will for ever and ever. (8 February 1931)

Any heterosexual male English teacher (I know; I am one) would be delighted to get such a letter, and to be teaching only male students in Aleppo must have been a letdown in this regard. The Aleppo Girls’ School did have a few female teachers, and there were a couple of apparently unattached women around—Alford Carleton met his future wife there—but none gets more than passing mention in his letters.

But there is no sign that he was abandoning a sweetheart or retreating from a failed affair; at least, no love letters survive. The only letter to a woman apparently his age takes the form of polite gratitude for her “companionship.” I quote it almost in its entirety to give a sense of my father’s exquisite epistolary manner(s) and to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about the nature of the relationship. It was written on 20 June 1930, on the verge of the summer during which he knew he was to depart for distant shores.

Dear Jill,

Many, many thanks for your note. I felt I should be writing you first to thank you for your kind companionship during our stay in Boston, and when your letter came, I was, for a moment, put out with myself for having delayed. Then I smiled a bit as it quickly occurred [*sic*] to me how absurd it was to think of being ahead of

Jill Wallace in doing a thoughtful thing. It was so kind of you. I only fear you have been made to feel I was in need of kindness.

There were and there are many problems that perplex me, and I would not have you troubled with them, but if you will let me think of you and at times write you or see you, I shall be stronger for it. May I also hope to hear from you occasionally, to know at least how you are and where you are.

On the one hand, this sounds too formal to be a *billet-doux*; it is polite, not intimate, in tone. On the other, however it came into his possession (it's not a carbon copy; it was handwritten), Dad did save it, and it hints at a relationship that he wished to sustain in some form even with no likelihood of seeing Jill in the foreseeable future.

* * *

Whatever his motives or expectations, when he arrived in Aleppo during the summer of 1930 to begin his three-year stint, he settled into a house in the Aziziyeh quarter that he shared with the Merrills "less as a boarder than a member of the family" (7 July 1931). Curiously, despite this physical and apparently emotional closeness, John Merrill consistently addresses my father in correspondence as "Mr. Couser"; this may be the formalism of the period or an attempt to retain some distance between employer and employee.

In the first surviving letter home, written in early October, he refers to having already received a series of letters from home, beginning in August. In his return letters, he remarks on the news of the day, both in Dover and on the world stage: the disastrous crash of the English dirigible R101 (an event unknown to me until I read his reference to it), disturbances in Northern Ireland, and the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. One characteristic feature of his epistolary style is to echo the concerns of correspondence he received. Though not surprising, this is frustrating to a reader more curious about his life in Aleppo than that of the family back home in Dover. But he obviously felt it important to express his ongoing interest in events on the home front, no matter how trivial. In his first letter home, he refers nostalgically to late summer activities like apple-picking; one senses an undercurrent of homesickness that he wishes to prevent from breaking through the surface of his prose:

I read about apples, having cider made, gathering grapes, and they seem to work like magic in bringing to me the atmosphere of this

season at home. I suppose that by the time this letter reaches you the leaves will have begun to turn. I shall not see much of that this year but shall experience the autumn of another land. Already I know it as a land of many colors although there are fewer trees than I have been used to. One depends on other natural causes for the color and they supply it. (5 October 1930)

Dad must have spent nearly all of his time during the term on the campus. Classes were held every day but Sunday, although Wednesday and Saturday were half-days. With classes to prepare and sports to coach, he would not have had much free time. Although Wesleyan had compulsory chapel while Dad was a student, he makes no mention of such a requirement at Aleppo College; most likely students and faculty worshiped weekly at local churches. As I've indicated, in his second year, Dad roomed with the French-speaking Ernest Bille. The subsequent year, Dad shared quarters with an American named Markham; they dubbed their apartment the Embassy. Thus, despite living in a French-controlled Arab land with a largely Muslim population and having a French-speaking roommate for one year, he would have spent the vast majority of his time among Anglophone Christians.

Probably the most interesting among his small social circle were the Altounyans. In a letter home written in early November 1930, Dad reported with pride that he was a charter member of "the Etcetera Club," which was initiated by the Altounyans and held a different sort of gathering each week. The patriarch of this family, Aram Assadour Altounyan, was born in 1854 in the original Armenian homeland, the Caucasus Mountains. After graduating from ABC-FM's Central Turkey College in Aintab in 1874, he went to medical school in England. Returning to practice in Aleppo (then also in the Ottoman Empire), he married Harriet Riddell, a nurse from Armagh, Northern Ireland, who was working as a matron in a mission hospital and had founded a Protestant church in Aleppo. In the late nineteenth century, he founded his own hospital in Aleppo, where he worked for the rest of his life. His having successfully treated successive Turkish rulers (Jemal Pasha and Jemal Ataturk) before World War I gave him immunity from persecution during the genocide; he managed to extend that protection to other Armenians, effectively sheltering them.

His son Ernest was born in England in 1889 and raised in the manner of an English gentleman. In 1902 he was sent to Rugby, where he became friends with Robin Collingwood, later the well-

known philosopher R. G. Collingwood. In 1915, Ernest married one of Robin's sisters, Dora. He interrupted his medical training to serve in the British Army during World War I. After the war, he completed his training and moved to Aleppo in 1919 to join his father at the hospital. The two men had a stone house built for them across the street from the hospital; they occupied separate floors in the house and apparently lived quite separate lives. As suggested earlier, Ernest seems to have been a kind of poet manqué—a more worldly and sophisticated man than his father. Among his friends were not only T. E. Lawrence and Robin Collingwood but the critic and author “Uncle” Arthur Ransome, who based the characters in his children's book, *Swallows and Amazons*, on Ernest's children, conferring on them an odd sort of immortality. As Anglo-American colonials of high social status, all four of Ernest's children were home-schooled until they were sent to boarding school in England, rather than to the nearby mission schools.

Ernest's one son, Roger, born in 1922, also became a physician. As the inventor of the “spinhaler” for asthma patients, he was the most famous of the three generations of Altounyan doctors. His older sister Taqui, born in 1917, became the family historian, by virtue of writing two memoirs, *In Aleppo Once* (1969) and *Chimes from a Wooden Bell* (1990). (The title of the former comes from a line in Othello's final soliloquy.) Together, her memoirs give a vivid picture of the lives of this Anglo-Armenian family. Following the Suez Canal crisis, in which England acted contrary to Arab nationalist interests, the Altounyan family was expelled from Syria on short notice. The family house was bulldozed and the hospital converted into a school; in effect, their multigenerational contribution to the health and welfare of Aleppines was ended and its traces erased. As a result, none of the family returned to Syria for a very long time.

Only when Taqui returned to Aleppo to visit decades later did she realize how insulated she had been from Arab life while growing up. This is clear, however, in her early memoir, in which she refers to the stone house as “the fortress” and remarks, “Together we formed a tight, self-contained community as though in an island fortress surrounded by the sea, which was Aleppo town” (50). Even within the expatriate community, the family lived in kind of bubble; they had numerous indigenous servants to do errands and menial tasks for them. And the children were never allowed to leave the compound unless chauffeured or otherwise chaperoned.

An entirely unexpected payoff for locating *In Aleppo Once* came when I stumbled upon this passage late in the book, in which Taqui Altounyan quotes from her girlhood diary:

That autumn there was also Mr. C., a new teacher in the boys' school, who, of course, came under our microscope, or rather, our distorting magnifying glass. [My sister] Titty and I agreed that he was "Abstract noun. Common gender. Objective case. Very intransitive verb. Most passive voice." But he was very probably an ordinary, perhaps rather shy, young man, who was not particularly interested in girls of fourteen and under. My diary is full of scathing remarks about "grown-ups"—the clothes and hats they wore, the things they said. Everyone was either a friend or an enemy, and there were no half-tones. Young men were usually silly, but I was interested in Mr. C., the games master. I could usually catch sight of him in the distance, from our tennis court, drilling the boys in a neighbouring field. My diary is severe: "After the Christmas party charades Mr. C. came out of his shell amazingly. He even dared to bang on the table." Whenever we met I would be aggressive. He did not know how to take me, having no idea what I was feeling. Later I sent him cards from boarding school and he sent me one, which I treasured for a long time. (154–55)

Needless to say, Mr. C is my father. I was startled (in a way, spooked), touched, and immensely gratified to come across this reference so serendipitously (and at a late stage in my research). While I am relieved that my father was not interested in teenaged girls, I am glad that he made such an impression, happier that Taqui recorded it and thus endowed him with a kind of cryptic immortality some thirty-five years after they met. I only wish my father had come across the passage himself.

The Altounyans were generous to include my father in their circle. This social outlet beyond the relatively narrow orbit of the school staff must have helped fill the void created by his absence from his own large family. The Altounyans' having children, some the age of his own siblings, must have appealed to him. Being granted admission to their world must have been quite a thrill; I don't think he ever, before or after, had such access to people of equivalent privilege, status, and social connection. They were not particularly wealthy, and by his daughter's account Ernest was not entirely happy to be living in Aleppo. He seems to have remained there partly out of a sense of duty to his father and a sense that he could not afford to raise his large family in England. Still, in the

current parlance they “divided their time” between Aleppo and the English Lake District. And to a young man from New Hampshire they must have seemed to live a rather rarefied life. So while the Altounyans may have been insulated from much of Aleppo’s vibrant culture, my father’s acquaintance with them would have given him a glimpse into a social world hugely different from that provided by his relatively provincial upbringing. Participating in their relatively circumscribed life must have significantly broadened his.

At another margin of his small social world was the College’s Arabic instructor, a local man of Turkic and Arab descent. Surprisingly, Dad reports that this man’s uncle had been commander of the Turkish army in the Caucasus during the war, a connection one would think would not endear him to his Armenian students. That Dad’s occasions to see how the native population lived may have been relatively rare is suggested by his detailed description of the house of the instructor, Fouad Aintabi. He refers to it as

the home of one of the best and oldest families in Aleppo. [. . .] They have a fine, old Arab house in which they have lived for years. From the outside one can get no idea of the charm of such a house built around a spacious open courtyard with pool and orange trees in the center. The outside aspect is simply a part of the continuous wall of the alley-like streets, with low, heavily studded iron doors at intervals. (24 January 1932)

My father seems to have been remarkably nonjudgmental about the local population. The only evidence of stereotyping of Muslims comes in a letter to his brother Tom. Interestingly, it has to do not with religion or “culture” but with sport; he invidiously compares their athleticism to that of his Armenian students:

The Armenians take to games as if it were instinctive with them; they seem actually born to sport. This is quite in contrast with the attitude of the Mohammedans who, though quite interested in sport, are interested in it as a spectacle; that is, from the spectator point of view. The idea of participating seems to suggest to them losing their dignity, soiling their hands, in other words being plebeian.

But he immediately qualifies this observation:

I shouldn’t speak too generally, however. There are clubs of young Armenians men who are very active in sport but the young Syrian,

city variety is inclined to use strong scent, hang around the coffee house and develop girth.

And he goes on to express disappointment with the Armenian approach to football:

The idea of playing as an organized unit is not one that takes on so quickly. The attitude of mind that has been produced in the Armenians as a result of what they have been through in the last two decades is not one that is naturally receptive to the idea of team play. The “every man for himself” idea has pretty firmly implanted itself.

* * *

At the end of his three-year term he was faced with a dilemma. Because of budget cuts necessitated by the Depression, the ABCFM considered not replacing him. But it occurred to Dr. Merrill, who was to return as director, to argue that if Grif were to stay, the board could use the money that otherwise would have paid his passage home and his replacement’s passage out to fund him for another year. So he was invited to extend his term for a fourth year. This dilemma generated a flurry of letters home: to his brother Tom, feeling out the local situation and inquiring as to openings in Dover; to Miss Fairbanks, who was not encouraging about job possibilities in Manchester; and to his parents, explaining his situation and seeking their blessing, should he decide to stay.

On one hand, Dad very much enjoyed his work and apparently considered making a career of it. He was also very wary of being unemployed should he return to the States: he told Tom, “I could not forgive myself if I had to be idle.” On the other, as the oldest child, he felt somewhat guilty for having deserted his family—despite his parents’ reassurances. In any case, he was not ready to commit himself to a career in teaching abroad without further reflection from a stateside perspective as well as the graduate education without which he felt he could not advance. No doubt, too, he missed his family and friends. In the end, he decided not to decide: he offered to stay if the Prudential (finance) Committee cut the tutor’s salary and he would not be replaced. It turned out that it was not necessary for him to stay, and he returned to take up life in the United States, much traveled and eager to begin graduate work in education.

As it happened, he never did that graduate work, and late in his career, at least, I think he regretted not having a graduate degree of any sort. As the head of the English Department at Melrose High School, he had counterparts, and even subordinates, with such degrees. Ironically, although he did not pursue the graduate training he thought would help him prepare for a possible return to Syria, his work in Syria must have functioned as a kind of extracurricular preparation for teaching in the United States. I certainly can't imagine a better credential for someone teaching high school in the United States today. While I don't remember his ever referring in the classroom to his time in Aleppo when I was his student, I think his experience there and his travels in the Near East gave him a sense of the variousness of human cultures and religions that lent an extra dimension to his teaching throughout his career. And to this day, at class reunions or at more serendipitous meetings, his former students speak highly of him as a teacher and mentor. In particular, some have mentioned being grateful, some forty years later, for Dad's opening their eyes to things outside the standard English curriculum, such as visual art or theater.

Although Dad never returned to Aleppo, he did stay in contact with the Merrills and the Carletons, who occasionally visited our family at our home in Melrose, at least twenty years after his time in Syria. Our Armenian friends also served to remind him of, and connect him to, that era of his life. My childhood in Melrose was punctuated by family trips back and forth to Belmont to visit with the Parseghians: Richard, who had attended Aleppo College, his wife, Angel, and their three children. Richard had become a very successful clothier, and the family seemed highly assimilated into the quite conformist life of an American suburb in the 1950s. But although they belonged to an Armenian church and had extensive ties to the large Armenian community in the Boston area, what registered with me and Jane as their ethnic marker when we visited them was not the adults' grave discussions of events in the Near East, but the food served, both in its abundance and its character: pistachios, shish kebab, rice pilaf, yogurt drinks, baklava and "bird's nest" pastry, and other dishes I cannot name. The cuisine was strikingly different from our family's usual fare in its spiciness, ingredients, and in its labor-intensiveness for the women who prepared it. One effect—not the most important, to be sure—of these visits to the Parseghians was that my sister and I became fans of

“ethnic” food *avant la lettre* and more adventurous eaters than most of our contemporaries.

Our family’s acquaintance with the Parseghians had more serious implications, as well. My sister and I knew that the core of this group were either my father’s former students or other alumni of Aleppo College who had fled the genocide carried out by the Turks during World War I and later emigrated from Syria to settle in New England. Indeed, one of my few distinct memories of my time in Manchester is of attending the ceremony at which one of these individuals, Dr. Paul Hasserjian, was naturalized as a U.S. citizen. Recently, I located his son, Dr. Robert Hasserjian, using the Internet, and he fleshed out his father’s story for me. Born in 1914, Paul was only nine months old when his father was removed to a concentration camp in Der Ez Zor, in the Syrian desert, where he (and countless others) later died. Paul and his mother lived secretly with neighbors in Aintab until they were able to flee Turkey for Aleppo in 1921. After studying at Aleppo College while my father was there, Paul went to the American University of Beirut, and subsequently became a radiologist. During World War II, his Jewish mentor in Lebanon emigrated to New Hampshire, and he encouraged Paul to follow in his footsteps, which he did in 1947.

As a result of being in regular contact with Armenian friends, my sister and I grew up with an awareness of the Armenian genocide that was rare for our generation, most of whom associated the term exclusively with the later European Holocaust, represented to us primarily by *The Diary of Anne Frank*—the book, the play, and the movie. I got a strange shock of recognition not long ago when, on impulse, I Googled “Richard Parseghian.” The search engine led me to a recently constructed website on the Armenian genocide titled “The Forgotten.” There I found Richard’s familiar face and could hear his distinctive voice telling how, as a child, he had watched a Turkish soldier beat his father. Some ten years after his death and now nearly a century after the events occurred, his testimony can still be heard.

Another, more subtle, legacy of my father’s years in Aleppo was the effect of our constant exposure to artifacts from the Near East. Underfoot or hung on walls were some small rugs my father had brought back or sent back from Syria. He also had collections of coins and buttons—small, inexpensive, highly portable souvenirs. More precious and fragile are tear bottles. Customarily, mourners would bury these vessels, containing their tears, with the dead; long burial gives the vessels a lustrous iridescence. Stored in the attic

were colorful robes, headdresses, and “slippers” that Dad had sent home. Although we saw these mostly when they were retrieved and lent to the church to be used as costumes for the magi in Christmas pageants, we grew up being familiar with Arab garb; it remained exotic to us, but it was not alien. In all of these subtle ways, Jane and I grew up in a household quite different from most in our rather white-bread suburb. Despite the fact that my father rarely spoke about this period of his life in a sustained way, it was a formative experience for him and, in an indirect way, for me and my sister. While he may have been motivated in the beginning as much by curiosity and a taste for adventure as by any sense of “mission,” my father’s letters home suggest that his experience in Aleppo engaged him in a serious, even profound way; his developing sense of mission, however, was rooted not so much in faith in God as in faith in a liberal education. This faith sustained him throughout his career. I think, though, the stakes may have seemed lower in his long stateside career than in his short Syrian sojourn. Going to Aleppo in the first place must have been a function of his defining values and motives, as I have tried to suggest here, and it undoubtedly shaped his view of the world and his profession for the rest of his life. Some of that inevitably rubbed off on his children; Jane and I are indirect beneficiaries of his missionary experience. Only as I have reached middle age and approach the end of my own career as a teacher have I come to appreciate how extraordinary it was for him to take a position in such a distant and alien place. Certainly, in view of recent world-historical events, I find his open-minded curiosity and his nonsectarian stance toward Near Eastern culture all the more impressive and admirable.

* * *

As I suggested at the outset, my initial knowledge of my father’s time in Syria was very sketchy, assembled piecemeal and by osmosis over a period of years. I do not recall his ever discussing it with me and Jane in any systematic or detailed way. He never sat us down with an atlas and traced his extensive travels; he never showed us the many pictures he took during his sojourn; I did not know of his letters from Syria until I discovered them after his death. Instead of hearing about it from him, I have undertaken two distinct, but closely related projects. One project is a personal one, a memoir of my father, beginning with discrete periods of his life before he married,

based on his papers; this piece constitutes its first installment. This project was prompted by my nagging sense that, although I am much more like my father than my mother, I had never felt very close to him; indeed, I didn't feel I had known him very well. (I felt much closer to, and more comfortable with, my mother.) The other project is academic, a survey and analysis of filial narratives (that is, memoirs of fathers by sons or daughters) produced (mostly) in North America in the last twenty-five years. A few years ago, I noticed that such texts were appearing with considerable frequency; I began to track them and quickly worked up a bibliography of nearly one hundred such narratives published in the United States since about 1980.

My research into filial narrative thus far suggests that the predominance of narratives of fathers is a function primarily of the relative inaccessibility of fathers to their children. When children write a parent's life, it seems, they are driven to write memoirs of the distant or absent parent. Often, the writing of these narratives is a way of restoring, repairing, or even enacting a relationship with the parent who seemed less available to the author. This certainly is the case with me. My father was in many ways a mystery and a bafflement to me. And his premature death, after years of unsuccessful treatment (including electroshock therapy) for depression and in the wake of my mother's death of cancer, deprived me of the one person who might resolve his mysteries. Discovering his papers after his death, I read through them, and shared them with my sister. But, stunned by his relatively sudden death and paralyzed by my unresolved grief, I then put them aside, not to consult them again for fully thirty years.

My recent resurrection of his dead letters is no doubt a function of a long-lingering sense of unfinished business. I have no sense that he had compiled a dossier for me to discover—that he intended to communicate with me through these documents—yet I feel that his papers, especially his letters, are in effect my patrimony, my most significant legacy from him. And as I enter my sixties and contemplate my own mortality, I find myself seeking a deeper understanding of my father. I have chosen lifewriting—rather than, say, psychotherapy—as my means. And instead of starting with the unpleasant last chapter, I have chosen to reconstruct his life using the documents, mostly self-written, that survive from his premarital life. I have no independent knowledge of this stage of his life, of course, and I have no personal stake in it. For a number of reasons, it seemed a good, safe place to start. And to my gratification, archival and

Internet research has helped me flesh out a portrait of him as a young man. Thus, ironically, after a career of analyzing lifewriting, I find myself unexpectedly doing it. And from this new perspective, I can report that the process can be highly rewarding. While I am perhaps no closer to penetrating the mystery of my father's terminal depression, I feel that I now understand this formative phase of his life in a new way and historical perspective. By reading his self-life-writing and doing some of my own, I feel I have come to know my father better some thirty years after his death than I did when he was alive and present to me. In any case, although his letters were not addressed to me, I feel that I have in some sense finally responded to them.