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Joanna Hyslop

'A brief and personal account': the evidence of Charles Dobson on the destruction of the city of Smyrna in September 1922

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Charles Dobson (1886-1930) was the Anglican Chaplain at Smyrna in September 1922 when the city was destroyed by fire. Accounts were widely reported in newspapers during the following days and the consensus was that the fire had been deliberately started by Turkish troops some days after they regained the city.² Soon after escaping and while still a refugee from Smyrna, Reverend Dobson was so disturbed by rumours of denial about the cause of the fire³ he was moved to write two reports in which he unequivocally stated his belief that the Turkish Army was responsible. Later he was a key witness in a trial about its origins. The two accounts, together with his witness testimony, reveal a clear day-to-day narrative of Dobson's experiences. With reference to the map of Smyrna which was used for the trial proceedings, his account of the critical period leading to the destruction of Smyrna takes on topographical as well as chronological detail. It is the purpose of this paper to present a summary of these accounts with a brief analysis of their particular qualities and how they came about.

Born in New Zealand, Charles Dobson had led an exceptionally active life before taking up the Smyrna post in 1922. One parish he served was a strife-torn coal mining district on the South Island's West Coast where he also played and refereed rugby. He later walked vast distances visiting the remote communities of the Marlborough Sounds. During the First World War, he had a distinguished career as a military chaplain, being one of the Main Body of men who sailed in October 1914 and served at Gallipoli.

Subsequently, on the Western Front, he earned the Military Cross and was Mentioned in Despatches. He was promoted to Assistant Principal Chaplain for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in France,⁴ and in 1920 he returned to New Zealand with his Greek wife, Eleni.⁵

As a clergyman, Dobson's role was pivotal as a link between diverse societies. In Smyrna he worked closely with British residents and their Consulate, but he proactively extended his energies beyond these confines and had contact with Armenian, Greek, Turkish, American and Maltese residents as well as the refugees who flooded into the city. This meant that he had an expansive overview as witness to events prior to the destruction of the city. He actively used his experience and position to good effect in those last frantic days by liaising between communities, sending notices to the press and taking it upon himself to collect and bury the dead. He was repeatedly called upon to intercede on behalf of terror-stricken people of all nationalities and his testimonies describe his frustration due to the constraints which prevented him from helping further.

Reports and a trial

On Thursday 14th September, Charles Dobson escaped the burning city with his wife and two small daughters on board S.S. *Bavarian*. Carrying over 750 refugees, the steamer arrived at Malta three days later. The refugees were sheltered in the lazaretto quarantine building and Dobson and his family lived there for about a month. On 29th September, together with other prominent citizens of Smyrna, he met with the Bishop of Gibraltar who had reached Malta the day before, stopping there on his way to Constantinople. Together, they drew up a statement of what had happened at Smyrna.⁶

Dobson was offered provisional work for the Mediterranean Mission to Seamen at Marseilles⁷ and he travelled there with his family via Rome. In late October, he was introduced to the British Ambassador to Italy, Sir Ronald Graham, who requested that Dobson dictate a report of his experiences at Smyrna. This report was sent directly to Lord Curzon at the Foreign Office in London.⁸ In a cover note, dated 2nd November and addressed to Curzon, the Ambassador wrote, 'I was impressed by Mr. Dobson's moderation and evident good faith. He carried a testimonial signed by 100 British subjects in Smyrna extolling the great services which he had rendered to

them at the risk of his own life.⁹ Dobson's opening words for the report clearly state his concern that the Turks' responsibility for the fire was in question. While in France, he wrote a second account, entitled *The Smyrna Holocaust*, which was published in London in early February, 1923,¹⁰ and he gave a public talk with the same title at King's College, London, in early May that year.¹¹

In December 1922, the Foreign Office was approached by the British Insurance Association who wished to use official reports from Smyrna in the litigation which arose as a result of losses caused by the fire.¹² 'The Insurance Companies, in view of the clause in their policies which excepted loss or damage arising in connection with war, riot, civil commotion, and similar perils, refused to admit liability for claims in respect of this fire, and called upon claimants under the terms of the policy conditions to prove that their losses were unconnected with any of the excepted circumstances.'¹³ Official despatches reporting events at Smyrna had reached the Foreign Office from Vice Consul Hole and Percy Hadkinson, as well as the Consul General of Smyrna, Sir Harry Lamb.¹⁴ However, the Foreign Office was unwilling to make the information public during the protracted negotiations of the Lausanne Treaty.¹⁵ In a long letter to the Foreign Office in early March 1924, the British Insurance Association made a further concerted plea that this decision should be reconsidered. Its request was solely for the purpose of discovering the true facts concerning the fire, with no question of political opinion, and 'merely with regard to what various officers of the department actually witnessed.' The Foreign Office replied that the reports concerned were of two classes, emanating from official and unofficial sources and that the names of the authors of the unofficial reports had already been given; the question of the publication of the official reports had been carefully considered, and it was decided 'for political reasons that it would not be in the public interest to lay them before parliament.'¹⁶

In April 1924, Percy Hadkinson¹⁷ was contacted by the Athens Legation about the use of his report. By this time he was working in an unofficial capacity at Mitylene, and it was therefore deemed acceptable by the Foreign Office that his account could be used. In fact, Hadkinson thought otherwise and refused. He stated that the report had been made by him in his official capacity and that, as it was largely relying on hearsay, it could not be so valuable to the BIA as other consular reports or those made by people who



Map of Smyrna, 1913

This Map of Smyrna, 1913, courtesy Aviva Group Archives, was used in the proceedings of the test trial in 1924: American Tobacco Company Inc (Plaintiffs), Guardian Assurance Company, Ltd (Defendants).

The crosses define the burnt area. Block numbers are those used during the trial and are marked in the text with square brackets [].

Key

Block	Building, Street or description
6	English Nursing Home, 'Immediately opposite the Railway Station.'
187	Anglican Church of St. John, 'Église Protestant.'
92	Agia Photini, 'Église Photini.'
62	British Consulate
26	Street which passes French Hospital
239	Railway crossing
23	Old Turkish Prison Camp
17	Greek Orthodox Church of St. John
230	Orthodox Cemetery
248	Caravan Bridge
212	American Consulate
8, 9, 10	Cart of bodies
56	Turkish Police Station

had no interests to risk. His family had property and claims in Turkey which they still hoped to retrieve and Hadkinson was disappointed that the Foreign Office thought it unlikely they would ever be able to return. He added with some bitterness, 'the animus the Turks have against us arises from some relatives of mine having helped our intelligence department during the late war, for which reason we expected our Government would be more willing to back our rights.'¹⁸

As the author of independent accounts, Charles Dobson was sought out by the firm of solicitors, Parker & Garrett, on behalf of the insurance companies.¹⁹ Two test cases were set to go to trial in late 1924 at the Royal Courts of Justice in London. Motivated by the desire that the truth should be told, Dobson agreed to give evidence prior to the trial for the defendants, The Guardian Assurance Company. He was examined under oath²⁰ on 2nd September, 1924 at offices in Cornhill, and throughout the interview, reference was made to a map of Smyrna.²¹ The map is reproduced, using the block numbers referred to in the commissioned evidence in square brackets. Dobson travelled again from Lisbon to stand as witness for the trial proceedings in December.²²

For the two reports Charles Dobson relied largely on his own observations, saying, 'Any account that I give must necessarily be from my own point of view, which is individual, and consequently limited' (Dobson Report). Otherwise he took care that he referred to reliable, verifiable sources: 'One deprecates the careless use of large numbers which have appeared in some newspapers, but from personal experience and from the reports of reliable eye-witnesses, whose testimony can be taken at Malta, the massacres were on a scale unprecedented in modern history' (DR). This rigour is matched by the punctiliousness of the examination for evidence which excluded hearsay entirely.

Charles Dobson had had much experience of actual war and, as a military chaplain, had a reputation for *sang froid*.²³ Accordingly the tone of his reports is studiously calm and factual, and devoid of exaggeration or embellishment, while he took care to check expressions of anger or condemnation. The immediacy conveyed by the use of the first person in the reports is emphasized by the unpolished dialogue of his commissioned evidence which would occasionally slip into the present tense as he recalled an event.

Five months at Smyrna, 14th April to 8th September

Charles Dobson took up his post as Anglican Chaplain in Smyrna on Good Friday, which in 1922 fell on 14th April. Coming to Smyrna with him were his wife Eleni, and his infant daughter Clio. Pending the birth in May of their second daughter Rosemary, he had taken on rooms at the English Nursing Home [6] which was opposite the Ottoman Aidin Railway Station. The parsonage had been rented out, so the family continued living at the Nursing Home²⁴ which was conveniently close to his church, St John's. [187]

In mid-May Dobson wrote to a friend in New Zealand, giving his impressions of the city:

There is a war on here but some distance up country. The place is stiff with troops and full of patrols. There are always hordes of Kemalist prisoners marching along. Perhaps like film producers the Greek authorities shuffle them to make a show. We came from Greece with the [British Naval] Commander in Chief who had a great reception including the cheering of English ships. The big harbour has warships of all the powers here at present and there is a sort of feeling of tension as there is talk of forming an autonomous state and calling on the people to resist. The city has about 800,000 people with refugees ... we are quite close to Athens if we want to raise the wind in a hurry.²⁵

A month later, in a letter to Archdeacon Philpott²⁶, he outlined some of the current difficulties and hopes for the future:

The Church has suffered in numbers and finances by the withdrawal to the villages of Boudja and Bournabat of most of the people who can afford to do so. When the political question is settled there should be a return of shipping activity and an influx of British people. The city has no electric trams and no telephones. These are only two examples of the backwardness of things. With security, Smyrna would be a very attractive field for British capital and the chaplaincy here would have a great usefulness.

As far as shipping is concerned the French and Italians, with the Greeks, are doing most of it ... I speak of things as they are today – the future may be quite different. The political situation overshadows everything. I have been interested trying to discover what the British people really want. There is an unmistakable turning towards the Greeks. Put broadly, the Greek will cut a man's Church figuratively, in business,

but the Kemalist is prepared to do it actually if he comes back in his present unchastened humour. The Microasiatic movement is quite real and has the support of the best elements of the Greek population and also of the Church.

I called on the Metropolitan²⁷ and had an interesting hour, but at present the Church is desperately divided by problems.²⁸

In August, rumours of the defeat of the Greek army were reaching Smyrna, and there was an enormous influx of refugees into the city. Describing the general condition of Smyrna in the week prior to the entry of the Turkish Army, Charles Dobson summarized: "The Army broke, and scattered, and they were coming in all the week. Some hospital trains were running in with wounded, and the city was congested with refugees, who for the most part were put into schools and other buildings, but a great many of them ... took refuge in houses and private gardens. I filled up my own churchyard ... with refugees."²⁹ He added: 'I went down to see Mr Herbert Whittall³⁰ who was on a boat, to see if we could organise any relief for the refugees.' He described a car journey to the suburb of Bournabat and how the road was blocked with refugees and remnants of the army including 'all sorts of transport with bullocks, camels, donkeys and soldiers riding what appeared to be artillery horses, the general debris of a broken Army mixed up with refugees bringing their little bits of belongings down ... They were all converging on Smyrna' (Defendants' Evidence).

Charles Dobson's impression of the state of mind of the people of Smyrna at that time was that 'they were generally "windy" and full of apprehension. ... They were not resigned [and apathetic], because they were going to organize the civilian army to resist the attack. ... It materialised, I believe, to the extent that the arms were handed out' (DE). There was much anxious speculation over the possibility of the arrival of the Turks. In her diary, Grace Williamson, who ran the Nursing Home, tersely summarized her concerns, 'Was Kemal actually coming to Smyrna! Awful thought!'³¹ Amongst British nationals there was debate over remaining in Smyrna to try and work with a new regime, or departing to safety with the risk of losing property and business. In his retrospective diary, the British Naval Commander in Chief, Admiral Brock, reported a meeting of some members of the English colony who seemed to be in favour of evacuation. However, he

reported the actual response the next day was very small.³² Dobson visited the British Consulate and found that a 'good many' British residents were leaving and that notices had been put up declaring that if people left, the British authorities would not be responsible for them (DE).

In early September, some days before the arrival of Turkish troops (DE), Dobson went to see the Metropolitan Chrysostomos at his church, Agia Photini. [92] The courtyard 'and the rest of the place was crammed with refugees.' With the Metropolitan, were the Archbishop of Ephesus and other priests who were fearful that excesses would be committed by the Turks on regaining the city. The Metropolitan gave Dobson a message to send to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

It was an appeal to him to use his influence with the British Cabinet in order to effect treating with Kemal outside the city, or in the event of an entry to insure protection of at least the lives of his people. I regret having left this message in my bureau. It was too compromising to be caught with in the last tragic days. The last clause was an appeal in the name of Christ for haste in averting the approaching calamity. In common with all British people whom I consulted, I did not think the Turks would behave in such a way as to justify the fears of the Metropolitan (SH p 21).

Dobson took the Metropolitan's message to show to Sir Harry Lamb, the British Consul General. Failing to find him immediately, he talked instead with Admiral Brock, British Naval Commander-in-Chief, whom he encountered on the Consulate stairs. [62] The Admiral, though sympathetic, thought that any entry by the Turks was likely to be orderly and emphasised that there was already considerable force on the spot. He advised Dobson to use his own discretion over cabling the Archbishop, but to add to any message that the British Admiral had sent it and was prepared to give all protection in his power to all sections of the community. He gave his authority to Dobson to publish a message in his name in the Press, giving his opinion that any occupation would be orderly and advising everyone to look after the refugees in the city (SH p 22). In keeping with the spirit of Admiral Brock's current understanding of the situation and his message, Dobson spoke later to his congregation and, as Grace Williamson reported, 'told us we were to try and help and not hinder by going away and leaving the people, it was up to us to stand by as English'³³

After talking with the Admiral, Dobson went to the Headquarters of the Micro-Asiatic Defence League. At the door he was disturbed to find civilians being supplied with bandoliers and rifles (DR). There was still hope that a section of the retreating army and civilian volunteers might hold the city and surrounding villages until the Allies could arbitrate an armistice. He wrote the Admiral's message for the Press, leaving it with members of the League and then returned to report the message to Chrysostomos. 'I found the Metropolitan full of painful anxiety concerning his people, and not altogether reassured by the Admiral's statement, since he (and, rightly, as it transpired) felt that he knew the Turks better than British Officers' (SH p 23).

The message given to the Press had been distorted. There was no reference to the possible entry of Kemalists, and a statement that British Naval units were on their way to Smyrna was placed in such close proximity to suggest a continuity of the message. Dobson believed that the mutilation of the message had been made in order to convey moral support to those prepared to defend the suburbs, but deplored the actual result which was abandonment of any resistance with a false reliance on the expected arrival of British transports (SH p 23).

Saturday 9th September

On the morning of Saturday 9th September Dobson went to the Consulate 'to get in touch with the situation.' There he spoke with Vice Consul Hole and others, but nobody seemed to know anything definitely. 'We were all under the impression that the Turks were a long way off still.' He recalled that it was before one o'clock when he was making his way home along the street which passed the French Hospital. [26] Suddenly 'a woman came out into the street and threw herself down on her knees and grasped my feet. There was a stir of excitement up and down the street, and then to my great surprise there came round the corner [a squadron of] Turkish soldiers. They rode at a gallop and they pulled their horses to the right and left to avoid riding the woman down.' Looking through a side street on to the quay he saw another body of mounted infantry with their rifles slung, carrying the crescent flag and nearby he heard shouting and some shots, and there was a general movement of more passing cavalry. (DE p 9)

'When I got home I found that the square, which had been full of refugees, was in a ferment of excitement ... and terror' (Ibid). He saw that

the refugees there were being robbed. An error in the transcription of the evidence taken under commission regarding what he saw in the square was corrected at the actual trial and reported in *The Smyrna Conflagration*.

Mr Justice Rowlatt: I see at the top of page 11 in Mr. Dobson's evidence before, he refers to an "Armenian fellow" who got a sabre and mounted a riderless horse. It struck me when I read it through.

Witness [Charles Dobson]: That word "Armenian" is quite a mistake. The chief actor in the case that I have in mind at present was an Irregular. I practically saw the genesis of him. He picked up a sabre, and mounted a riderless horse; then he got hold of a rifle, but the bolt would not work. He began operations under the Clinique windows upon the refugees who were huddled together there.³⁴

Inside the Nursing Home, he found that everyone was 'in a great state of nerves' and that a Greek naval rating had got in, hoping for protection. For the evidence he explained, 'I was practically the only man in this Maternity Home and it was full of patients and women, and everything else, and we crowded in refugees, which we had no right to do, and I really had to make up my mind what was to be done with this man. ... Anyhow, I took him out into the garden because he had to be got rid of for our own sakes, and I wanted him to surrender to a Turkish officer, but he wept, and it seemed to me from what he said that he could not surrender to any Turk, so I dressed him up in a suit of parsons clothes, and gave him some money and turned him loose' (DE p 10). 'I am astonished now that it was ever possible to suggest surrender to the Turk' (SH p 24).

Dobson then went out to see further troops coming in near the railway at the Point. [239] By the wharves there he discovered bodies of men who had been shot lying amongst the debris left by the embarking army. 'I intended taking a photograph of [the Turkish troops'] entry and two of the cavalry covered me with revolvers and told me to take their photographs and others came along, I believe with the intention of holding me up, but one of the Turkish employees of the railway stopped these fellows by telling them that I was English' (DE p 10).

'On Saturday afternoon I brought in a man who had been ridden down. I found him in the old prison camp, [23] and assisted him into my church and put him in the yard, and made him comfortable, and he died during the

night' (DE p 12). Saturday night, he recalled, was 'a very wild night ... it was full of shooting' (DE p 11).

Sunday 10th September

On Sunday morning Charles Dobson went first to his own church, St John's, to see how the refugees there were getting on. He wanted to bury the bodies he'd found the previous day, so went to the Orthodox Church of St John's [17] to find a priest to help him. This church, like all the others, was packed with refugees who were 'lying in appallingly insanitary circumstances, and terror-stricken, after a night of desultory rifle-fire and screaming' (SH p 24). Dobson asked a Turkish policeman who had been posted opposite his own church for assistance. This man commandeered a cart, forced two or three refugees to help, and even offered protection. Instead however, they relied on carrying the Union Jack which they draped over the cart. Mr Riddell, the churchwarden went too. They found bodies amongst the debris around the Point and near the Railway Station, and one 'in a little patch of ground just close to the church ... with the feet stuck out of the hedge' (DE p 13). They took these to the Orthodox Cemetery and buried them.³⁵ [230]

Dobson described the town as 'different' that day, with firing during the day time (DE p 14). He climbed up to the top of the railway station to look at a fire that was burning near Caravan Bridge. In his first report, Dobson wrote, 'during the Sunday night there was sporadic firing and screaming, and I believe much killing in the Armenian quarter near Caravan Bridge' (DR). [248] In 1924, he could not recall whether the trams had been running on the quay, but thought it unlikely because he had been able to freely walk up and down there so much that day. Fresh regular troops were coming past 'pretty well all day', and their discipline seemed to be good. He asked some of them whether they would destroy some horses which had been pushed into the harbour with broken legs, and a Turkish officer promised he would look into it. 'I was not molested anywhere I went [but] there were places I would not go to' (DE p 14).

Monday 11th September

Early on Monday, Dobson went with Grace Williamson to a store next to the Consulate to get provisions for the Nursing Home. 'The key of this store

was kept at the Consulate ... and they opened the place and let Sister Grace in, and I kept the crowd out.' At the Consulate there was a Turkish guard. 'Hordes of people were wanting to get in ... The British guards had been put inside the Consulate [and there was] an iron gate between the two guards' (DE p 15).

Having returned to the Nursing Home, Dobson opened a window when he heard an Italian officer swearing outside. The officer told them it was dangerous to have open windows as Turks had been looting at the end of the street. In the square 'we saw I should say two hundred – that is a rough estimate; I cannot swear as to whether it was two hundred – but it was a big body of men ... who were sort of sitting down on their haunches; some were half kneeling and half sitting with a Turkish guard standing over them, and these fellows were yelling out the word "Padisah" [Sultan]' (DE p 15). He described this scene in the *Smyrna Holocaust*, saying, 'I afterwards learned from an absolutely unimpeachable source that these men were subsequently butchered. The method of killing, my informant told me, was by steel to avoid rifle fire' (SH p 25).

Charles Dobson gave the case of what happened to a retired officer of the Anglo Indian Medical Service, Colonel Murphy, and his family as an example of the ungovernable brutality of Kemalist regular soldiers. 'They broke into his home at Bournabat; they violated his servants, and when he attempted to protect them stunned him with household ornaments. His daughters escaped the fate of the servants by appealing to the officer of the party; he, evidently not able to control his men, could only advise them to hide. Colonel Murphy was stripped and insulted. Finally they stood him up and shot him. His wife, a lady of advanced years, was stunned' (SH p 26). 'He was left wounded for some days and then was brought to the English nursing home by the personal effort of Sir Harry Lamb' (DR). They arrived there in a borrowed car with Murphy's wife and two daughters that Monday afternoon. Murphy 'was wrapped up in blankets, and was very weak. He was suffering, of course, from a gunshot wound. ... The chauffeur and I carried him up and the Sister helped, and put him to bed.' Mrs Murphy 'was really rather mentally affected. She babbled and talked a lot [...] they were all distressed, [and] she had been physically hurt' (DE p 16). In later recalling whether the town's gas supply was still running, Charles remembered Mrs Murphy's suffering that Monday night: 'Gas could not be going on, because I have a very vivid recollection of the night when Mrs Murphy called upon

me sitting in a room with a petrol light. [...] it was a very weary evening we spent in sitting in the room with this distracted woman, with her bad nerves, with a very ghastly light' (DE p 34).

After seeing to the comfort of Colonel Murphy, Charles returned to town to see Mr Horton, the American Consul. When he left the American Consulate [212] it was near dusk and he hurried to avoid the curfew. 'Here in an open space [9] there was a cart, and in this cart, covered with a rough sort of matting which was thrown over, but was not sufficient to hide the nature of the contents of the cart, there were women and babies, and the body of a young girl [...] they were all dead. I pulled it aside to look at them; they had all been shot. This girl – I do not know what age she would be; she was a thin sort of girl, and she had not reached womanhood, although you would not call her a child – was shot through both breasts, and there were other evidences that she had been outraged.' He added how he had a scruple about burying people himself, and described how the next day he'd again sought out a priest at the Orthodox Church of St John to help. He had some difficulty in persuading the priest who 'had got into a state of nerves by this time'. Returning to the spot where he'd found the cart of bodies, they found that they had been buried already by Orthodox people (DE pp 16-17).

Later that Monday night, Charles and Eleni got up and dressed 'in the middle of the night, because things got so hot. I used to tell Mrs Dobson ...' here, frustratingly, Charles was prevented from recounting what he used to say for the evidence under the rules regarding hearsay. He continued, 'the firing got so bad that I dropped telling her lies, and said we must get up and be prepared for anything' (DE p 18).

Tuesday 12th September

Dobson described how on Tuesday morning, after visiting the refugees at St John's, he went to the British Consulate. There he had a conversation with Vice-Consul Hole and they went to the inner garden where it was 'very very quiet.' 'While we were sitting on one of the benches talking there was a crash, and then a body came off one of the roofs of the adjoining houses. The whole of the wall is covered with creepers, and this body crashed into the creepers and was held up. I jumped up and ran towards the body.' This Armenian was alive and Turkish soldiers who were hunting him were covering him with rifles from the roof. 'I expostulated and shouted at the Turks in

English to prevent them killing him. Then after a bit they went away, and we took this fellow and we called in a couple of marines to extricate him from the vines. ... I was very averse to having him thrown out. [After some discussion] I went with the kavass just a little down the street, where there is a sort of open space, where there is a Turkish police station' (DE p 18). [56] As he stated in his report from Rome, Dobson believed the hunting of this Armenian 'even in the consulate gardens' was 'evidence of the massacres that were taking place in more secluded quarters' (DR).

Dobson recalled that, not far from the Consulate, a file of Greek, or Armenian, prisoners was being taken away '[and] one of those fellows broke away' (DE p 36). He recounted the same scene in his *Smyrna Holocaust*: 'a prisoner, being led away roped with a number of others, broke his bonds and knelt and kissed my feet. In this, as in other cases, I was powerless to do anything' (SH p 26).

At the Railway Station late that afternoon, together with others, Charles Dobson drew up 'a list of British subjects including the Maltese as far as we could, who would have to be informed if it was decided that they would have to get out' (DE p 19). And after 11 o'clock that night, Sir Harry Lamb got an urgent wire out to the Foreign Office.

'Mustapha Kemal Pasha whom I met more or less fortuitously this evening Tuesday [sic] asked me to define my capacity. To my reply that I was representative of High Commissioner Constantinople he retorted that his Government considered itself in a state of war with Great Britain and therefore did not recognise High Commissioner Constantinople, or myself either as his representative or as consul. He would be justified in interning all British subjects. He did not however intend to do so and we were free to leave if we liked. I request instructions urgently as to whether I should embark Colony or not. Civil Governor to whom Mustapha Kemal then referred me assured me that I need not be in any anxiety regarding their safety until tomorrow night Wednesday.'³⁶

Wednesday 13th September

Very early on Wednesday, Lamb visited the Nursing Home and instructed Charles Dobson to warn people on the list of British subjects to be at the Consulate before 6 o'clock in order to evacuate the city. He was also to warn as many Maltese as possible though he had no list of names and

addresses for them. 'With regard to many of the people whose names are on this list I had not the slightest idea where they lived' (DE p 20).

At about eleven o'clock Dobson was in the Armenian Quarter, looking for a Maltese house. 'The state of the streets in the direction of the Basmahane Station was bad. The Turks were looting and the people were running about' (DE p 21). There was 'a great running of terror-stricken people, carrying children and bedding' (SH p 27). 'One man was lying on the road who had been shot through the thighs ... he had a great clot of blood which had formed which I could not attend to' (DE p 21). 'His screams were unheeded' (SH p 27). 'Another man had been struck in the jaw and a very large part of his face had been knocked up. Up the side streets there were shots fired. One Turk I remember – it is not an important thing – threw a bundle of towels out of a window to another man below' (DE p 21). 'The general atmosphere was terrible, and I began to fear that we might have left our retreat till too late' (SH p 27).

After 'some beer and some sort of a snack over at de Candolle's³⁷ ... we decided, of course, that we must go, and de Candolle lent me his motor to take my wife and the two children.' Dobson himself went on foot to the Consulate accompanying the family's Greek wet nurse, and he carried her child in his arms (DE p 22). He described the quay and how all the lighters had till then been 'smothered with refugees. It would have been a great problem for some people to get these people fed. [...] All along there,³⁸ there were people, congregations of the different nationalities embarking, and there were refugees taken off the lighters, the Turks had just landed them and were sorting them out' (DE p 22).

At the Consulate 'there was the job of sorting out the people and getting the passports ready' (DE p 22). A family account illustrates the difficulties which ensued due to the rule of British ships taking on board only British nationals. The officer in charge initially denied passage to Dobson's Greek wet nurse and her daughter, Irene. Dobson argued that his own infant daughter's life would be threatened on the long journey without nourishment, to which the officer responded with the impossible solution of allowing the nurse but denying her daughter to board. The Reverend Dobson cut through the impasse, and shocked the officer, by declaring that the wet nurse's daughter Irene was also his own child.³⁹ He reported that, while still at the Consulate, and 'some time before embarking ... between 2 and 3 o'clock ... I was told that there was a fire from the signaller who reported

it.' He added, 'I was quite conscious that there was a fire, but I did not care whether there was a fire or not, it was not interesting me very much; I was preoccupied in getting my Greek nurse and [her] child passed on, and the first time I saw the fire was when we were actually on the way to the *Bavarian* on the pinnacle. [...] I did not see any flames, but I saw a huge black pillar of smoke shooting up. [...] but obviously it was a fire' (DE pp 23-24).

After boarding the *Bavarian*, 'I went downstairs and the place was crammed with people whom I knew. If I did not know them they knew me, and there were a lot of them who were hysterical, and it was a long time before I was keen to know what was going on upstairs.' Later, from the deck he saw the great pillar of black smoke again, 'and then there were thinner fires beginning in another quarter, of course, after a time these developed, and then still thinner ones.' He added, 'It was not very long before the smoke was lit. You did not see the flames; there was a sort of glow in the smoke.' 'I got a little bit of sleep, but I was up and down all the time. ... Altogether there were three [separate fires] which I am positive about. ... There was quite a considerable space of sky between them. ... It seemed to me that the fire was heading to the water front. It was getting more terrible all the time. It was obvious to me that the fire was generally spreading at the back here. It was an enormous conflagration, just one sheet of flame. Of course, you could see the buildings silhouetted against the background of flame, and then you would see the outline of a building and then that building would catch fire too, and nearer and nearer it was bursting through actually on the water front' DE pp 24-25). In *The Smyrna Holocaust* he summarized, 'It is most significant that the fire shot up in several places with very little intervals of time and pointed to a systematic incendiaryism such as only a well co-ordinated movement could have effected' (SH p 28).

As a witness to events at Smyrna, Charles Dobson occupied an exceptional position. He worked hand in glove with the British Consulate and was greatly relied on by it, though he was not part of its official staff. An important figure within the British colony, he held an oblique viewpoint as a New Zealander who was married to a Greek woman. Dobson's post as Anglican Chaplain gave him a strategic position which he chose to exploit to good effect during the crisis, and he actively crossed the boundaries

between the varied communities of the city, putting himself forward as a messenger between them. His British identity may have afforded him some protection, but he was exposed to danger as he constantly moved about the streets in order to carry out practical tasks and was frequently called upon to help people who were themselves in extreme peril. The name of the English Nursing Home belied its crucial role for serving much more than the English public. As a resident there, Dobson was constantly in touch with the news, activities and opinions of the people who came and went, and its position afforded a view of events taking place in the large space in front of the Ottoman Aidin Railway Station.

In a letter dated 27th September 1922, a refugee from Smyrna wrote, '[Rev. Dobson] told me upon arriving at Malta that he had been over the trenches 13 times during the war, but had never witnessed anything so horrible as the conditions at Smyrna, and he would never forget it.'⁴⁰ His alarm at the distortion of truth as reported in the press compelled Dobson to publish an account of his own experiences. By the time of the insurance trial in late 1924, those who had escaped Smyrna but were still hopeful of returning to Turkey to restart commercial activity were unwilling to give evidence themselves. In his desire that the truth should not be hidden, Charles Dobson agreed to give evidence for the defence prior to the trial, and he returned from Lisbon for the actual proceedings. The judgement concluded that the fire which destroyed Smyrna had indeed been deliberately started.⁴¹

This paper is offered as part of my research into the life of Charles Dobson who was my grandfather. The three key sources are:

Report by Rev. Charles Dobson on Smyrna; Enclosure No 1, Graham to Curzon, 7 November 1922, The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/7949.

Charles Dobson, *The Smyrna Holocaust*, pp 21-29, appendix to Lysimachos Oeconomos, *The Tragedy of the Christian Near East*, (Anglo-Hellenic League, London 1923); Classmark DS51.S7 OIK, Modern Greek Pamphlets Collection, Maughan Library, London.

Charles Dobson, Defendants' Evidence, Taken Under Commission, September 1924. High Court of Justice, King's Bench Division. American Tobacco Company Inc (Plaintiffs), Guardian Assurance Company, Ltd (Defendants), The National Archives of the UK (TNA): J17/641, pp 2-42.

Notes

- 1 Report by Rev. Charles Dobson on Smyrna; Enclosure No 1, Graham to Curzon, 7 November 1922, The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/7949 (hereafter cited as Dobson Report or DR in text.)

The final paragraph: 'This is only a brief and personal account of a few of the incidents that remain permanently in one's memory; but in the course of a month's ministering to the British community in the lazaretto at Malta I have heard from people, whose word cannot be doubted, such accounts of murder, pillage and rape that, stripped of all exaggeration and discounting all tendency to hysteria, the accumulative facts are such as to make a truly damning indictment against the Kemalistic troops, who preserved discipline until their own occupation was effectively accomplished, and then apparently deliberately neglected those military precautions which would have ensured the Christian population against the fanatical cruelty and lust of the Anatolian soldiery.'

- 2 'Stricken Smyrna's Lot', *Evening Post* (NZ), Vol. CIV, Issue 67, Fri 16th Sept, 1922
'Deliberately Planned', *Times* (London), Sun. 18th Sept, 1922
Duncan Gardner Wallace, 'Last Days of Smyrna', *Times* (London), Mon. 19th Sept, 1922.
- 3 Charles Dobson, *The Smyrna Holocaust*, pp 21-29, appendix to Lysimachos Oeconomos, *The Tragedy of the Christian Near East*, (Anglo-Hellenic League, London 1923); Classmark DS51. S7 OIK, Modern Greek Pamphlets Collection, Maughan Library (hereafter cited as Smyrna Holocaust or SH in text.)
'I was astonished when in Italy, and again here in France, to find how unwilling some circles were to believe the culpability of the Turkish troops in the burning of Smyrna. It seems to me that the firing of the city by the fanatic element of the Turkish Army was the natural culmination of the breakdown of restraints imposed by military necessities, and of the unbridled indulgence of xenophobia. I have not yet met anybody who was in a position to know the circumstances, who does not contemptuously discredit the assertion that the Armenians fired the city.' p 27
- 4 New Zealand Defence Force Personnel Record: Charles James Hamilton DOBSON, AABK 18805 W5537 0034302. Digitised record at <http://archway.archives.govt.nz/>
- 5 Eleni Paulos Georgouloupoulos (1890-1940), was born in Piraeus, educated in Paris, and had been living in London for some years when she and Charles Dobson met in 1915. They married in 1919 at Piraeus.
- 6 John Greig (Bishop of Gibraltar) 'The Bishop's Journal', Friday September 29th, Gibraltar Diocesan Gazette, November 1922, p 18. Present at this meeting were Herbert Whittall, senior, Robert Hadkinson with his son, J. Epstein and the three British chaplains, Revs. Dobson, Fry and Ashe.
- 7 Gibraltar Diocesan Gazette, November 1922, p 14.
- 8 Dobson Report.
- 9 Gibraltar Diocesan Gazette, December 1922, p 31. The testimony given by British refugees from Smyrna, expressing their gratitude towards Rev. Charles Dobson, was published in the Gibraltar Diocesan Gazette at the Bishop of Gibraltar's request.
- 10 *Smyrna Holocaust*.
- 11 'Arrangements For Today', *Times* (London), 3rd May, 1923
- 12 Parker, Garret & Co. to Foreign Office, 21 December 1922, TNA: FO 371/1076
- 13 *The Smyrna Conflagration*, American Tobacco Company Incorporated v. Guardian Assurance Company Ltd., report of trial, n.d., p 6, S 368:11, Guildhall Library, London.
- 14 Sir Harry Lamb, despatches, TNA: FO 371/7890; FO 371/7888; FO 371/7898.
Edwyn Hole, reports, TNA: FO 371/7894; FO 371/7890.

History

- 15 The Lausanne Peace Treaty, signed on 24 July, 1923, came into force on 6 August, 1924, after ratification.
- 16 British Insurance Association to Foreign Office, 2 March 1924 and Foreign Office reply, 19 March 1924, TNA: FO 286/906.
- 17 In 1922 Percy Hadkinson was British Vice Consul at Mitylene.
- 18 Hadkinson to Cheetham, letter, 18 April 1924, TNA: FO 286/906
- 19 Oliphant, memo, 9 January 1924, TNA: FO 371/1076. Charles Dobson was traced to an address in Middlesbrough where he was working as curate at St Paul's under the Archbishop of York, and his location was communicated to eight firms of solicitors.
- 20 Charles Dobson, Defendants' Evidence, Taken Under Commission, September 1924. High Court of Justice, King's Bench Division. American Tobacco Company Inc (Plaintiffs), Guardian Assurance Company, Ltd (Defendants), TNA: J17/641 pp 2-42 (hereafter cited as Defendants' Evidence or DE in text.)
- 21 Map of Smyrna, 1913, courtesy of Aviva Group Archives. The map was used for the trial and was constantly referred to during Dobson's interview for the defendants' evidence on September 2nd, 1924.
- 22 By the time he gave evidence under commission in Sept 1924, Charles Dobson had been appointed Chaplain to St George's Chapel, British Embassy, Lisbon, in the Diocese of Gibraltar.
- 23 O. E. Burton, *The Auckland Regiment N.Z.E.F., 1914-18* p 239 (Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., Auckland, N.Z., 1922.) Describing the fighting of Aug 30th 1918 and the action that won Dobson the Military Cross, Burton adds: "The padre was one of the few Main Body men still surviving, and had had a long war experience. He was well known for his courage and sang-froid."
- 24 Grace Williamson, diaries, 1914-20 and 1922, <http://www.levantineheritage.com/link.htm>
The English Nursing Home was run by Nurse Grace Williamson whose diaries describe her wartime experiences in Smyrna and later the days leading to the fire in September 1922.
- 25 Dobson to Tom Seddon, 10 May, 1922. Seddon family papers, MS-Papers-1619-159, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
- 26 Archdeacon Philpott, Archdeacon of Malta.
- 27 Metropolitan Chrysostomos (1867-1922), head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Smyrna.
- 28 Dobson to Philpott, 3 June, 1922. Smyrna Anglican Chaplaincy, G.L. Ms 32699/521, Guildhall Library, London
- 29 Defendants' Evidence. Grace Williamson's diary also records that many people were taking refuge, or attempting to take refuge, in the Nursing Home.
- 30 Mr Herbert Whittall. The Whittall family was a long established Levantine merchant family in Smyrna.
- 31 Grace Williamson, diary, 1922, <http://www.levantineheritage.com/link.htm>
- 32 Admiral Brock, account of proceedings at Smyrna from 3-14 September, 1922, 2 October, 1922, TNA: ADM 137/1779. Brock's retrospective diary reported a meeting of Mon 4th September on board HMS *Iron Duke* 'for the purpose of discussing the situation and the arrangements which might be needed for securing the safety of British subjects in case of disturbance [. . .] The possibility of concentrating British subjects in a place of refuge was examined, but found to be impracticable.'
- 33 Grace Williamson, diary, 1922, <http://www.levantineheritage.com/link.htm>
- 34 *The Smyrna Conflagration*, American Tobacco Company Incorporated v. Guardian Assurance Company Ltd., report of trial, pp 70-71, S 368:11, Guildhall Library, London.

- 35 Dobson was conscientious that burials should be conducted under the appropriate denominational ceremony if possible, a scrupulousness learnt as a military chaplain.
- 36 Lamb to Foreign Office, telegram, 13 September 1922, TNA: ADM 1/8640/114.
- 37 General de Candolle was Manager of The Ottoman Aiden Railway Company in 1922 and his office was at the railway station opposite the Nursing Home.
- 38 Sibel Zandi-Sayek. 'Struggles Over the Shore: building the quay of Izmir, 1867-1875', University of California at Berkeley (*City and Society*, Vol 12, Issue 1, pp 55-78, June 2000) 'The new quay stretched over two and a half miles.'
- 39 Rosemary Hyslop, oral account to author, August 2007. Rosemary was Dobson's infant daughter.
- 40 Henry Locke to Robert Simes, letter, 'The Horrors of Smyrna', *The Register* (Adelaide SA: 1901-1929), Sat 11th Nov, 1922
- 41 Justice Rowlatt, *The Smyrna Conflagration*, American Tobacco Company Incorporated v. Guardian Assurance Company Ltd., report of trial, pp 124-128, S368:11, Guildhall Library, London.