

Man on the Spot: Captain George Gracey and British policy towards the Assyrians, 1917-1945¹

The promises or alleged promises made on behalf of the British Government to the Arabs, Jews, Armenians and Kurds in the period 1914-1918 have absorbed historians ever since. The case of the Assyrians has been overlooked. This study examines claims that in the autumn of 1917, a British Army officer enticed the Assyrians into the war on behalf of the Allies with promises of support at the war's end. In doing so it makes reference to the fragile mechanism whereby Britain sought to implement policy in the Middle East. Conclusive proof that such guarantees were given may never be found but this research underlines the legacy of British involvement in the Middle East during the First World War.

British policy in the Middle East during and after the First World War has been scrutinized in detail since the release of the official papers in the late 1960s. The seminal importance of the war years in the political geography of the region has also been reflected in a preoccupation with the various promises and agreements into which the British Government or its agents entered, allegedly or in fact, with the peoples of the region.² Most notable of these is the so called McMahon-Hussein correspondence, a series of exchanges between Sir Henry McMahon, High Commissioner in Cairo, and Sherif (later King) Hussein of the Hejaz. By virtue of that correspondence, Hussein believed, or claimed to believe, that Britain had undertaken to recognize Arab independence in a large area of the Arab Middle East. As preparations for a post-war peace conference began, British officials began to itemise such commitments to better understand the position from which they, and their political masters, would bargain. Although

the various commitments and promises to the Arabs featured prominently in such analysis and have remained prominent in historiographical terms, this is less true, if only marginally so, of those commitments or promises to the Armenians and the Kurds.³ Thus far, however, the case of the Assyrians has evaded the microscope.⁴ The fate of that ancient Christian people, heirs of Nineveh, approximately forty thousand in number, was closely bound with the various proposals that were put forward in 1918-19 for the frontiers of Mesopotamia. As an ethnic and religious minority which straddled the, still fluid, boundaries of Persia, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Syria, and with vocal supporters especially in the United Kingdom, the Assyrians could not be neglected when discussions of the geo-politics of the region as a whole commenced. In fact, the future of the Assyrian people persisted as an issue in British policy from the latter stages of the First World War and resurfaced in official debates until the outbreak of war in 1939. Then, after a brief lull, Assyrian claims for a homeland recurred, with renewed vigour during the latter stages of that conflict and were discussed intermittently until at least 1955, when the Assyrian Levies were disbanded. This study investigates the nature of Britain's alleged or actual pledges to the Assyrians during the First World War, and the manner in which those undertakings resurfaced up until the end of the Second World War.

A further strand of this piece which is illuminated by the Assyrian issue, are the difficulties associated with the execution of British policy in the Middle East during and immediately after the First World War. Symptomatic of this was the existence of various Cabinet and departmental committees, competing departmental interests, and competing military authorities. Beneath these complex layers of officialdom, there was inevitably, somewhere, a man whose task it was to implement government policy; assuming such a thing existed: the so-called 'man on the spot'.⁵ The Middle East during the First World War offered a gallery of such individuals and in this context the nature of British commitments as they emerged was closely linked to the abilities, limitations and prejudices of individuals in the region. This is true, for example, of the wayward but brilliant Arnold Wilson, Acting Civil Commissioner in Bagdad at thirty four, and responsible for a territory that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Caspian and south to the Persian Gulf. It might also apply to the case of Reginald Teague Jones, at thirty years of age British Commissioner in Transcaspia, who was held to have committed Britain to the financial support of the government there. Or, at a less elevated level, Major Edward Noel, who romped through Kurdish areas of northern Mesopotamia and Persia reportedly inflating the expectations of its people as rapidly as Lord Curzon, the Acting Foreign Secretary, could

dampen them. The phenomenon of the man on the spot is a further strand of this study and in this respect it may be seen as a cautionary tale.

By the time that he obtained his Army Commission in 1914, George Gracey was already very familiar with the Armenian provinces of Anatolia and also with northern Mesopotamia. By background he was a missionary, educated in Belfast, but, if an obituary of him is to be believed, more the soldier than the missionary in appearance.⁶ Between 1904 and 1914 Gracey had been superintendent of a US missionary industrial institute at Urfa. In view of his detailed knowledge of the region, as well as his linguistic skills (he had fluent Turkish, good Armenian, as well as some Kurdish and Russian), he transferred to intelligence duties, serving with the British Military Mission at Tiflis as a Special Intelligence Officer. Early in 1918 Gracey was sent on a mission to combat Turkish propaganda among Kurdish tribes. Subsequently, he worked for the Foreign Office as British Commissioner at Erivan under the direction of Sir Oliver Wardrop,

British Commissioner for Transcaucasia, who was based at Tiflis. During the war he is held to have personally saved, by leading them to safety from Van to Igdir, twenty five thousand Armenians. Ranald MacDonell, who served as vice-consul at Baku during the First World War and afterwards worked in the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, commented on this episode and on Gracey's skill in moving large numbers of people to safety. To him, Gracey resembled Moses with the Israelites, or Borrow, who 'believes that the Bible and adventure make good companions'.⁷ In October 1918 Gracey, with members of the Caucasus Military Mission, was taken prisoner by Bolshevik troops, was held in Moscow for nine months and was subsequently released in an exchange of prisoners between Britain and the Soviet Union.

However, Gracey's story was familiar for another reason. Like some others of his kind, having once found favour in Whitehall, that support dwindled. Given the extensive nature of British military and political commitments in the region during and immediately after the First World War, the list of such casualties was correspondingly long.⁸ In Gracey's case, in the autumn of 1920, at Erivan, prostrated by acute physical pain from nervous dyspepsia brought on by his duties and by his captivity in Moscow, his Foreign Office superiors had him replaced and Gracey was told that for the time being at least there was no

position for him at the Foreign Office.⁹ Thereafter Gracey, who resumed his charitable work, had a lingering presence among the Foreign Office files. To some officials he was a menace; to others a reliable if rather frequent correspondent. At the height of the Mosul boundary dispute, when the League of Nations attempted to adjudicate on the claims of Turkey and Iraq, Gracey had visited relief centres in Mosul, interviewing Christians who had been displaced by the dispute, communicating his findings to the Foreign Office and to *The Times*.¹⁰ More generally, as General Secretary of the charitable organisation, Friends of Armenia, during the 1920s Gracey had frequent cause to contact or call at the Foreign Office. This was particularly so from 1929, when he also acted as overseas delegate for the Save the Children Fund, and when efforts were being made by the League of Nations to resolve the significant Christian refugee problem in the Middle East. Gracey was well known and indeed respected by Lord Bryce, by senior churchmen and others of that ilk.¹¹ The disfavour of some Foreign Office officials arose partly because of Gracey's preoccupation with charitable relief, a subject which lacked obvious political significance. More importantly perhaps, as British Commissioner at Erivan, Gracey was held to have acted against the interests of a US investigatory commission under Colonel William Haskell, which had been despatched by the Allies to investigate

conditions in Armenia.¹² As a result of this, in 1920 talk of a further award to accompany his DSO was quietly dropped.¹³ Somewhat later, in June 1931, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, recalled Gracey as a 'pleasant, well meaning but irresponsible man.'¹⁴

Gracey's case also highlights broader issues relating to the conduct of British policy in the Caucasus and the northern fringes of Mesopotamia and Persia. The oversight and execution of that policy was undermined considerably by a lack of reliable information from the region. By the time reports arrived in London and had been discussed by various committees the situation on the ground had often changed radically. The committees themselves emerged as a response to divided responsibilities between the Foreign and India Offices, the responsibilities of the service departments and pressure of business on the War Cabinet.¹⁵ Military and civilian officials in the Middle East, often under intense pressure to act, could not always await instructions from London and accordingly the behaviour of the man on the spot was integral to the emergence of an expectation of assistance from Britain. George Curzon was aware of this and referred to it repeatedly in 1919 when British commitments appeared to spiral out of control.¹⁶ However, the difficulties faced by the man on the spot were often overlooked in London. For example, by the autumn of

1919, Gracey faced considerable challenges at Erivan; among them potential and then actual conflict between Armenians and Azeris, between Armenians and Bolsheviks, and, intermittently, between Armenians and Georgians.¹⁷ In the city of Erivan typhus, cholera and malaria were rife and people died in the streets. There were two hundred thousand refugees to be cared for. Gracey found his salary inadequate for his personal needs.¹⁸ Meanwhile Foreign Office officials niggled about the length of telegrams from Erivan and, by default looked to voluntary sources to provide relief; in this case the Lord Mayor's Relief Fund, with which Gracey was closely connected. Whilst the British Cabinet and its Eastern Committee debated the feasibility and consequences of permitting France or the United States to go to the assistance of the Armenians, little practical assistance was given. The War Office refused to arm the Armenians in case they provoked neighbouring states even though the Azeris were clearly planning military action in order to take the intervening and hotly contested Zangezur region. Gracey's request for guidance on how to deal with Colonel Haskell and his staff as well as US missionaries, elicited no response other than that the Foreign Office was unable to advise.¹⁹

Gracey, who was well known to the government in Erivan, was also under personal pressure to commit the British Government further. In an interview with Alexander Khatissian, its president, the day after his

arrival in September 1919, he was welcomed as one 'who had been with them in their distress and in their martyrdom'. The President and his people 'looked forward to a greater bond of sympathy.'²⁰ Two months later Gracey reported that Khatissian wanted him to enter into direct political relations on behalf of the British Government.²¹ However, although Gracey's official employment ended in 1920 the precise significance of his activities in the Middle East had yet to become apparent.

As previously mentioned throughout the 1920s Gracey maintained contact with the Foreign Office. This was largely because of investigations being conducted by the League of Nations into the repatriation of Armenian refugees and the settlement by the League of the Mosul boundary. Gracey visited the Middle East on at least two occasions, sending copies of his reports on the plight of Christian refugees to the Foreign Office.²² Through his charity work he was closely involved in the issue of Christian minorities in Iraq, among them Chaldeans and Jacobites, as that country moved towards independence. His chief concern, however, was the welfare of the large community of Assyrian Christians, heirs of the ancient Assyrian Empire. Prior to the First World War the Assyrians had settled in and around Urmia in Persia, in the northernmost Kurdish areas of Mesopotamia, and in the Hakkari district which in 1925 was

transferred from Iraq to Turkey. By the time of Gracey's visit to Mosul in the winter of 1925-6 those Assyrians who remained in Iraq were disliked by Arab Iraqis who strongly resented their tendency to regard themselves as 'British protégés'.²³ They were also disliked because of suspicions which emerged in the early 1920s that the French might facilitate Assyrian aims for a 'Greater Assyria'.²⁴

Unusually for a member of Lloyd George's war time coalition government, Robert, Lord Cecil, had always maintained that Britain must honour its wartime pledges in the Middle East. This was true with regard to the French, and the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 and with regard to the Armenians.²⁵ In the spring of 1931 Cecil had telephoned George Rendel, head of the Eastern Department at the Foreign Office to request his help in locating a paper which he was certain existed and which, he said, recorded a categorical pledge given by a British officer to the Assyrians that if they took up arms against the Turk their future would be guaranteed.²⁶ In 1931, Cecil was President of the League of Nations Union and a former Assistant Foreign Secretary, who retained close ties with the Foreign Office, and who wished to prevent the persecution of Iraq's minorities when that country attained its independence. The task of locating the information

was passed to William Childs, a temporary clerk in the Eastern Department.²⁷

In December 1917 Gracey, then attached to the British Military Mission at Tiflis, had been sent to the area west of Lake Urmia, in north-west Persia. The precise nature of his instructions is unclear; several versions having emerged subsequently. The ostensible military purpose of Allied efforts there was to mobilize Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds to defend part of the front between the Black Sea and Bagdad. The Assyrians were to have been organized by a force of Russian officers and money and munitions were to have been provided for them. According to Gracey he found the Assyrians divided and, having consulted French, US and Russian consular representatives he was sent to heal the rift.²⁸ Due to Russia dropping out of the war the scheme for defending the Black Sea-Bagdad line was not realized and the Assyrian forces were obliged to retreat into Mesopotamia. Use of the Foreign Office card index took Childs to a note by Gracey from 1919 in which he had explained the necessary destruction of many of his earlier reports to prevent them from having fallen into the hands of the Bolsheviks.²⁹ According to Childs, no evidence of any instructions to Gracey or reports from him from that time could be found either at the Foreign Office or, after enquiry, at the War Office or among papers of the Committee of Imperial Defence. Cecil was not satisfied with this

explanation and was adamant that a pledge had been given. As a result, Childs interviewed Gracey at the end of July 1931 and showed him a report from late 1918 prepared by the Assyrian Refugee Committee in Tehran in which the claims about Gracey were mentioned; the only evidence that could be found in the Foreign Office archives.³⁰ Specifically, the report recorded that when, in the summer of 1917, Russian forces began to disintegrate in the Caucasus and on the Turkish-Persian frontier, delegates from the Assyrian community were sent to meet representatives of the Allies in Tiflis. In response a letter was given to these Assyrian delegates, signed by a Russian General, Levandovsky, in which they were instructed to keep themselves for a month longer and 'they would send military help.' As the report continued, in the autumn of 1917 Gracey arrived to try to form an army which would stop the advance of the Turks from Mosul. Gracey's intention was to form this army from among the Assyrian people and to this end he held several meetings with the Assyrians; the last of these being in the house of the Mar Shimun, the spiritual leader of the Assyrians. The meeting was attended by Russian, French and US consular officers. According to the report:

The gist of the whole discussion directed to a mutual understanding having two points in view. First that the

Assyrians should furnish men to make the fighting force and to protect the Salmas, Urumia and Solduz front until the arrival of the Allied army. Second that the Allies take it upon themselves to furnish money, munitions, officers and an adequate force...and that in case the Allies became victorious they would grant to us a permanent and fundamental protection with all the privileges promised to small and oppressed peoples.

Gracey, when confronted with this account, was reportedly 'indignant' that his meaning had been distorted in such a way as to imply an offer of British protection. He then agreed to provide his version of what had happened but applied a condition; that he should be officially asked. His ongoing involvement with the Assyrian people in relief work, and his outspoken championing of their cause for a new homeland meant that he would not wish to prejudice their future.³¹ George Rendel, head of the Eastern Department, also had qualms, though for different reasons, and asked Stephen Gaselee, the Foreign Office Librarian, to send the request. It was, according to Rendel, an issue of history not of politics.³² In fact, Rendel was being rather slippery. On the claims of the Assyrian Refugee Commission at Tehran he raised the objection that the guarantees, if they had been given, were contingent on the

Allies being victorious but that in the case of Turkey, they had been unable to impose terms on her.³³

Contrary to Rendel's view, the issue had far more than historical significance. Its pressing political import became clear in the following year, 1932, when Iraq attained its independence and concern mounted about the future of its minorities; a concern heightened, rather ironically, by the bombing of some Kurds by the Royal Air Force.³⁴ In May 1932 Childs was again asked to comment on Gracey's activities in December 1917. Further evidence had been submitted by the Assyrians and was based on eye witness accounts of Colonel Paul Caujole, the head of the French Mission at Urmia in 1917, and Monsieur Basile Nikitine, the Russian vice-consul at Urmia in 1917. According to Childs, whilst Caujole's testimony implied that Gracey had only pledged his *personal* support, that of Nikitine was open to wider interpretation. However, as both had provided their testimony in 1922, some five years after the events in question, and at the request of Agha Petros, who was in 1922 a prominent leader of one Assyrian faction, formerly a colonel in the Russian Army, and a man of mixed reputation, Childs considered the evidence rather weak.³⁵ As Childs had noted in September 1931, it was 'incredible that [Gracey] a junior officer, visiting Urmia without direct instructions, and, as it were, accidentally, should have confidentially (sic) pledged H.M.G. in the way

that the Assyrians claim that he did.³⁶ In fact, Childs knew Gracey from his own pre-war experience in Asia Minor and had some sympathy with his position. Of his own experience of civilian travel in the Armenian districts of Turkey in 1912, and in particular his visit to the Armenian town of Zeitun, Childs noted:

I had not been inside the walls of the town three minutes before my way was blocked by a frantic crowd of Armenians, hailing me as a British officer sent to assist them against the Turks, or at least to see, on behalf of the British Government, what was going on in Zeitun. Nothing I could do at the time would persuade the people from such dangerous delusions. These Armenians were in the shadow of impending danger. The fact that an Englishman had visibly arrived was positive proof for them that he would not have undertaken the hardship of visiting Zeitun at this juncture unless on an official mission. It was only by leaving the town the next day that doubt was cast upon my "mission" but, even so, only partially, as I afterwards heard.

As Childs concluded, Gracey's unexpected arrival at Urmia in uniform, amid heightened tensions and with the consent of his French and

Russian colleagues might understandably have inflated the Assyrians' expectations. 'Nothing less would be believed than that such visible British intervention meant at least a British promise to grant all that the Assyrians thought they required.'³⁷ If nothing else, Childs appeared to have satisfied George Rendel. Perhaps hoping to brush the matter under the carpet, Rendel commented sarcastically on the 'faculty of Orientals for misunderstanding and misrepresenting simple facts'.³⁸

The consequences of Gracey's actions, howsoever interpreted, were significant and might have been considerably worse had it not been for the fact that in 1925, when settling the border between Iraq and Turkey, the Hakkari district, the traditional homeland of the Assyrians, had, as previously mentioned, been awarded to Turkey. This decision was made against British advice which had backed the Iraqi claim partly because it raised the possibility of obtaining a more favourable frontier for Iraq.³⁹ As British efforts to settle the Assyrians in Iraq were only partially successful, and as from 1932 Britain had to maintain good relations with the Iraqi government, it became necessary to resettle a substantial portion of the Assyrian population outside Iraq.⁴⁰ Resettlement, rather than absorption into Iraq was favoured for

several reasons; not least the durability of the latter idea. Britain's High Commissioner (then Ambassador) in Iraq, Sir Francis Humphrys, was in little doubt about the unpopularity of the Assyrians among the majority of the Arab Iraqi population. The Assyrians and the Assyrian issue were seen to have solicited foreign interference in Iraq and to have raised the prospect of further interference on the eve of independence.⁴¹ This was accentuated by other factors, among them the Assyrians' proclaimed loyalty to Britain as the mandatory power rather than to the Iraqi government. More significantly, such concerns on the part of the Iraqi government were increased in the aftermath of massacres committed by Iraqi troops against Assyrians crossing the border from Syria into Iraq in August 1933. The idea of an investigation possibly under League of Nations auspices, was felt likely to strengthen Iraqi hostility towards the Assyrians and the western powers.⁴² The Assyrians were also tainted in Iraqi eyes by their employment in the Levies. Indeed, their employment in the suppression of Kurdish separatism and unrest during the 1920s, enforced long-standing differences between them and the predominant Kurdish population of northern Iraq.⁴³

The preferred resettlement area of a League of Nations investigation, headed by Dr Fridtjof Nansen and conducted under the aegis of the Nansen International Office for Refugees, was the Parana district of

Brazil. However, efforts to woo the Brazilian press by a British officer deputed by the League of Nations had been largely ineffective.⁴⁴ The Brazilian Assembly and the Brazilian people remained hostile to the idea and conditions attached to the acceptance of the Assyrians by Brazil were deemed unacceptable. In particular, the Brazilian Government insisted that if the settlement did not work then the Assyrians might be sent back to Iraq; something which British officials considered to be unacceptable and counterproductive.⁴⁵

Clutching at straws, and before the Brazil option had entirely fizzled out, correspondence ensued with the Colonial Office about relocation within the British Empire. However, the Colonial Office proceeded to block first Canada, then Cyprus, Mauritius, the Seychelles, Ceylon, Malaya, Northern Rhodesia and Uganda, among other countries.⁴⁶ Even Australia and India were suggested, only to be dismissed in turn. The idea of India was supported by Leo Amery, formerly Secretary of State for the Colonies and Dominions, and Amery, on the basis of various reports from mountaineering parties, was convinced that Kashmir, in particular, would be suitable. Writing to Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India in July 1934, Amery suggested that the Maharaja of Kashmir might create a gendarmerie of Assyrians.⁴⁷ Hoare had considerable sympathy for the Assyrians, having organised relief work among Russian refugees in 1921-2 in the Near East, and having

most probably encountered Assyrians then and again in 1925, when, as Secretary of State for Air he had travelled to Iraq with Amery.⁴⁸ However, having considered Amery's proposal he replied that he had already approached the Government of India but to no avail. Its view, and the view of his advisers in London, was that there would be insurmountable political objections, as well as the fundamental problem of introducing an alien people, with no proven economic capacity, to a country which was already over-populated. In fact, the idea was regarded with some humour by George Stanley, acting as Governor General of India in the absence of Lord Willingdon. Writing to Hoare in mid-July 1934, he noted a suggestion that the Assyrians might be sent to Geneva, under the direction of officers recently discarded from the Indian Army, and that they might form an army of the League under the command of Robert Cecil.⁴⁹

Settlement within the empire was favoured by those charitable bodies with which Gracey was involved. However, the Foreign Office either considered or investigated a great many countries outside the empire. According to John Sterndale Bennett, it was a 'choice of being sent to Timbuctoo or going to Hell';⁵⁰ the irony being that France had in fact offered land near Timbuctoo for the Assyrians. In the case of British Guiana, which for a time emerged as the only realistic option, a film was commissioned to advertise its merits among the Assyrians. The

Assyrians were suspicious and detected efforts to abandon them in a black hole. The proposed settlement was over a week from civilization.⁵¹ To George Rendel, contemplating the bloody clashes between Assyrians and Iraqis in the previous August, the pressing need for the Assyrians to be settled somewhere other than Iraq was a matter of principle as well as one of necessity. In Rendel's view, the desire of the Assyrians to remain a homogenous group within Iraq, a 'state within a state', was incompatible with the intention of the Iraqi government to establish a modern unified state. If they were to stay this might lead to more serious clashes which might engulf the whole of Kurdistan and develop into a 'serious anti-Christian and anti-foreign movement...in the whole of Iraq'.⁵²

There were other complications; among them the cost of relocating the Assyrians. If Britain did not press for Iraqi subventions this might be interpreted as an admission of culpability and as a green light for Iraq to ill-treat its other minorities.⁵³ Declarations made by Sir Francis Humphrys before the Permanent Mandates Commission in June 1931 were also seen to have left Britain with a moral responsibility for the subsequent ill-treatment of the Assyrians. On that occasion, Humphrys had assured the Commission that the minorities in Iraq were not in danger and that if Iraq proved unworthy of the trust placed in her then the moral responsibility for that must lie with Britain. Partly on the

basis of these assurances, the Commission was willing to contemplate the termination of the British mandate.⁵⁴

Further difficulties in handling the issue arose as a result of differences between Humphrys and the Foreign Office in assessing the Mar Shimun, the Assyrian Patriarch, and the extent of his authority. Humphrys, from an earlier stage than most, considered him the villain of the piece and that he had manipulated his own people and was playing to the gallery of outraged, if largely ignorant, international opinion. However, notwithstanding the efforts made by Britain on the Assyrians' behalf during the 1920s – including extensive relief efforts – Britain was not judged to have binding legal obligations in terms of providing for their future.

Besides these difficulties the potential relocation of the Assyrians was also complicated by the geographical dispersal of the Assyrians within and without Iraq's borders and by the fact that a small number of Assyrian families were content to remain in Iraq.⁵⁵ By 1933 responsibility had drifted from London and Bagdad to Geneva, where a special committee, drawn from member states, met under League of Nations auspices to discuss the Assyrian issue.⁵⁶ That committee had primary responsibility for investigating and facilitating, in consultation with the Iraqi government, the settlement of the Assyrians outside Iraq. It had also to investigate the measures taken by the Iraqi

government to assist those Assyrians who might wish to remain in Iraq (in keeping with a previous Council resolution), and also received reports from the Iraqi government about those Assyrians left destitute by the massacres committed in August 1933.⁵⁷

To the British Foreign Office this arrangement had some advantages. In 1931-2 the Assyrians had petitioned the League of Nations, demanding autonomy in northern Iraq, and, when that failed, threatened to establish this by force. Added to this, the remaining Assyrians serving in the levies, threatened to resign.⁵⁸ However, the creation of the League of Nations Committee also had its risks. In particular if the various resettlement schemes fell through and it was decided to integrate the Assyrians into Iraq, this would inevitably lead to conflict between Iraq and the League, and Britain would be drawn into it. Added to this there was the attitude of the French authorities in Syria. Periodically, they apparently attempted to manipulate the Assyrian issue to obtain a more favourable border for Syria. It has also been claimed that King Faisal, the Hashemite ruler of Iraq, if not the majority of his subjects, believed that France, rather than Britain, was inciting the Assyrians against the Iraqis and that France was ultimately responsible for the Assyrian attack of August 1933.⁵⁹ Admittedly, French officials in Syria tolerated the presence of Assyrians who had taken refuge there and eventually were prepared also to admit the

families of those refugees. However, in general France deliberately abstained from involvement; aware that any interference might spark an incident with the Iraqi authorities at a time when Syria was proving extremely difficult to govern.⁶⁰ Although British officials periodically toyed with the idea of settling the entire Assyrian community in Syria, this was felt to be problematic given the difficulties faced by the French, the probable ending of the French mandate and the likelihood that in the event of their moving to Syria, the Assyrians would simply be replicating their predicament in Iraq. This, it seems, was one reason for the rejection in 1936-7 of the proposal, backed by the League of Nations, for the settlement of the Assyrians on the Ghab River in Syria. A further, though less widely aired reason against this solution, was that in Syria the Assyrians would come under pressure to convert to Catholicism; something that would undermine the Anglican Church and its missionary efforts.⁶¹ More importantly, perhaps, British officials feared that if Faisal realized his aim of obtaining the Syrian as well as the Iraqi thrones then French influence might in time extend into Mosul and other parts of Iraq, something which Britain must seek to avoid.⁶²

The Assyrian case was reminiscent of other episodes of British policy in the Middle East during and after the First World War. That is not simply because of the involvement of William Childs, who, in 1930 had expertly analysed the promises made by Sir Henry McMahon to Hussein of Mecca.⁶³ When, in late 1915, news reached London of McMahon's promises to the Arabs and again in 1920, when the scope of President Wilson's ideas about the future of Armenia became clear, in desperation politicians and officials made reference to building castles in the air.⁶⁴ Precisely the same might have been said of the Assyrians. Officials were almost certainly aware that a more numerous and influential group than the Assyrians would have pressed the issue to the greater detriment of Britain's prestige. Gracey's Assyrian promises also echoed those of McMahon in another respect. Both men, after all, like many of their kind, had been given some latitude in their activities, both subsequently felt the need to try to justify their actions, and both McMahon and Gracey suffered in terms of their official associations as a result of their actions.⁶⁵

Of the extent of Gracey's culpability it is difficult to be precise. If he did commit Britain then he took the sensible precaution of destroying not only his despatches from December 1917 but also, as he himself noted, the copies of these despatches as well as notes he had made on them.⁶⁶ However, some interesting questions remain. One of these is

the way that Gracey submitted his reports, a number of them being sent to the Foreign Office and to his immediate superior in the Caucasus a whole year or two after completion.⁶⁷ There is a sense in Gracey's self-justifications of an anxious mind, the circumstances of his capture and his subsequent imprisonment notwithstanding. When, almost fourteen years after the events of December 1917, he complied with Gaselee's request to provide a statement, he showed a remarkably clear recollection of the detail of what had occurred.⁶⁸ Although Foreign Office staff seemed to accept this explanation, on one occasion, when defending himself against charges of having committed Britain, he changed the detail of his story in such a way that one official termed it 'almost less than the actual truth'.⁶⁹ However, Gracey was helped by the fact that, on the eve of his mission in December 1917 his orders had been communicated to him orally by General Offley Shore, who according to Gracey, stated that he 'would have to be guided by the exigencies of the different, difficult and trying situations as they arose';⁷⁰ a fairly meaningless instruction. Gracey claimed that notwithstanding his personal feelings on the matter of Assyrian independence, in December 1917 he had only pledged his personal support but recalled that with the support of Cajole and Nikitine he had stated his belief that 'the Allied Governments would consider sympathetically such representations as

they would make along such lines.⁷¹ Though entirely understandable, in view of the circumstances, this utterance was unwise.

Refuting similar charges made by Canon William Wigram at a public lecture at the Royal Central Asiatic Society in October 1933, Gracey noted that in December 1917 he had told the Assyrians 'that by fighting in the Russian Army they would be defending themselves and working out their future welfare with the Russians, and that if they were successful, in all probability the Russians and the British Government would do something to see that justice would be given to them.'⁷²

Gracey was also rather fortunate in that the US State Department chose not to disclose further testimony dating from 1926, which further illuminated his activities in 1917-18. One source, a Dr Y M Yonan, clearly reinforced Gracey's culpability.⁷³ That the State Department apparently chose not to communicate this information to the Foreign Office may have owed something to the fact that Yonan's testimony also revealed the complicity in Gracey's promises, alleged or otherwise, of Dr John Shedd, the US Vice-Consul at Urmia and a prominent missionary. More importantly, perhaps, the US Consul at Tabriz in Persia, Augustin Ferrin, when collating this material in 1926, had found evidence that Shedd (as well as other US missionaries) had directly contravened his orders and had actively engaged in political,

military and intelligence transmission activities in connection with the Assyrians and British operations.⁷⁴

Ferrin's task related to the possible resumption of an investigation into atrocities that occurred in 1918-19 in and around Urmia. In particular, these included the death of a French bishop, Sontag, and over six hundred Christians at the French Catholic Mission at Urmia and of two hundred and seventy individuals, including three naturalized American citizens, at the US Mission at Urmia.

Ferrin's investigations had revealed a further witness to Gracey's promises. Dr Askandar Khan had in 1920 been the second most important witness in the initial, short-lived, investigation into the atrocities of 1918-19, and had been personally active in organizing an Assyrian army in 1918. As a Persian citizen, that involvement had led to the forfeiture by him and twenty-one others of their land. According to Ferrin, Khan had ascribed his predicament directly to the promises of protection given by Gracey, and endorsed by Vice-Consul Shedd. Although he bore no ill-feeling towards Shedd, who had since died, Khan apparently felt that Shedd had been deceived by Gracey and his bitterness was therefore directed towards Britain.⁷⁵

Gracey was also helped by the fact that most British supporters of the Assyrian cause appeared to accept his version of events. He had, after all, devoted his career since the fateful meetings of December 1917 to

the devoted service of the Assyrians and other Christian peoples of the Middle East. His culpability was lessened by the fact that whilst no legal obligation compelled Britain to assist the Assyrians, and whilst it was argued that no firm commitments had been given to them, within the Foreign Office it was admitted, increasingly as time passed, that the Assyrians *had* been led to believe, one way or another, and not necessarily as a result of explicit pledges from Gracey, that they would be returned to the Hakkari district. This was stated most unequivocally in September 1933 by John Sterndale Bennett of the Eastern Department. His view was that, unpalatable as it might be, there existed a widespread public belief that the Assyrians were induced by Britain, in particular, to enter the war and a similarly widespread belief existed that during the war they were promised by Britain eventual independence or at least autonomy and protection.⁷⁶ He continued, 'Although Captain Gracey obviously had no power to commit, and his statement did not commit HMG, a simple people like the Assyrians would naturally regard him as an accredited British representative, and may, perhaps be pardoned for interpreting what he said as a pledge, even though cautious, of British support.'⁷⁷

What prompted this admission is difficult to say. By the early to mid-1930s further evidence of promises to the Assyrians was being furnished by the Mar Shimun and his circle. Among these was Colonel

J McCarthy who was responsible for organising Assyrian forces in support of the mission of Major-General Lionel Dunsterville to the Caucasus in 1918. In a pamphlet produced in 1934 by supporters of the Assyrian cause, McCarthy was quoted as saying that he personally had given a definite promise that they would have their homeland restored to them. Similarly, Sir Percy Cox, Britain's High Commissioner in Iraq from 1920 to 1923, was quoted as having stated in 1922 that 'A definite promise of settlement under a benevolent, if not a British government, had been made to [the Assyrians]'. If the pamphlet were to be believed, Both Caujole and Nikitine had produced further statements reiterating their earlier statements.⁷⁸ The softening of opinion at the Foreign Office may also have owed something to the views of the British Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, when he claimed that Britain must seek a 'lasting and honourable solution' to the Assyrian issue.⁷⁹ Although on another occasion Simon had suggested sending the Assyrians to North Borneo, in his recorded remarks during his Foreign Secretaryship there was a sense of him conceding a moral responsibility on Britain's part and even, perhaps, an awareness that Britain had not behaved entirely honestly in the matter.⁸⁰

It seems likely that a number of factors influenced Simon and his subordinates at the Foreign Office. Foremost was public opinion in

Britain and the extent of public conviction that Britain had made promises to the Assyrians. Besides parliamentary discussion of the issue, allegations of Britain having betrayed the Assyrians remained to the fore among Church and missionary circles, and had also taken hold among émigré Assyrian communities in the United States.⁸¹ This debate heightened awareness that if the issue was not dealt with satisfactorily then it might poison relations with an independent Iraq. Similarly, the loyal service of the Assyrians in local levies in Iraq as well as vocal and effective support from the League of Nations Union, afforded the question some importance. More broadly, the deteriorating situation in Palestine provided clear evidence of the potential for war-time promises to de-rail British policy.

Although feelings about the Assyrians were rather mixed among British officials and officers, there was undoubtedly a sense that their ancient pedigree as well as their vulnerability lent them a special status. Lt General Aylmer Haldane, appointed Commander in Chief, Mesopotamia at the very end of 1919, later commented that their 'rugged manliness...their handsome faces and military bearing, roused strong feelings of sympathy with a race which had gone through so fierce a struggle for existence, and seemed likely yet to have far to go before it reached a Promised land.' Their dress, he noted, was 'a combination of ...the pantomime harlequin and Joseph's multi-coloured coat'.

Similarly, to Wallace Lyon, as with many other British officials in Iraq especially, the parallels between 'this brave but unfortunate people', as he referred to the Assyrians, and the Jews was striking.⁸² For those who lacked a classical education, a passing acquaintance with the Old Testament would have provided some awareness of the antiquity of the Assyrians, even if it did not necessarily elicit sympathy towards them.

Supporters of the Assyrian cause had no obvious need to single out Gracey for attack when there were other public statements of intent such as the Anglo-French Declaration of 7 November 1918, which might form the basis of the Assyrian claims. That declaration stated that Britain and France were 'concerned to ensure by their support and by adequate assistance the regular working of Governments and administrations freely chosen by the populations themselves.'⁸³ Furthermore, as suggested by the former Acting Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia, Sir Arnold Wilson, in 1919 Britain had had the opportunity to make provision for Assyrians on the frontiers of Mesopotamia, but it had not done so.⁸⁴ Indeed, in 1919 Wilson had suggested the relocation of two thousand Kurds from the turbulent Amadia region in the Mosul Vilayet to make way for them.⁸⁵ Wilson, in many ways the quintessential man on the spot, was by 1933 viewed with disdain by Foreign Office officials as a man of outstanding ability

and deviousness, whose views on the Assyrian question were closely affected by the future of Iraqi oil and his work for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. He and others, Gracey included, pointed to similar failings in British policy during the 1925 boundary settlement and in subsequent British policy.⁸⁶ In particular there were the charges that Britain had proposed the cessation of the mandate before the Assyrian question had been settled and that the guarantees for the safety of minorities given to the League by Iraq had not been sufficient.⁸⁷

Sufficient care had not perhaps been taken by various authorities in their dealings with the Assyrians in terms of inflating their expectations, but the issue was immensely difficult. This was so not least because of the broad strategic questions that arose at the end of the First World War and the impossibility of settling the future of the Assyrians when the apportioning of mandates more generally in the Middle East remained undecided. In 1919-20 the future of an isolated, numerically small, Christian people, surrounded by Kurds, whose future had also to be decided, was a rather minor consideration for the British Delegation in Paris. Admittedly the British Foreign Office officials Arnold Toynbee and Eyre Crowe, when sketching the possible frontiers of a Mesopotamian state in late 1918, had made provision for an autonomous Assyrian enclave on the fringe of Mesopotamia but this was as far and indeed further than most British officials were prepared

to go.⁸⁸ The difficulties involved in accommodating the Assyrians within Mesopotamia or on its borders became more pronounced as Britain's presence decreased and as a prolonged presence in northern Mesopotamia appeared potentially hazardous. The backdrop to post-war deliberations in Paris was insurrection in Mesopotamia and financial retrenchment in London. As Daniel Silverfarb has suggested, those British officials who negotiated the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 would have been too conscious of the charge of foreign interference to insert into the treaty a clause safeguarding the rights of Iraq's minorities.⁸⁹ Yet the subsequent urge felt by British officials and politicians to resolve the Assyrian question, notwithstanding a very clear statement made by Sir Percy Cox in 1924 dismissing the idea of a British protectorate over the Assyrians, testified to the enduring sense of responsibility felt by many British officials on the issue.

As for Gracey, he continued to press his views on the Foreign Office for the settlement of the Assyrians on Cyprus, where the Mar Shimun had taken refuge, and about the possibility of a public subscription being raised on their behalf. The appeal was launched successfully in 1934 under the name of 'the Assyrian Settlement National Appeal'. It was endorsed by, among others, Anthony Eden, Samuel Hoare and Leo

Amery (who had also been involved in similar fund-raising efforts in 1925-6) and folded finally in 1939. Indeed, such was the extent of Gracey's commitment to and involvement in the Assyrian issue, that Amery submitted his name for an honour in 1938.⁹⁰

That such a subscription was necessary, was due to the determination of the British Treasury to resist additional charges arising from the proposed repatriation of the Assyrians to the Ghab region of Syria. Whilst pledges of financial support had been forthcoming from Iraq, from France, from the League of Nations, and, after much pressure, from the British Government, there was a projected shortfall of fifty to sixty thousand pounds. In February 1936, the Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, the Viscount Cranborne, stated that the position of the British Government towards the Assyrians was akin to that of a man who had saved another from drowning. In other words, whilst Britain no doubt had a special interest in the Assyrians they did not have an indefinite responsibility for their welfare.⁹¹ To accusations from Hugh Dalton that the government was evading its responsibilities and ignoring the 'imposing and heterogeneous body of opinion' on the Assyrian issue, Cranborne responded that that body consisted merely of Dalton, the Archbishop of Canterbury and his, Cranborne's uncle, Robert Cecil.⁹² This was not quite accurate. In an earlier debate in the House of Lords, Lord Noel-Buxton had suggested that Britain was

responsible, both morally and directly for the Assyrian's plight. To his mind after the First World War Britain had failed to honour its pledges to the Armenians and must not repeat the mistake with the Assyrians. Besides this, he suggested that the Assyrians had become unpopular in Iraq by virtue of their loyal service to the British Government. Also, Britain had given guarantees for their well-being to the League. Similarly, George, Lord Lloyd, who had extensive service in the Middle East, noted that the Assyrians had been used in 1918 in conjunction with the Dunsterville mission to Baku and in 1924-6, as part of the levies, had guaranteed Iraq its oil supplies.

Leo Amery was another vocal lobbyist on the Assyrians' behalf. In July 1934, he had written to Samuel Hoare that, 'I know of nothing more contemptible in recent history than our declining all responsibilities for the Assyrians, except in so far as we might be willing to share with other members of the League in the cost of their resettlement'.⁹³ During 1936-7 he wrote to Eden on several occasions suggesting among other things, the possibility of repatriating the Assyrians to the Hakkari district or the establishing in north-eastern Syria, of an autonomous area where they might settle.⁹⁴

To Robert Cecil, as to Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury (1928-42), Britain's debt was irrefutable. To both men it was not so much a matter of law as a matter of honour and the existence, in Cecil's

words, of a 'clear and definite' moral obligation which it was 'absurd' to deny. This obligation was based upon the events of the war, the failure of the British government to secure the Hakkari district in 1925-6, and on the repeated assurances given to the League regarding the well-being of the Assyrians under Iraqi protection. The refusal of the government to find the extra sum was to his mind 'terribly sordid' and 'a wretched thing'. Cecil, recalling his previous involvement in the matter, noted: 'I certainly formed a very strong view that during time of the War we undertook, not a legal responsibility upon which an action would have lain, if it was a matter for action, but a very clear moral responsibility to the Assyrian nation.' Cecil also argued that the failure to secure the Hakkari district had led to the dispersal of the Assyrians, something which made the massacres of 1933 possible.⁹⁵

Soon after this outburst, the League of Nations confessed its inability to resettle the Assyrians. Simultaneously, and in view of mounting pressure from Cecil and others to act, in January 1937 the Cabinet had appointed a high level interdepartmental committee, chaired by the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, to discuss the possible resettlement of the Assyrians. Simon's appointment is also interesting especially in view of the apparent hardening of his views on the issue of Britain's culpability as well as the strong resentment of Colonial Office officials towards their Foreign Office counterparts. At the first meeting of the

committee Simon noted that Robert Cecil and Cosmo Lang were wrong to allege a legal obligation on Britain's part. In its report, however, denial of legal responsibility was broadened to a denial of 'any special responsibility'. Nonetheless, the report suggested rather ambiguously that for reasons of 'justice and expediency' it was desirable that some equitable solution should be reached. The on-going efforts of officials to locate a new home had, by this stage, narrowed to Australia. If, as was expected, this option proved impossible, then the committee suggested that efforts should be undertaken with the Iraqi authorities to improve conditions for the Assyrians in Iraq.⁹⁶ Although discussion persisted until the eve of the Second World War, no significant progress was made on the issue.

After a very brief lull, in 1941 discussion resumed. This was partly because of the need to consider the future of those Assyrians who had been recruited to the Royal Air Force Assyrian Levies. Britain's indebtedness was deemed by many to have increased particularly as a result of the actions of the Assyrian Levies during the Iraqi revolt of 1941 and especially in the defence of Habbaniyah. Their loyalty had indeed made the recurrence of violence against them likely after the war's end and the Air Ministry had accordingly raised the issue with the Foreign Office.⁹⁷ Various ideas were circulated including the extension of the settlements on the Khabur River in Syria, something

which had been discussed and rejected in 1936. When the matter was discussed internally within the Foreign Office in the autumn and winter of 1943-4, the whole range of possibilities was again opened. Some impetus was provided by the revelation that a British Army officer, Colonel Young, had given unauthorized assurances to the Assyrians in the Khabur settlement in Syria, that if they joined with British forces, 'they could rest assured of "a just apportionment of territory in the final post-war settlement"'.⁹⁸ Fortunately for Young if not for Gracey, these new promises were quickly forgotten amid the discussions about possible settlement options. According to one official, Soviet Russia might be willing to take the Assyrians because it would enhance opportunities for espionage in Iraq among any Assyrians who remained there.⁹⁹ A more serious, though short-lived, possibility was settlement in the conquered Italian colonies of Cyrenaica or Eritrea. A further reason for the revival of the issue was the willingness of Anthony Eden, as Foreign Secretary, to contemplate further discussion of the issue by his subordinates. Eden had been contacted in July 1944 by William Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury and had remarked, 'I like the Syrians [sic] and they have served us loyally. It is a sad confession failure that we cannot care for such friends.' Eden and his officials continued to place hope in reviving schemes for settlement in the

Empire; something endorsed by the Cabinet, when it eventually discussed the issue in August 1946.¹⁰⁰

However, whilst various resettlement schemes continued to be aired, including the possibility of settlement in British Guiana,¹⁰¹ the general thrust of official opinion increasingly reflected the view that those Assyrians in Iraq and Syria should simply be encouraged to settle down and to become 'good Iraqis and good Syrians.'¹⁰²

According to Viscount Cranborne, the failure of the League of Nations Assyrian committee during the 1930s had been due to 'the political and economic conditions of the modern world'. In his opinion these were quite incompatible with the resettlement of an entire people. There was undoubtedly some truth in this statement yet what is the more remarkable is that the member states and, especially, the British Foreign Office persisted in the belief that the Assyrians could and would settle happily in a distant country. This was in spite of the fact that, in the opinion of some officials, the Assyrians were seen as a 'troublesome people' and that the white Dominions would not accommodate them in view of their skin colour.¹⁰³ Equally remarkable were the discreditable attempts of Cranborne and others to deny British responsibility for the future of the Assyrian people.¹⁰⁴ As time passed, perceptions of Britain's obligations undoubtedly shifted within the Foreign Office, especially as the generation of officials whose task

had been to resist any notion of obligation, retired.¹⁰⁵ The more general shift in emphasis among officials was also reflected in the views of Anthony Eden and his successor as Foreign Secretary in July 1945, Ernest Bevin; both of whom considered that the events of the Second World War had greatly increased Britain's moral obligation.¹⁰⁶ Gracey too had found it a difficult issue to shake off and for some time his preoccupation with British responsibility for the Assyrians had begun to cause some annoyance at the Foreign Office.¹⁰⁷ In June 1939, he had written to Stephen Gaselee at the Foreign Office, enclosing further evidence of what had occurred at Urmia in December 1917. Recalling his earlier testimony to Childs, Gracey noted that 'I have always felt that they needed a little more substantiation'. To that end, in 1937 he had written to Robert McDowell, a US missionary who had worked with him on intelligence duties in the Urmia area in 1917-18, to obtain his recollection of events in December 1917. McDowell's response was forthcoming but not for over two years, and whilst his account appeared to bear out Gracey's statements of 1933, it did not exonerate him entirely. As McDowell noted:

There can be no doubt that the Assyrian leaders were entirely aware of the circumstances under which you came to Urumia, and it cannot be claimed that you made the trip for

the purpose of making any engagements on the part of the British government.¹⁰⁸

Clearly, this quite ignored the point raised by Childs that Gracey, under pressure of circumstances, overreached his instructions. Those instructions, it will be remembered had according to Gracey's statement of 1933, been given to him orally by General Offley Shore. On the issue of Gracey having allegedly encouraged the Assyrians to believe that the Allies would support their claim to independence, McDowell added, again with notable reservation: 'To the best of my knowledge this matter was never discussed by you nor even by the Assyrian leaders among themselves at this date.'¹⁰⁹

Writing in 1945, however, and again attempting to shake off the 'canard', Gracey noted that he had gone to Urmia 'on my own responsibility and not under any authority' but had merely written to Military H.Q. at Tiflis informing them of his intentions. As Gracey continued, he therefore 'had no authority whatever to promise the Assyrians anything.' This denial took the form of a letter to Canon John Douglas of the Church of England Council on Foreign Relations, which Gracey then sent to the Foreign Office. Douglas, it seems, had become alerted to Gracey's activities in December 1917 and was acting with the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as with Gracey, to publicize the

plight of the Assyrians and to guide the Mar Shimun. Gracey's letter ended with a plea that his rebuttal should not be published. According to Gracey, the reiteration of the baseless allegations even when followed by his rebuttals had done much to undermine the Assyrians' cause. There was, however, a sense of disingenuousness about Gracey's letter. Besides the issue of his instructions he made no mention of the ill-advised expression of sympathy for the Assyrians' aims to which he had previously admitted.¹¹⁰

Whether or not these declarations amounted to promises or whether they were simply, as George Rendel described them in 1934, a 'hoary myth',¹¹¹ the episode is a reminder of that often difficult relationship between the man on the spot and his political masters in Whitehall, and of the enduring legacy of British policy in the Middle East during the First World War.

¹ This piece is based upon papers given to the British International History Group at Peterhouse, Cambridge, in September 2005, and to the World Congress on Middle Eastern Studies, Amman, in June 2006.

² Most notable is E Kedourie's masterly work, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence and its Interpretations 1914-1939* (Cambridge: 1976). More recently, I Friedman's, *Palestine: A Twice Promised Land? : vol.1, The British, the Arabs and Zionism, 1915-1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000).

³ On the Armenians, see R G Hovanissian, 'The Allies and Armenia, 1915-18', Journal of Contemporary History, iii (1968), pp.145-68, and A A Arslanian, 'British Wartime

Pledges, 1917-18: The Armenian Case', *Journal of Contemporary History*, xiii (1978), pp.517-30. Also, see Hovanissian's book, *The Republic of Armenia, vol. 1, The First Year, 1918-1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp.265-6. On the Kurds, see, D McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: Tauris, 2000 edition), ch.7.

⁴ It merits passing reference in a number of more general works. D K Fieldhouse (ed), *Kurds, Arabs & Britons: The Memoir of Wallace Lyon in Iraq 1918-44* (London: Tauris, 2002), p.30, refers to it, admittedly in connection with events on the eve of Iraq's independence, as 'one of the more disgraceful events in British imperial history'. D Silverfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq 1929-1941* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.33-46, provides a more extended analysis but without reference to any war-time commitments, real or otherwise.

⁵ The theme, with reference to the British Empire, is treated generally in R D Long, *The Man on the Spot: Essays in British Empire History* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1995).

⁶ 'Capt. George Gracey', *The Times*, 18 March 1958, p.13.

⁷ R MacDonell, *And Nothing Long* (London: Constable, 1938), p.277.

⁸ It included such senior military personnel as General L C Dunsterville, who led the British expedition to Baku in 1918. See A H Arslanian, 'Dunsterville's Adventures: A Reappraisal', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xii (1980), pp.199-216.

⁹ Foreign Office Papers, The National Archives (TNA), London, FO 371/4951/E11865, Luke to Foreign Office, 4 Sept. 1920, and enclosures. Gracey had considerable personal courage. See his account of the death of his commanding officer, Colonel Pike, in Vladikavkaz in Aug. 1918; FO 371/3889/112963, Gracey to Goldsmith, 26 Aug. 1918; also, Wardrop Papers, MS. Eng. D. 3385, fo.17, Bodleian Library, Oxford,

Wardrop to his wife, 11 Sept. 1919. On his Foreign Office ambitions, see Bryce Papers 208/30-31, Bodleian Library, Gracey to Bryce, 4 July 1921.

¹⁰ 'The Deportations from Mosul: Turkish Brutality', *The Times*, 11 Dec 1925, p.13.

¹¹ Gracey went on to serve as General Secretary of Save the Children Fund from 1937-48.

¹² FO 371/4951/98, Phipps to Wardrop, 21 Feb. 1920. Haskell was appointed High Commissioner in Armenia in July 1919 by the Supreme Council.

¹³ FO 371/4951/E13172, minutes by Osborn, 26 Oct. 1920, and Tilley 27 Oct. 1920.

¹⁴ FO 371/15316/E3791, minute by R Vansittart, 18 June 1931.

¹⁵ On this subject see H Mejcher, 'British Middle East Policy 1917-21: the inter-departmental level', *Journal of Contemporary History*, viii (1973), pp.81-101; E Maisal, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy 1919-1926* (Brighton, 1994); J Fisher, 'Lord Robert Cecil and the formation of a Middle East Department of the Foreign Office', *Middle Eastern Studies*, xlii (2006), pp.365-80.

¹⁶ See, for example, Curzon Papers, Ms Eur F112/275, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC), minutes of the Interdepartmental Conference on the Middle East, 7 & 13 Feb., & 10 Nov. 1919.

¹⁷ In attempting to hold the ring Gracey received little help from Khatisian's government in Erivan in discouraging Communist infiltration there; R G Hovannisian, 'Dimensions of Democracy and Authority in Caucasian Armenia, 1917-1920', *Russian Review*, xxxiii (1974), p.46.

¹⁸ FO 371/3660/512/144752, Gracey to Wardrop, 27 Sept. 1919, in Wardrop to Foreign Office, 3 Oct. 1919.

¹⁹ FO 371/3660/512/159643, Gracey to Wardrop, Foreign Office, 7 Nov. 1919, in Wardrop to Foreign Office, 10 Nov. 1919; minute by M D Peterson, 11 Dec. 1919.

²⁰ See n.18.

²¹ FO 371/3660/512/159650, Khatissian to Gracey, 10 Nov. 1919, in Wardrop to Foreign Office, 14 Nov. 1919.

²² See, for example, FO 371/10822/E7173/2/65, 'Report on Conditions of Christians Who When Being Deported By the Turkish Authorities Into the Mountains From the Disputed Area of Mosul, and who Escaped from Turkey to Iraq', [sic] n.d., confidential.

²³ R S Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), pp. 46-7. Stafford had been Administrative Inspector in Iraq and the Foreign Office advised him against publishing his book.

²⁴ S H Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950: A Political, Social and Economic History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p.147; W A Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind: Life in Eastern Kurdistan* (London: Black, 1922), pp.407-8.

²⁵ Cabinet Office Papers (TNA), CAB 27/24, Minutes of the Eastern Committee, 18 July 1918; Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, i, pp. 265-6; Bryce MSS 208/9-10, 'Note on the Armenian Question To Members of the Imperial Conference From the Rt. Hon Lord Robert Cecil, MP, & Mr Aneurin Williams, MP, 16 June 1921'.

²⁶ FO 371/15316/E3791, minute by G W Rendel, 17 June 1931.

²⁷ On Childs' background, see J Fisher, 'On the Baghdad Road: on the trail of W J Childs', *Archives*, xxiv (1999), pp.53-70.

²⁸ FO 371/15316/E4236, Gracey to Gaselee, 12 Aug. 1931, confidential.

²⁹ FO 371/15316/E3791, 'Pledges to the Assyro-Chaldeans', minute by Childs for Mr Rendel, 22 May 1931. Gracey's note, dated 5 Aug. 1919, is at FO 371/3889/112963.

³⁰ FO 371/15316/E3791/75/93, minute by Childs, 13 June 1931, 'Extract from a Report by the Assyrian Refugee Commission at Tehran, at the end of 1918'. Unless otherwise noted, the remaining material on pages 11-13 relates to this memorandum.

³¹ FO 371/15316/E4039/75/93, minute by Childs, 31 July 1931. E Naby, 'The Assyrians of Iran: Reunification of a "Millat," 1906-1914', International Journal of Middle East Studies, viii (1977), pp.239 & 249, suggests that the foreign missions with which Gracey had been involved before 1914 had done much to divide the Assyrian people and increase animosities with their Kurdish and Azeri neighbours.

³² FO 371/15316/E4039/75/93, minute by Rendel, 31 July 1931.

³³ Minute by Rendel, 12 June 1931, on Childs' minute and enclosure; see n.29.

³⁴ FO 371/16088/E4748/4016, minute by Childs, 20 Sept. 1932. The issue was highlighted, among other things, by a talk given to the Royal Central Asiatic Society in 1933 by Captain P Mumford. Gracey had attended the meeting and spoke out against the bombings. Childs, who was a member of the society, had asked its secretary privately for an advance copy of Mumford's talk.

³⁵ FO 371/16037/E2419/58, minute by Childs, 25 May 1932. On Petros's bravery but also his past as 'an international "crook"', see Longrigg, *Iraq*, p.138.

³⁶ FO 371/15316/E4236/75, minute by Childs, 7 Sept. 1931.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. minute by Rendel, 7 Sept. 1931.

³⁹ P J Beck, 'A Tedious and Perilous Controversy': Britain and the Settlement of the Mosul Dispute, 1918-1926', Middle Eastern Studies, xvii (1981), p.262. Also, J Joseph, *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbours: A Study of Western Influence on their Neighbours* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp.170-2.

⁴⁰ A Syriac speaking resettlement officer was appointed in 1927 to induce the Assyrians to settle in Iraq; R S Stafford, 'Iraq and the Problem of the Assyrians', International Affairs, xiii (1934), p.164.

⁴¹ K S Husry, 'The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (1)', International Journal of Middle East Studies, v (1974), pp.162, 164. Joseph, *Nestorians*, p. 197, suggests that some

Iraqis suspected Britain of inciting the Assyrians and other minorities against Iraq to thwart its political ambitions.

⁴² The massacre has been an emotive issue among historians; see Husry, 'The Assyrian Affair', *passim*, and J Joseph, 'The Assyrian Affair: A Historical Perspective', International Journal of Middle East Studies, vi (1975), pp.115-7; Silverfarb, *Informal Empire*, pp.40-42. The official consensus in the Foreign Office appeared to be that the Assyrians provoked the Iraqi troops but that the latter had over-reacted.

⁴³ Their employment as levies was questioned by several individuals with significant experience of Iraq, among them, Lt Col. R S Stafford, Gertrude Bell, and Stephen Longrigg. FO 371/16892/E5968, 'Assyrian Question: Position on Oct. 6th, 1933', memorandum by Rendel, 6 Oct. 1933. Stafford, *Tragedy*, pp.72-3; Longrigg, *Iraq*, pp. 197-8; <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/>, Gertrude Bell Papers, Bell to her parents, 1 Oct. 1923, and Bell to her father, 28 May 1924, consulted 14 Oct. 2006, 12:30pm; Silverfarb, *Informal Empire*, p.36.

⁴⁴ FO 371/17835/E1686, Seeds (British Ambassador, Rio de Janeiro) to Simon, 23 Feb. 1934. An overview of the resettlement schemes, which are not discussed here, is provided in Silverfarb, *Informal Empire*, pp.44-6.

⁴⁵ The difficulties of the Brazilian scheme may be followed up in FO 371/17835, and in the League of Nations, Official Journal, xv (1934), pp.548-55.

⁴⁶ See, for example, FO 371/16891/E5622/7/93, correspondence & minutes. Among the other countries suggested at this point were Argentina, Syria, Abyssinia and the Balkans: FO 371/16899/E7531/7/93, Sterndale Bennett to Rendel, 5 Dec. 1933. The Lebanon and Portugal's African colonies were also considered.

⁴⁷ Leo Amery Papers, AMEL 1/5/26 pt 1, Churchill Archives Centre, Amery to Hoare, 20 July 1934.

⁴⁸ Templewood Papers, Ms II/8, Ms V/8, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge.

⁴⁹ Amery Papers, AMEL 2/1/24, Hoare to Amery, 25 July 1934; Hoare Papers, MS Eur E240/7, fo.529, OIOC, Stanley to Hoare, 16 July 1934.

⁵⁰ FO 371/17847/E6267, minute by Sterndale Bennett, 8 Oct. 1934.

⁵¹ FO 371/17847/E596/1, Ogilvie-Forbes to Foreign Office, 18 Oct. 1934. The Assyrians were regarded as difficult to please and this had also been true of efforts to resettle them within Iraq during 1927-30; Stafford, *Tragedy*, p.52; Longrigg, *Iraq*, p.196. The scope for agriculture in British Guiana was deemed insufficient; see, for example, C[olonial] O[ffice] Papers CO 111/722/3, TNA, undated note by Sterndale-Bennett, in Sterndale-Bennett to Parkinson, 1 March 1933.

⁵² FO 371/16892/E5968, 'Assyrian Question: Position on October 6th, 1933', Rendel, 6 Oct. 1933.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Silverfarb, *Informal Empire*, p.37.

⁵⁵ FO 371/16891/E5659, Humphrys to Simon, 21 Sept. 1933.

⁵⁶ The committee comprised of British, Italian, French, Danish, Mexican and Spanish representatives.

⁵⁷ FO 371/17832/E281/1/93, 'Memorandum respecting Assyrian Resettlement – Position on Jan. 10, 1934, confidential, Sterndale Bennett, 11 Jan. 1934. See, for example, FO 371/16892/E5930, Humphrys to Foreign Office, 5 Oct. 1933. The committee was established by the Council of the League on 14 Oct. 1933.

⁵⁸ Silverfarb, *Informal Empire*, p.39.

⁵⁹ K S Husry, 'The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)', International Journal of Middle East Studies, v (1974), p.349.

⁶⁰ However, Husry, *ibid.* suggests that Faisal suspected the French of wishing to undermine confidence in the Iraqi government as a means of perpetuating French control of Syria.

⁶¹ FO 800/288, Lang (Archbishop of Canterbury) to Simon, 25 Sept. 1933.

⁶² K S Husry, 'King Faysal and Arab Unity 1930-33', Journal of Contemporary History, x (1975), pp.329-31.

⁶³ FO 371/14494/6491/427, 'Memorandum on Exclusion of Palestine from the Area assigned for Arab independence by the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence of 1915 to 1916', 24 Oct. 1930.

⁶⁴ FO 371/4965/E15131, minute by Crowe, 5 Dec. 1920.

⁶⁵ On McMahon's efforts to exculpate himself, see I Friedman, Journal of Contemporary History, v (1970), pp.83-122.

⁶⁶ FO 371/15316/E4236, Gracey to Gaselee, 12 Aug. 1931, confidential.

⁶⁷ Political and Secret Department Papers, L/P+S/11/155/P5158, OIOC, Gracey to Kitson (sic) 5 Aug. 1919, copy; see also, L/P+S/11/172/P3141.

⁶⁸ Gracey to Gaselee, 12 Aug. 1931, see n.66.

⁶⁹ FO 371/16899/E7546/7, minute by unknown official, 8 Dec. 1933.

⁷⁰ See n.66.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² FO 371/16896/E6624/7/93, Gracey to Rendel, 31 Oct. 1931, and enclosure. Gracey continued to comment on the Assyrian issue at various lectures. See, for example, his ill-advised remarks concerning Britain's perceived untrustworthiness in the Middle East in view of its failure to intervene on behalf of the Assyrians; 'The Assyrians', Brigadier-General J G Browne, Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, xxxv, (1937), p.181. Similarly, see Gracey's remarks on broken promises to the Armenians; review of Nansen's *Armenia and the Near East*, Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, vii (1928), pp.290-1.

⁷³ RG 59/891.00/1400, United States National Archives (NARA), Washington, 'Confidential Political Report', Report no. 5, Ferrin, 18 Dec. 1918.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Confidential report. Also, covering letter, Ferrin to Secretary of State, 21 Dec. 1926, no. 18 and separate enclosures.

⁷⁵ RG59/891.00/1396, Ferrin to Secretary of State, 6 Nov. 1926, no. 10.

⁷⁶ On the specific point of responsibility for having the Assyrians join the war accounts vary considerably. Some suggest that Russian officers initially had the Assyrians assist Russian troops in attacking Kurds even before Russia and Turkey had entered into formal hostilities.

⁷⁷ FO 371/16891/E5653, 'The Responsibility of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom for the Future of the Assyrians', Sterndale Bennett, 22 Sep. 1933, confidential.

⁷⁸ Amery Papers, AMEL 1/5/26 pt. 1, Mar Shimun to Amery, 4 March 1934, enclosing 'The Assyrian Tragedy', Annemasse (February 1934).

⁷⁹ Simon had used the phrase at a meeting of the Council of the League of Nations on 14 Oct. 1933; Official Journal, xiv, 1648.

⁸⁰ FO 371/17842/E4731/1, minute by Simon, 23 July 1934. Also, *ibid.* and Official Journal, 5 Dec. 1932, xiii, 1966.

⁸¹ J F Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p.356. On the opinion of Assyrians in the United States, see Y Malek's, *The British Betrayal of the Assyrians* (New Jersey: Kimball, 1935). In his book, Malek, formerly of the Iraq civil service, reproduced the statements by Cajole and Nikitine of January 1934; see n.78.

⁸² A Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1922), p. 241; Fieldhouse, *Kurds, Arabs and Britons*, pp.82-3. To Sir Ronald Storrs, who campaigned on behalf of the Assyrians from the 1920s, they were 'an ancient and noble nation'; Browne, 'The Assyrians', p.182.

⁸³ The declaration is reprinted in J C Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record*, ii (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1975), p.112.

⁸⁴ See Wilson's article, 'The Crisis in Iraq', *The Nineteenth Century*, cxiv (1933), pp. 411-22. The article was considered to be 'tendentious and unpleasant', 'mischievous' and full of 'falsehoods'; FO 371/16892/E5984/7, minutes by Gorell Barnes and Rendel, 9 Oct. 1933.

⁸⁵ A T Wilson, *Loyalties: Mesopotamia, vol. II 1917-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936 edition), pp.39-40.

⁸⁶ According to Gracey, at a League of Nations Union committee on the Assyrian question in the autumn of 1933 he had pointed to the League as having the 'main responsibility' for the Assyrian situation in view of its decision on the Mosul boundary in 1925. To some Gracey was a moderating influence on fellow committee members; FO 371/16891/E5642, minute by Sterndale Bennett, 23 Sept. 1933; FO 371/16891/E5637/7, 'Assyrian Question in Iraq: Conversation with Captain Gracey', Sterndale Bennett, 22 Sept. 1933.

⁸⁷ FO 371/17839/E3694, Humphrys to Simon, 18 May 1934.

⁸⁸ CAB 24/72, memorandum by Toynbee & Crowe, 'The Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula', 21 Nov. 1918; However, David Hogarth, formerly director of the Arab Bureau in Cairo, noted that 'repatriation, local autonomy & protection are incumbent upon us'; FO 608/83/7, minute of 24 April 1919.

⁸⁹ Silverfarb, *Informal Empire*, pp.36-7.

⁹⁰ Lang Papers MSS. 161, Amery to Lang, 1 April 1938, and Halifax to Don, 5 April 1938, Lambeth Palace Library, London.

⁹¹ United Kingdom, H.C. Deb., 309 (25 Feb. 1936).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ See n.47.

⁹⁴ Amery Papers AMEL 1/5/26/pt 2, Eden to Amery, 19 Aug. 1936 & 10 April 1937.

⁹⁵ United Kingdom, H.L. Deb., 49 (11 Feb. 1936).

⁹⁶ The committee consisted of the War, Colonial, Dominions, and Foreign Secretaries, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and Lord Privy Seal. The report of the committee as well as the minutes from its first meeting may be seen at CO 323/1515/15.

⁹⁷ FO 371/35002/E5753, 'Assyrian Resettlement', memorandum by C H Fone, 23 Sept. 1943.

⁹⁸ FO 371/35002/E5287/148/93, minute by C W Baxter, Northern Department, c10 May 1943.

⁹⁹ FO 371/35002/E5753/148, minute by Chaplin, 29 Sept. 1943.

¹⁰⁰ FO 371/40074/E4660/729/93, Fisher to Eden, 31 July 1944, and minute by Eden, 13 Aug. 1944. For the Cabinet discussion see CAB 128/6, CM (46) 78, 14 Aug. 1946.

¹⁰¹ CAB 129/12, 'Future of the Assyrians: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies', Hall, 12 Aug. 1946, CP(46) 322, secret.

¹⁰² FO 371/75186/E3143/1823/93, Chancery to Eastern Department, 25 Feb. 1949.

¹⁰³ This was especially true of J G Ward; see his minute of 15 Dec. 1943, FO 371/35002/E5287/148/93.

¹⁰⁴ Lord Hugh Cecil may well have had Cranborne in mind when, in June 1935, he compared those officials who denied 'special obligations of honour' towards the Assyrians as 'displaying the casuistical skill which a Jesuit confessor of the eighteenth century would have envied', letter to *The Times*, 14 June 1935, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ FO 371/111026/VQ1224/32, minute by Ward, 8 Dec. 1954.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, 'Future of the Assyrians: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs' [Eden], 2 June 1945, CP (45) 11, CAB 66/66; CAB 129/12,

'Future of the Assyrians in Iraq and Syria: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 26 July 1946, CP (46) 304.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, minute by Rendel, 8 July 1935, FO 371/18931/E4151/2.

¹⁰⁸ CO 732/83/2, Gracey to Gaselee, 13 June 1939, enclosing McDowell to Gracey, 9 March 1939, and enclosure.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ CO 732/83/2, Gracey to Douglas, in Gracey to Dunlop, 10 July 1945.

¹¹¹ FO 371/17835/E1733, Rendel to Gracey, 24 March 1934.