

# Philanthropy, Faith, and Influence: Documenting Protestant Missionary Activism during the Armenian Genocide

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## Abstract

American Protestant missionaries played important political and cultural roles in the late Ottoman Empire in the period before, during, and after the Armenian genocide. They reported on events as they unfolded and were instrumental coordinating and executing relief efforts by Western governments and charities. The Burke Library's Missionary Research Library, along with several other important collections at Columbia and other nearby research repositories, holds a uniquely rich and comprehensive body of primary and secondary source materials for understanding the genocide through the lens of the missionaries' attempts to document and respond to the massacres.

*Keywords:* Armenian genocide, Turkey, missionaries, Near East, WWI, Middle East Christianity

# Philanthropy, Faith, and Influence: Documenting Protestant Missionary Activism during the Armenian Genocide

*Elizabeth N. Call and Matthew Baker, Columbia University*

April 2015 marks the centenary of the beginning of the Armenian genocide, in which an estimated 1 to 1.5 million members of the indigenous and ancient Christian minority in what is now eastern Turkey, along with many co-religionists from the Assyrian and Greek Orthodox communities, perished through forced deportation or execution (Kevorkian, 2011). American Protestant missionaries had been present in the Ottoman Empire since the early nineteenth century and were instrumental in shaping Western awareness and response to both the Hamidian massacres of the mid-1890s, in which an estimated 200,000 were killed, as well as the genocide of 1915-1923 (Kevorkian, 2011, p.11). Inspired by the evangelistic and millenarian zeal of the Second Great Awakening, the role and legacy of these missionaries is complex and contested, and a number of recent works have explored and tried to holistically understand their presence and significance (Makdisi, 2008; Nielssen et al., 2011; Stanley, 2003). In addition to their proselytizing labors, they reported, lobbied, authored books and pamphlets, and were key agents in an extraordinarily successful wartime fundraising effort in the aftermath of the genocide. Indeed, historian Suzanne E. Moranian has argued the Protestant missionaries were “the most critical figures in the relationship between the United States and the Armenians during the genocide era. They were unmatched in exerting influence and expertise in the Turkish field and on the American home front, as well as in the American policy, intellectual, and cultural circles” (Moranian, 2004, p. 185).



["Starving Armenia" poster], ca. 1915, Mission Research Library Pamphlet Collection, Armenian and Syrian Relief, folder 1894. Image courtesy of The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, one of Columbia University's Libraries, is home to the Missionary Research Library (MRL), an extensive and rich group of collections of primary and secondary source materials integral to understanding and interpreting the history, goals, significance, and legacy of missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including their role in documenting and responding to the Armenian genocide.



Written from India by an American who was for  
many years in Turkey, and who left there in ~~for Turkey,~~  
July, 1915.

July 6, 1915.

~~My dear Dr. Barton:~~

As I was coming out from under the hands of the censor, I was asked to write to you, telling you something of the real situation in our part of the world. May I ask you, however, not to publish my name or that of any ~~Marash~~ missionary--not even the name of ~~Marash~~ or any of the places which I shall mention, as the censorship is so strict and terrible now that the mention of names brings us under suspicion at once. May I instance? ~~Dr. Merrill~~ and ~~Dr. Shepard~~ have been under such suspicion or ill-will that they have not been able to get a simple family letter through to their family members in America in months and the whole station of ~~Aintab~~ is under sufficient suspicion to prevent most of the letters they write you and Mr. ~~Peet~~ from reaching their destination. The reason, we feel quite certain, is a report on Moslem work which was sent to your rooms,--never dreaming that it would be published as it was,-- in which were mentioned the names Merrill, Shepard, and Aintab. ~~Marash~~ and Aintab both begged me to ask you to publish nothing except in the most general way, such as "interior of Turkey." We would much prefer that even in speaking you should not use names.

Another thing, we expect some of our personal friends may be sending us money through you. I have asked them to send it simply to the account of the missionary whom they wish to use it, for any such items as would indicate even that the state of poverty was known in the outside world or any letters indicating such, would be dangerous. I think this is not fancy, for we are quite sure that an especially long monthly statement from Mr. ~~Peet~~ was delayed by the censor for especial work on it, and so was not delivered to us for

[Letter to WW. Rockwell from Kate E. Ainslie], July, 1915, MRL 2: The Near East Relief Committee Records, series 1, box 3, folder 3. Image courtesy of The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

## Missionaries and the MRL

A word on the history of the MRL is necessary, both to describe a fascinating and often misunderstood collection and to provide important context for its Armenian and related materials. Today, the word "missionary" typically denotes a range of beliefs, activities, and attitudes, sometimes unfavorable: from imperialism and colonialism to religious exclusivism and cultural chauvinism. Many of these missionaries, however, also started schools, colleges,<sup>1</sup> hospitals, orphanages, managed philanthropic ventures, learned and described languages, customs, and places, and penned travelogues and proto-anthropological studies (Grabill, 1971; Moranian, 2004). Whatever

1. These include Constantinople Woman's College and what would later become the American University in Beirut.



"Mothering the Orphans of the Near East," n.d., MRL 2: The Near East Relief Committee Records, series 2, box 18, folder 18. Image courtesy of The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

one's view of the missionaries and their projects, they created, gathered, and maintained a unique and far-reaching record of people and places that in many cases would not otherwise exist, one which is of undeniable scholarly value in understanding the histories of the places they lived and worked, often for several generations.

The MRL was established by future Nobel Peace Laureate John R. Mott and opened in June 1914 with seed funding from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., following the 1910 World Missionary Conference (WMC) held in Edinburgh, Scotland. "World" was far more descriptive of the conference delegates' interests and aspirations than it was of its membership, which was almost entirely Western and Protestant in composition (Stanley, 2009, p. 12). It marked an important moment in the evolution of the Protestant missionary project, bridging a preceding century focused on "Christianizing" and the increasingly ecumenically-minded and pluralistic century that lay ahead.

Originally, the MRL was located at 25 Madison Avenue in New York City. The materials collected were made available for missionaries on furlough and in the field, those in missionary organizations or on mission boards, professors and scholars of missions, anthropologists, government officials, other libraries, and the general public. Materials collected by the library ranged from published pamphlets to archives of individual missionaries and institutional records. Comprising an ever-growing collection of materials from around the globe, the MRL recorded the context – historical, political, social, cultural, anthropological, medical, and educational – of mission "fields" in the early nineteenth through twentieth centuries.

In 1929, because of a lack of funding, the MRL was moved to the newly constructed Brown Tower at Union Theological Seminary at



120th Street and Broadway. Thanks to the stewardship of librarians such as Charles H. Fahs and Hollis W. Herring, the MRL continued to grow despite financial constraints. The library's minimal funding did eventually run out in 1976, at which time its collections were transferred to the Burke Library (Frame, 1998). What is referred to today as the MRL collections include 564 linear feet of archives of missionaries' papers and institutional records, hundreds of printed books, and more than 21,000 pamphlets. All of this material has been processed, and is available through CLIO, Columbia's online catalog, and through the library's archival finding aids. Taken as a whole, the MRL collections form a remarkably comprehensive record of missionary work in education, politics, philanthropy, health, and related fields, and of the places in which that work was conducted over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



[Postcard], n.d., MRL 2: The Near East Relief Committee Records, series 2, box 18, folder 18. Image courtesy of The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

## MRL and the Armenian Genocide

Several sets of resources from the MRL provide crucial information and insight concerning the events of 1915 and their aftermath, in particular, the American Constantinople Relief Committee Records, Mary Lewis Shedd Papers, Near East Relief (NER) Records, and the Missionary Research Pamphlet Collection.

The American Constantinople Relief Committee Records consist of the papers and records of the organization that was formed in 1912 to raise money for refugees in Turkey and surrounding areas. The Committee fell apart in 1914 due to questions concerning the secretary's fundraising practices. While this collection is fairly small,

it is of interest in researching the Armenian genocide in that it helps highlight how information about events in and around the region came to the United States in the years immediately preceding 1915. For example, there are many drafts of advertisements that were to be put into American newspapers soliciting donations, as well as letters describing the conditions in the region, how many Armenians and others were subject to disease due to overcrowding in the hospitals, the numbers of refugees, and accounts of buildings and property destroyed.

The Mary Lewis [Mrs. W.A.] Shedd Papers provide a valuable perspective as to how other communities in the region were affected during this period. Shedd and her husband William were Presbyterian missionaries in Persia, where William would later become United States Consul. The collection includes a typed copy of a journal kept by Mary Shedd while in Urumia from February 24, 1918 to October 3, 1918. On July 31, 1918, the Shedds were forced by the Ottoman Army to leave Urumia, along with thousands of Assyrian Christians. According to Shedd, the reason for this evacuation was a reaction to what has become known as the “March Days” or “March Events,” during which an estimated 12,000 Azerbaijanis and other Muslims were murdered in Baku, then part of the Russian Empire, between March 30 and April 2, 1918. While evacuating, William died of cholera, but the group was able to escape. On August 24, 1918, Mary reached Hamadan in Persia and estimates in her journal that around seven or eight thousand

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 DEC 22, 1913

INVESTIGATIONS BY OUR COMMITTEE ALREADY WORKING SHOW GREAT DESTRUCTION  
 OF VILLAGES IN THRACE ESPECIALLY THOSE BETWEEN RAILWAY AND SEA WHERE  
 ARMIES HAVE MARCHED DESTRUCTION COMPLETE ALL MEANS LIVELIHOOD NOW GONE  
 PEOPLE IN DESPERATE NEED OF FOOD AND FUEL TO CARRY THEM THROUGH WINTER  
 TURKISH GOVERNMENT HELPING TURKISH POPULATION LIMITED EXTENT LITTLE AID  
 GIVEN CHRISTIANS ENDEAVORING SUPPORT MODERATE RELIEF WORK THROUGH WINTER  
 AND NEED AT LEAST TWO THOUSAND POUNDS FURTHER DOING ALL POSSIBLE FOR BULGARIA  
 BUT THIS OPENS ANOTHER DISTRESSFULLY NEEDY FIELD .

PEET. 145 AM

[Telegram from W.W. Peet to Dwight Care], December 22, 1913, MRL 2: American Constantinople Relief Committee Records, box 1, folder 1. Image courtesy of The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

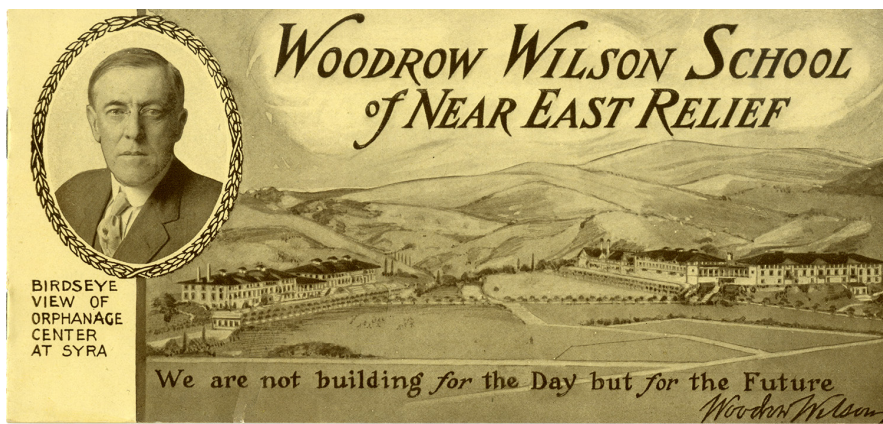


had died, been killed, or were taken prisoner on the journey she and her group had completed. Mary continued on as a missionary and in 1922 published a book about her husband's life, *The Measure of a Man: The Life of William Ambrose Shedd, Missionary to Persia*. Her own journal has also been published as *The Urumia Exodus: More Leaves from the War Journal of a Missionary in Persia*, but the original provides a number of additional details and entries not included in the published version.

The largest and most significant of the MRL Armenian Genocide collections are the Near East Relief Committee Records, 1904-1950. This organization was established as the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) in 1915 in response to the Armenian genocide, and in 1919 became the Near East Relief (NER) Committee. Led by James L. Barton and Cleveland H. Dodge, NER raised an estimated \$117,000,000 and provided relief in the form of food, clothing, and shelter for refugees, as well as building schools, hospitals, and orphanages (Barton, 1930). That Dodge was a close friend and confidant of Woodrow Wilson, and the organization would be directed by the likes of William H. Taft and Franklin D. Roosevelt, gives some indication of its influence. Protestant missionaries were integral to the distribution of aid, a testimony to their political reach during the genocide period and to the cultural significance of mainline Protestantism during the first half of the twentieth century. Moranian, developing the point made above, notes that “it was the problem of relief [of the Armenians in 1915] that brought piety into overt partnership with the political, and elevated the missionaries to a position of influence in Washington. In only a few years, through sophisticated fund-raising techniques, the American Protestants eventually created a multimillion-dollar business of Near-East aid” (Moranian, 2004, p. 192). Near East Relief was in many ways the forerunner of later initiatives such as the Peace Corps and USAID.

The NER holdings consist of more than 10 linear feet, subdivided into 2 series based on the source of the material. The first series are items collected by William Walker Rockwell, professor and librarian at Union Theological Seminary. It contains correspondence, notes, reports, cablegrams, clippings, pamphlets, and a range of administrative documents pertaining to the experience of Armenian communities and refugees and to the work of ACASR/NER. Many of these vividly convey the urgency of the situation and the works undertaken to alleviate the suffering of the Armenians, Assyrians, and others. The second series is that of Talcott Williams, son of missionaries to the Ottoman Empire and first Director of Columbia's Pulitzer School of Journalism.<sup>2</sup> These contain bulletins, reports, minutes, pamphlets, maps, posters and other

2. Some of Williams' papers are included in the Columbia School of Journalism records, and others are at the University of Delaware.



“Woodrow Wilson School of Near East Relief,” n.d., MRL 2: The Near East Relief Committee Records, series 2, box 18, folder 18. Image courtesy of The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

important records of NER’s work and outreach. In 1930, Near East Relief became the Near East Foundation, a Syracuse-based organization whose relief and development work continues to the present day. The Near East Relief records are essential in understanding how the genocide was documented and addressed by Western organizations and governments, as well an important record of the terrible events as they unfolded.

The MRL also includes numerous books and pamphlets relevant to the documentation of the massacres, and in particular to the raising of funds and support for those affected. A brief selection of titles provides a sense of their emphasis: *The Deportation of the Armenians Described from Day to Day by a Kind Woman Somewhere in Turkey* (by Rockwell); *Armenia, the Word Spells Tragedy*; *The Most Terrible Winter the World has Ever Known: More than a Million now Starving in Bible Lands*. These printed materials provide a clear sense of the public relations and outreach efforts that were underway and offer a fuller picture of the shorter and longer format methods used to communicate the realities of the massacres and the plight of survivors.

Since 2012, materials from the MRL have been the most requested collections by researchers in the Burke Library’s Special Collections Reading Room. In a recent survey conducted by one of the library’s archivists, among researchers who have used materials from MRL collections between 2011 and 2014, several reported using the Near East Relief Committee Records in their work, including Ph.D. dissertations, course research papers, a biography, and a full length documentary (Kamsler, 2015). Other sections of the MRL are consulted with similar frequency, in particular from China and Africa. Recent series such as Brill’s *Studies in Christian Mission* and Eerdmans’ *Studies in the History of Christian Mission* further underscore the ongoing scholarly interest in missions-related resources.

## Other Resources at Columbia and Beyond

In addition to the Burke Library's holdings, Columbia University Libraries are home to a number of materials of use in understanding the Armenian genocide, including the Columbia Armenian Oral History Archive, which contains 142 detailed interviews with genocide survivors, and the Irene Kliszus papers, a small collection relating to the Kliszus family and to the experiences of Assyrian Christians. Columbia also houses the records of Robert College and the American College for Girls, two of the many institutions started by Protestant missionaries that played important roles in the political and cultural life in Turkey before, during, and after the genocide.

Nearby institutions also hold very significant collections relevant to the genocide and to the study of missionaries' role in the Near and Middle East. Yale holds both the well-known Day Missions Collection and the bulk of John Mott's papers. Harvard's Houghton Library hold the very extensive records of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, arguably the most important missions group in the nineteenth century, in the Near East and elsewhere. New York City's Rockefeller Archive Center charts the work of Near East Relief's successor organization into the 1960s.

## Conclusion: Translating the MRL

The activism of Protestant missionaries in the early twentieth century created a body of evidence pertaining to the Armenian genocide that is of considerable importance in understanding that difficult and important period in the history of the Near/Middle East. The same holds true for other areas of the world, including East and South Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Though proselytization may have often been a goal, just as often the intentions were also philanthropic or what we might now call "humanitarian" and can't be mapped neatly onto any single ideological grid. Whatever one's final view of missionaries' work and legacy, and of the biases they brought to their various enterprises, they amassed key – in many cases unique – documentation of events that continue to be of keen interest to scholars and researchers from many disciplinary perspectives. The holdings of the Burke Library's MRL collections clearly confirm a fact that librarians and archivists know well, and which shapes the curation and stewardship of our collections: that whatever the origins and past purposes of documents, taking care of the sources that survive is integral to responsible remembering and to skillfully interpreting and integrating the past into the work of the present.



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