



WALLACHIA AND MOLDAVIA
AS SEEN BY WILLIAM WILKINSON,
LATE BRITISH CONSUL RESIDENT AT BUKOREST (1820)

SORINA GEORGESCU

Hyperion University, Bucharest

Abstract

This article analyzes the way William Wilkinson, a Levant Company member, perceives two Romanian countries situated at the edge of the Ottoman Empire, one of the British Oriental Others, in his *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia with Various Political Observations Relating to Them*, published in London in 1820 and written after several years of official residence mainly in Bucharest (1813-1816). Since the book has not been previously analyzed, except for the theme of religion by Professor James Brown, this article proposes to approach it from several different points of view: the author, the Company and the image of the Turks; economic opportunities, prohibition, organization; Romanian history; cities, monuments, travelling system, inhabitants. What this study wishes to demonstrate is that, through both criticism and appreciation, Wilkinson's book is one of sympathy and mercy towards the Romanian people – a pledge for their freedom.

Keywords: *William Wilkinson, Levant Company, Wallachia, Moldavia, Romanian history*

The natural richness, and the various resources of Wallachia and Moldavia, are such, that if those countries could enjoy the important advantages of a regular government and wise administration, under which industry and agriculture should receive their due encouragement, the trade of exports laid open, the commercial intercourse with foreign nations set upon a proper footing, and finally, the mines explored, they would in a short time become the most populous and most flourishing provinces of Europe (Wilkinson 84).

Introduction: William Wilkinson, the Levant Company, and the Image of the Turks

As an employee of the Levant Company before 1821, William Wilkinson, the British consul in the Romanian Principalities, mostly in Wallachia, must have been sent here mainly on commercial purpose, as had always been the mission of any Levant Company member.

Several studies in the field note¹ that Levant was a trading company founded in 1581 through a charter given by Queen Elizabeth I. She thus offered several persons the monopoly of imports and exports to and from Constantinople, Smyrna, Aleppo, Alexandria, Algiers and Patras, through a commercial treaty signed with the Ottoman Porte. What distinguished this company from others of the kind (the East India Company, the Muscovite Company, etc.) was its powers and structure. These permitted its employees stationed abroad to describe the countries/towns they resided in. Officially speaking, the Ottoman Empire was seen, even in 1825, when the company had ceased to exist, in a very Saidian way, as an Oriental “Other” of the British Kingdom, despite the positive image that might have been transmitted via several traders’ letters and journals:²

The Turkish Government being essentially different from any other in Europe, perfectly despotic in its nature, and approached only like that of all Oriental people, ancient and modern, through the medium of presents and particular influence, no intercourse can be carried on with the natives (Walsh 5).

What the British needed for the better management of the Company was an ambassador they employed, a secretary, “chaplains, physicians and consuls,” “cancellers, dragomen, agents and janissaries” (Walsh 8). This system remained valid until 1805, when the Government itself decided to appoint and pay all staff. From the beginning, British ambassadors and consuls in the Levant were given both a commercial and a political mission; they were paid by the Company, but were responsible for taking care of the necessary political alliances. If, at first, the Queen wanted the Sultan’s support against Spain, things changed over time and “Britain’s relations with the Ottomans became entwined with Anglo-Saxon relations around the middle of the eighteenth century by what became known as the Eastern Question” (Laidlaw 16). Being now in a much “closer and commercial” (17) relationship with Russia, who, in its turn, was The Ottoman Empire’s enemy, Britain’s own position towards the Ottomans was fluctuating and delicate. Both empires were “remote and alien realms” (17) for the British officials, but they both also offered important commercial opportunities. As such, the British ambassador’s duty was the preservation of

¹ See Walsh, *Account of the Levant Company with Some Notices of the Benefits Conferred upon Society by its Officers, in Promoting the Cause of Humanity, Literature, and the Fine Arts*. London, 1825; M. Epstein: *The Early History of the Levant Company* passim.; Jonathan S. Couch: “Traders and New Ideas about the East: The British Levant Company and the Discourse on the Ottoman Empire, 1581-1774.” PhD. Diss. U. of Maryland, 2013; and Christine Laidlaw: *British in the Levant: Trade and Perceptions of the Ottoman Empire*. London: Tauris, 2010.

² Couch: “Traders and New Ideas.”

their relations with the Ottomans, “to protect the capitulations³ and to facilitate the practicalities of commerce” (18), while maintaining their friendly relations with Russia.

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the Company was proud of having also served the “cause of literature, science and humanity” (Walsh 12). While in the Levant, its members described the towns and people they visited,⁴ promoted charity and saved “Christian captives from the Barbary states” (Walsh 14). It was in this context, and with the two countries under Turkish-Greek rule, that William Wilkinson decided to write his *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia with Various Political Observations Relating to Them* (1820), with obvious sympathy towards the two Romanian Principalities, as apparent in the “Forward” to his book.

First, he declares himself the follower of a rich tradition of English travelers whose journals never “fail to create interest”, and whose favorite themes are “Turkey and Egypt,” “and, indeed the Ottoman Empire” (iii). Then, he distinguishes himself from the others through a commitment to turn “two of its most important and curious provinces,” “Wallachia and Moldavia,” into a subject “by no means unworthy of notice” (iv). These are

those which divide the principal part of the ancient kingdom of Dacia [...], although in the renewed existence of Greek governments exercising most of the prerogatives of independency, in the struggles of the two nations between a strong remnant of Dacian barbarism and in the influence of modern civilization, and in a country comprehending within its boundaries all the productive resources which fall but separately to the share of other countries (iv).

The book is divided in nine chapters, plus some “General Observations” and an Appendix, and it describes the two countries from all possible perspectives: geography, history, structure, politics, population, economy, religion, and climate. I will only refer to economy, history, politics, travel, cities and to its inhabitants. Since Wilkinson was sent to the Romanian Principalities mainly on commercial interests, I will start my discussion with this section of his *Account*.

Economic Opportunities, Prohibition, Bad Organization

This “Peru of the Greeks” (Wilkinson 71), as the author calls the two countries, is full of riches, of natural resources; the first three mentioned minerals are gold, silver and quicksilver. Next, there is wheat, immediately followed by bees-wax, honey, butter, cheese, hides, staves and ship-masts, hare-skins, yellow-berries, sheep’s wool, cattle and poultry.

³ Contracts.

⁴ (cf. Walsh 14).

Fear of the rulers' rapacity, of the Sultan's especially, prevents the inhabitants from exploiting the Carpathian mines. Another reason might be political instability and the Greek princes' fear of a "sudden recall and disgrace" (73), a prospect which encourages them to take advantage only of those resources "immediately within their reach" (73), rather than a resource "that merely offers a remote prospect of gain" (73). Much to Wilkinson's surprise, the Ottomans are neither interested in, nor willing to, set this business "properly on foot" so as to reap "a lasting advantage" (73). The political reason received as explanation does not satisfy him at all: "for surely no such considerations could prevent them from availing themselves of treasures which they have certainly assumed in every way the right of calling their own" (74).

Such arguments make him consider and recommend to his peers and British officials that they should liberate the Principalities from Turkish influence, or there would be no possible exploitation of their mineralogical riches. For the time being, the only gold that can be obtained is that being picked by gypsies belonging to the government along the Dimbovitza or Argis rivers, on their way towards the Danube.

The trade of Wallachia and Moldavia is another cause for the British Consul's wonder, commerce being "one of their most important sources of opulence" (74), despite its many restrictions and prohibitions. Taking each product separately, Wilkinson also compares the two Principalities in terms of the quality of all their commodities. Thus, wheat is worse in Wallachia than in Moldavia, "but it is far from being bad" (76), while the Moldavian wheat is said to be the equal of that of Poland. Unfortunately, it all has to go to the Porte. The Moldavian timber is also far better than that of Wallachia; "it is of the finest oak and perfectly well calculated for the construction of vessels" (77). It is also under the monopoly of the Porte, therefore "sold at the lowest possible prices" (77) in the two countries. Cattle and poultry also go only to Constantinople, while hare-skins, yellow-berries, horses, sheep and oxen, and sheep's wool are free of export.

Fortunately, villagers never fail to bring hare-skins and yellow-berries in due time, when engaged and paid through such contracts. What is less satisfactory is the quality of the products, only hare-skins and sheep's wool being considered first quality. Horses, sheep and oxen are sold at great profit in the surrounding provinces. All these products are exported through the seaport of Galatz, a city Wilkinson really appreciates, "a rich market indeed" (80): "its market is always well stocked with the productions of the interior," "there are public granaries for the wheat, and a great number of large warehouses, belonging to private merchants, for all articles" (80). Commercial men, who are the main inhabitants of this city, manage to break the prohibition and, to Wilkinson's delight, "find the means of exporting some quantity of wheat, and other contraband articles" (80-81). Galatz may be small but

The great concourse of people occasioned every year by commercial pursuits gives it the appearance of being very populous, and all the bustle of a place of great trade. The presence, in particular, of a great number of commercial vessels, increases considerably that appearance (81).

While Galatz is the main town for exports, the main markets for imports are the towns of Bukorest (Bucharest) and Yassi, the capitals of the two Principalities. Here come “coffee, sugar, pepper, rum, lemons, oranges and foreign wines” (81), the first three being the most important. Apart of these, the two Romanian countries also receive cotton, “woolen manufactures and hardware” (83), calicoes, chintz, glass and earthenware from Germany, cambrics from France, muslins from England and furs from Russia (for their national costume).

Unfortunately, the system of taxing the imports is badly organized. Several products – coffee, sugar, pepper, rum, lemons, oranges – are expensively bought in Smyrna or Constantinople, then taxed once in the Ottoman Empire (custom-house duty), then again in the Principalities. In the latter, the products are taxed twice or more, with arbitrary taxes established not by the local governments, but by their officers. As Wilkinson complains: “as they are tolerated, they become unavoidable, unless the proprietors of the goods happen to be subjects of the European courts, and as such, receive protection and assistance from the consuls residing in the country” (82). The local spirit of speculation appears again, when calicoes, chintz, glass and earthenware are sold at higher prices by being, falsely, called English instead of German, the true country of origin. The French cambrics and the English muslins are “always profitable articles to speculators” (83).

From all the merchants that trade in the two Principalities, the most advantage goes to those naturalized in Russia, Austria, or to those under the English flag, since they can receive protection from those powers, “an advantage which is of no small consequence to their affairs” (83).

Romanian History – From Daring Dignity to Complete Submission

The second important section I will analyze here, the one regarding Romanian history, is a part which any Romanian researcher reads with worry and emotions, fearing the foreign author’s lack of accuracy, of objectivity, or of his/her proper understanding. I think this is not Wilkinson’s case, whose sources⁵ prove well searched and interpreted. Let me first say that he sees the two principalities “intimately connected” and “alike” (vi), and traces their

⁵ Sources he declares: Roman history; Wallachian, Transylvanian and Hungarian authors; Dimitrie Cantemir: *History of the Ottoman Empire*; Thornton, *Present State of Turkey* (quoting from Cantemir).

importance back to the reign of Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia (1729-1796).

The most important rulers and periods he mentions in his survey coincide with the ones most talked about in Romanian history books: the Dacian kings Baerebestes and Decebalus, the Romanian rulers Bogdan (Moldavia) and Raddo Negro (Wallachia), Mirtza (Mircea the Old) (Wallachia), Dracula (Vlad Dracul) and his son Dracula (Vlad the Impaler) (Wallachia), Michael (Michael the Brave) (Wallachia), Constantin Brâncoveanu Bessarabba (Wallachia), Constantin Marrocordato (Wallachia) and Stephen (Stephen the Great) (Moldavia). Both positive and negative images here agree with those offered later by Romanian historians themselves,⁶ from the Dacian rulers until the Ottomans begin and all about justice and politics in the Romanian countries is nothing but negative.

The Dacians were “sober, vigorous, capable of enduring” (2) and did not fear death. Their first king, Baerebestes, was a “warlike prince” who “boldly set Roman conquerors at defiance” (2). While Decebalus, their last king, “one of the ablest and most enterprising warriors of his time,” irrupted “into the territory of the Empire” (3), as Roman sources say, and compelled Emperor Domitian to “sue for peace” and pay him “an annual sum.” This lasted until the year 102, when Emperor Trajan decided to stop the payment and conquer Dacia. The Dacians are not the victims of history, as their descendants. They are, on the contrary, brave fighters, even predators as they “cross the Danube” and “lay waste the Roman territory” (4). They are defeated by Emperor Trajan; they invade the Empire again and plunder a Roman neighboring population, the Iazygae, which totally infuriates Trajan, who finally subjugates them completely. This time Decebalus chooses to commit suicide rather than become their subject.

After several waves of other attackers – the Goths, the Hunns, the Gepidae, the Lombards, the Bulgarians and the Slaves – the natives will be “treated as slaves” and “retire to the other side of the Carpathians”, in Fagarash, and Maramosh, where they will have “their own chiefs” (12). They cross the mountains again, this time to Upper Wallachia and Moldavia, when their former territories are devastated by the invasion of Battou-Han in 1240, as Wilkinson argues after having researched the works of Wallachian, Transylvanian and Hungarian authors, without finding any other satisfactory explanation. Both voivodes, Bogdan and Raddo Negro, were subjected to the King of Hungary. However, their successors will have their independence acknowledged during the 14th century. Tributary was also, at the time, the Bannat of Crayova, a refuge for the knights coming from and going to the Holy Land.

⁶ See, for example Constantiniu.

With Mirtza (Mircea the Old), attacks are made again on the “neighboring possessions of the Turks” (Wilkinson 16), the new and main enemy for centuries to come. The year 1391 ended with the Romanian ruler’s defeat. Later on, Wilkinson tries to report the complicated story of the alliance between Vlad Dracul of Wallachia and King Ladislas of Hungary, against their common enemy, the Turk. To cut a long story short, let us just say that the first episode of this fight is correctly described, ending with the Wallachian voivode’s beheading. The second episode makes Vlad the Impaler (the second Dracula) a brave ruler, who “crossed the Danube and attacked the few Turkish troops that were stationed in his neighborhood” (19) and defeated them. Then, Wilkinson argues, after being defeated, in his turn, by Sultan Mahomet II, Vlad was replaced by his brother “Bladus,” thus leaving both brothers with the same name. The correct name here is Radu the Beautiful, the one remembered for signing with the Turks a treaty of “perpetual tribute” called “slavery” (19) by the British consul. From that moment on, the Turks grow stronger and stronger and have no respect for “rights and privileges,” but “connived at every sort of depredation” (24).

The next ruler, Michael (Michael the Brave) (1593), manages to create a “league against the enemy of Christianity” (24), together with Sigismund of Transylvania – instigated by the Pope to fight the Turks – and Aaron of Moldavia. Quite a daring idea, I would argue, considering the difference in size between the Romanian countries and the Ottoman Empire. They defeat the Turks, but this time Michael will be killed by his former ally, General Baste, the head of the Austrian army. As a result, the Turkish troops cross the Danube and occupy “the greatest part of the principality” (28). Step by step, as Wilkinson argues, the spirit of the inhabitants was subdued and declined, both in Wallachia and in Moldavia. Here, obedience to the Turks was “not the effect of conquest, but a voluntary measure of precaution and security” (29), following the advice of Voivode Stephen the Great, due to the Sultan’s ferocity and Moldavia’s lack of sufficient means of resistance.

In what follows, Romania seems to have lost its daring spirit, its courage or awareness of what independence meant, a lack that Wilkinson very much regrets. This is most clearly exemplified by the episode of Voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu (Bessarabba). Briefly stated, he is branded as a traitor and taken away from his home to Constantinople along with his whole family. All this while the inhabitants of Bucharest remained “tranquil spectators of those acts of violence and made no effort to release their voivode” (38). Wilkinson argues, with sadness, that

with a nation more awakened to its own dignity, and to the value of independence, an event of this nature would not, perhaps, have taken place without the support of an army, and the shedding of blood; and, indeed,

the circumstances of this very occurrence would hardly appear credible, if they were not almost fresh in the memory of the present generation (38).

He also notices how the Turks did their best to oppress the two Principalities. First, they assumed the “exclusive right of appointing the two voivodates” (42), then they put the obedient and servile Phanariotes to the government of the two countries. Here, the only well-meant ruler is Constantin Marrocordato, much appreciated for his “generosity of character” (44) and his refusal to comply with the Turks’ orders. As the British author remarks with pity:

[A]nd if, at the present moment, the inhabitants of the two principalities were to recall their right to memory, and claim the enforcement of it, the Porte would consider and treat the proceeding as open rebellion on their part (42).

Nothing could be worse than the “present” situation, politically and legally speaking, for the British consul and, indeed, for all Romanian histories speaking about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Spectacular and ostentatious ceremonies take place in Constantinople and the Romanian countries as the Sultan invests the new Greek princes as voivodes and confers on them the title of “God’s Anointed” (47). Similar ceremonies are organized at “the renewal of public officers” (55), on whose shoulders the prince places a robe of honor:

[A]nd he advances in the most respectful attitude, and kisses the prince’s hand. He is then conveyed home in one of the state-carriages, or on one of the prince’s horses (according to his new rank), and accompanied by a great number of Chiohodars, or livery-servants of the court, to whom he pays a considerable fee (56).

The prince has absolute authority; the Divan’s (Senate) power of control is only a theoretical formality. His decisions cannot be changed either by the natives or by his successors and he is free to interpret the laws in his own way. Dismissal and disgrace are in store for any member of the Divan who pronounces an opinion contrary to his own. Only foreigners seem to be respected, they were under the protection of their consuls, who “are frequently obliged to act the part of attorneys” (51) in defending them.

Wilkinson sees the maximum corruption in the Supreme Council of the church. Its acts and decisions seem to “proceed from any motives than those of moral tendency”, a true “encouragement of profligacy and other disorders in the society” (69). The will of the populace “is the only authority by which” the council’s “concerns are conducted” (69). This time he gives Moldavia as the positive example. There, the constitution “does not permit the prince to interfere with the affairs of the ecclesiastical council, nor with the financial concerns of

the metropoly,” and the archbishop “is elected by the nobility, and must be a native” (70).

Cities, Monuments, Traveling Systems, Boyars and Peasants, Beautiful Landscapes

Apart from the seaport of Galatz, which has already been discussed, the British author had the opportunity to reside in Bucharest (Bukorest) and visit Yassi, Tirgovist and the Courté d’Argis. Bucharest he dislikes the most. It is a big and dirty city, situated on a “low and marshy ground” (86), and is full of churches – 366, of monasteries – 20, and of caravanserais – 30. The palace here was burnt in 1813, and it was not rebuilt, so the late prince was forced to reside “in two private houses joined into one” (88). The houses are “separate from each other,” “surrounded by yards or gardens and trees” (88). They are made of brick, their walls are “plastered and whitewashed” inside and outside; their roofs are “generally covered with wood” (88). The streets are “paved with thick pieces of timber, thrown across, and made tight to each other”: this means “deep liquid mud” in the rainy seasons and “a thick black dust” in the summer, “which the least wind renders excessively injurious to the eyes and lungs; besides these great inconveniences, a complete renewal, at least once in every six years, is absolutely necessary” (88-89).

On top of it all, “large kennels,” under the “wooden pavement,” “receive the filth of the houses” and “convey it to the river Dimbovitza,” with no care taken to “keep the different passages open”; this means they are all filled with dirty substances which, during summer produce “the most noxious exhalations, and occasion fevers of a putrid and malignant nature.” In vain does he try to convince people to pave the streets with stone, as the “pavements constructed by Trajan and the Romans, which have so firmly withstood the destructive hand of time” (89-90).

On a more positive note, Bucharest is a beautiful town, due to its “mixture of houses and trees” when seen from a distance. But, “it is like the fine scenery of a theatre which charms the distant eye, and on being approached is found to be a coarse daub” (90).

He likes Yassi much better, although the streets are just the same. This is a smaller town than Bucharest and better-built, with “many elegant houses,” “in the most modern style of European architecture.” The prince’s palace is the most extensive edifice in town, and it is surrounded by gardens and yards. It is furnished half Oriental, half European, and it is big enough to host “more than a thousand people” (87). The same or even better is the former capital of Wallachia, the city of Tirgovist. It is “most delightfully situated,” with a “beautiful range of hills” on the one side and “a very fine and extensive plain” on the other. The town also contains many ruins of ancient edifices, “amongst which those of the voivode’s palace are the most conspicuous” (87).

Speaking of ruins and monuments, the Monastery at Courté d'Argis is, perhaps, Wilkinson's favorite. This is a building "far more elegant" than St. Stephen's Church in Vienna:

[T]he whole of the exterior work is entirely carved of marble, something in the style of the steeple of St. Stephen's Church at Vienna, but far more elegant. The whole produces a very striking effect; and, as it has perfectly preserved its original beauty, it is certainly a monument that the Wallachians may boast of in any part of Europe (16).

To visit means to travel, and travelling is one of the aspects the two countries may truly boast. There are no coaches to be hired, very few private lodgings to be had, and the only public hotel in Bucharest, "well furnished, and provided with every requisite commodity." had just been opened by a German patron. Still, if one is willing to set aside the idea of comfort, travelling here is "so expeditious, that in this respect it is not equaled in any other countries." It is well organized, with "post-houses in all directions" and plenty of horses:

a kind of vehicle is given, which is not unlike a very small crate of earthenware, fastened to four small wheels, by the means of wooden pegs, and altogether not higher than a common wheel-barrow. It is filled with straw, and the traveler sits in the middle of it, keeping the upper part of his body in an erect posture, and finding great difficulty to cram his legs within. Four horses are attached to it by cords, which form the whole harness; and driven by one postilion on horseback, they set off at full speed, and neither stop nor slacken their pace, until they reach the next post-house. Within the distance of half a mile from it, the postilion gives warning of his approach by a repeated and great cracking of his whip, so that, by the time of arrival, another cart is got ready to receive the traveler (92).

Total irony defines his description of the boyars in both Principalities. This should not come as a surprise, if we think of one of the most famous Romanian books written in the nineteenth century, although much latter: *Ciocoii vechi și noi, sau ce naște din pisică, șoareci mănâncă* (*The Old and New Parvenus, or The Offspring of a Cat Will Always Eat Mice*) by Nicolae Filimon (1862).

They all claim public functions in the state, not out of vocation, but out of a desire for gain. This makes princes change them every year, thus disorganizing everything through "great confusion in the transaction of public business." Moreover, it leads to incompetence, since boyars "never regard their want of capacity for any branch of public service" (55).

Boyars also seem too proud of their titles and their allegedly ancient origins. They perceive themselves as the equivalents of the German Counts and Barons and of the Russian Major-generals. Here Wilkinson quotes a certain Mr. Thornton, another Levant Company member, the author of the *Present State of*

Turkey. This author criticizes the Wallachian and Moldavian nobility for calling themselves the descendants of the Slavi, when they were only “the creation of the Sultan’s Voivodes.” Wilkinson adds that, through his own research among such families, he “could never discover that their claims to antiquity went beyond the period of Raddo Negro’s and Bogdan’s establishment.” They are unfamiliar with history, either with that of their own country or of any other. And he mentions here the most famous Wallachian families: the Bessarabba (Brâncoveanu), the Cantacuzene and the Paleologos. What most intrigues him is their incapacity to “in any manner explain upon what grounds” (57) such origins are assumed.

They travel only by coach, since walking is “derogatory to their dignity” (90), something meant only for the vulgar mob. The unhappy result is a street full of carriages hitting the pedestrians. Irony continues as regards the aspect of such carriages. They use mainly the German *calèche*, with lots of ornaments, but with no regard for the dress of the coach or for the beauty of the horses: “it is very common to meet in the streets a carriage glittering with gold, drawn by a pair of miserable hacks, and driven by a Gypsy in rags.” They choose the expensive instead of the refined: they buy old carriages from Vienna, “made up to deceive the eye, and offered as new” (91), but full of ornaments. Thus, they are forced to buy another one every twelve or eighteen months. The laziness, slovenliness and carelessness of their coachmen also contribute to ruining the carriages.

They can read and write Romanian and Greek, and few of them also know French. They call themselves “literati and poets” when they “are able to talk familiarly, though imperfectly, of one or two ancient or celebrated authors, or make a few bad verses that will rhyme.” For this, they are looked at by their fellow countrymen in deep astonishment, as if “endowed with superior genius and abilities.” When adults, they are too tempted by “the allurements of public employment, the petty intrigues at court, and the absence of every obstacle to pursuits of gallantry and pleasure” (129), to really care about anything else. They receive their education at home, from private tutors (Greek priests), while the “sons of inferior boyars and tradesmen” go to the public schools to study “Wallachian, ancient and modern Greek languages, writing and arithmetic” (130). Women receive even less education since they marry very early. None are well instructed in religion.⁷ They learn it only “by the examples of their elders” (130), and know the Bible only by reputation. Wallachians speak modern Greek accurately, almost as their native tongue, while Moldavians prefer French and other modern languages.

⁷ Religion as such, in Wilkinson’s Protestant view, has already been well analyzed by James Brown (18-30).

However, this is not their fault, Wilkinson seems to believe. A government which so discourages civilization keeps “the state of society very backward” and has “only the most pernicious influence over its moral character” (131). Thus, vice is not the Boyars’ “determined propensity”, but is caused by prejudices, ignorance and a “universal system of moral corruption.” All they care about is money, and not money through work, but through dexterity and cunning, money through rapacity. They are defined by avidity, ostentation, avarice, carelessness of their private affairs, huge debts, extravagance and negligence. Happily for them, “nobility protects them from the pursuits of the creditor” (132). They dress like Turks, “with the only exception of the turban, to which they substitute a kind of cap of an extraordinary size called calpack, made of grey Astracan fur, in the shape of a pear.” This seems a very ugly and ridiculous head-dress for the British Wilkinson, and not “at all adapted to the beauty and magnificence of the rest of the costume.” Ladies combine the European style with the Oriental richness and profusion of ornament. They are not beautiful, but they have “natural grace,” “pleasant humor” and “neatness of shape” (135). They prefer German music, while the men leave it all for the Gypsy slaves to study and play. They all dance English dances, waltzes and the Polish mazurka – no easy job due to their totally unsuited dress.

With some exceptions, boyars spend their days either at the government or at home, “in absolute idleness, or in visiting each other to kill time”, leaving their lands in “total neglect, or in the hands of mercenary agents, who enrich themselves with their spoils” (137). Winter means, at least in Bucharest, public clubs and masked balls. Summer means the “hellesteo” – (“a lake situated about a mile’s distance out of town, on the borders of which, the company walk or sit two or three hours”) (139), the coffee house and the “beautiful little grove called Banessa” (140):

Near the most frequented part is a coffee-house, where ices and other refreshments are to be had. On Sundays, the number of carriages coming to this place, amounts sometimes to six or seven hundred; and the multitude of fashionables, as well as the great display of dress and jewels of the ladies, certainly render it a gay and pretty scene. The walks are not shaded by trees, and the only advantage they offer, is an extensive view round the country.

At the distance of a mile from the *Hellesteo*, is situated a beautiful little grove called *Banessa*, to which a part of the company frequently drive. It is the property of a Boyar of the name of Vakaresko, and forms a kind of park to his country-house, situated behind it. This gentleman is not only good enough to keep it open to the public, but even makes every possible improvement for their accommodation, at his own expense. Both he and his lady do the honors of it to their friends, in the most obliging manner (140).

Some of them amuse themselves with "German operas and comedies translated into Wallachian." On important anniversary days or religious holidays, they are mainly engaged with paying "etiquette visits at court," the kissing of the prince's hands being "an honor which the foreign consuls, their wives and officers attached to their suite, alone, think proper to dispense with" (141).

Boyars have trivial subjects of conversations and speak indecently, even in front of their ladies. Their "natural aversion to every serious occupation which does not immediately relate to personal interest," and the "extensive freedom of intercourse with each other" lead to their matrimonial faith becoming "merely nominal," through "clandestine connections" (144) and to lots of divorces.

On the opposite side of society, there is the class of peasants, whom the author pities deeply:

There does not perhaps exist a people laboring under a greater degree of oppression from the effect of despotic power, and more heavily burthened with impositions and taxes, than the peasantry of Wallachia and Moldavia; nor any who would bear half their weight with the same patience and seeming resignation (155).

These are indifferent, apathetic, oblivious to any happiness, joy or anguish, due to their lack of any hopes and "the habitual depression of their minds" (155). They are calm, they drink but do not quarrel or fight, they are very respectful and submissive. They are superstitious, believe in witchcraft and in ghosts, in miracles and in the holy water. They live in huts, whose "walls are of clay, and the roofs thatched with straw, neither of which are calculated to protect the lodgers from the inclemency of the bad seasons" (157). They sleep all together in one of their "subterraneous habitations", on "one piece of coarse woolen cloth, which serves in the double capacity of matrass and covering." They seldom afford meat, they eat "eggs fried in butter" and milk with "mamalinga" (158) instead. They work outdoors all day long, but they are still not very active and "take frequent rest." They combine "the Eastern black eye and dark hair, the Russian blue eye and light hair, the Greek and Roman nose, and those features which distinguish the Tartars" (158-59). They marry very early and "excessive poverty induces" women "to grant their favors for any pecuniary consideration, frequently with the knowledge and consent of their husbands, or parents" (159). While on vacation, they eat, drink and dance. Their men dress like the Dacians, their "women are clothed from the neck to the ancles with a long gown of thick cotton stuff of a light color, made tight at the waist in such a manner as to render the whole shape visible. They generally go barefooted, and they cover their heads with a common handkerchief, merely meant to keep up the hair" (160). They work the ground like their European counterparts, only with oxen instead of horses. They use a lot of Indian corn.

Finally, although the wasted, uncultivated land, gives “the country, in many parts, an appearance of desolation” and of “wilderness”, Wilkinson is most delighted by “the more inferior parts of this country”:

Romantic hills and dales, rivulets and streams, fields adorned with verdure and flowers, present themselves in a successive variety of beauty during the fine season, particularly within twenty or thirty miles of the Carpathians, from the Pruth to the Danube at Orsova. The inner parts of these mountains themselves offer the most magnificent scenery; and their summits, the most beautiful and extensive views. Those who have seen the Romantic parts of the Alps, cannot help recalling them here to their remembrance; the impressions of the moment are such that they feel at a loss to decide which deserve the preference. Whilst the impatient courier, going over the rough roads to the Carpathians, bestows curses on the dangers that slacken his pace, and impede his progress, the voluntary traveler and lover of nature stands lost in admiration, and finally quits with reluctance and regret scenes which nature has formed in her most romantic mood (165-6).

Conclusion

As a member of the Levant Company, British consul William Wilkinson was sent to the Romanian Principalities to learn all he could about their economic potential, besides preserving British relationships with the Ottoman Empire, to which the two countries belonged at the time politically speaking. Wilkinson decides to do what no one had done before and write a complete account about this area so remote from Western civilization, especially from Britain, so he approaches his subject from all possible points of view, counting both the advantages and disadvantages, both the beautiful and the horrible. Thus, he argues, Romanians are rich but badly organized, their resources should be exploited, but first, most countries should be liberated. Some of their products are first quality, but none are truly bad. They were a brave and courageous people, but now they are completely subdued and corruption in politics, economy, religion and law are the rule of the day. They have beautiful monuments, great landscapes, some beautiful and some not so beautiful cities, bad pavements and bad drainage, but their travelling system is better than any place he had visited before. Boyars seem the typical parvenus, while peasants are condemned to extreme poverty. With certain exceptions, boyars are the subject of all his irony and mockery, while peasants are offered all his mercy. All in all, the two Principalities have Wilkinson’s true sympathy.

Works Cited

- Brown, James. “Impressions of Romanian Religion and Morality in Some Nineteenth-Century Travelers’ Accounts of the Danubian Principalities”. *Diacronia* 15 (2014): 18-30. Print.

- Cantemir, Demetrius. *The History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire*. 2 vols. London: John James and Paul Knapton, 1734. Print.
- Constantiniu, Florin. *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*. Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 1998. Print.
- Couch, Jonathan S. "Traders and New Ideas about the East: The British Levant Company and the Discourse on the Ottoman Empire, 1581-1774." PhD Diss. U. of Maryland, 2013. Print.
- Epstein, Mortimer. *The Early History of the Levant Company*. London: George Routledge, 1908. Print.
- Filimon, Nicolae. *Ciocoii vechi și noi, sau ce naște din pisică, șoareci mănâncă*. Bucharest: Litera, 2009.
- Laidlaw, Christine. *The British in the Levant: Trade and Perceptions of the Ottoman Empire*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2010. Print.
- Thornton, Thomas. *The Present State of Turkey*. 2 vols. London: Joseph Mawman, 1809. Print.
- Walsh, Robert. *Account of the Levant Company with Some Notices of the Benefits Conferred upon Society by its Officers, in Promoting the Cause of Humanity, Literature, and the Fine Arts*. London: Printed for J. and A. Arch., 1825. Print.
- Wilkinson, William. *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia with Various Political Observations Relating to Them*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820. Print.