ARMINIUS VAMBÉRY: A MULTIFACETED PORTRAIT

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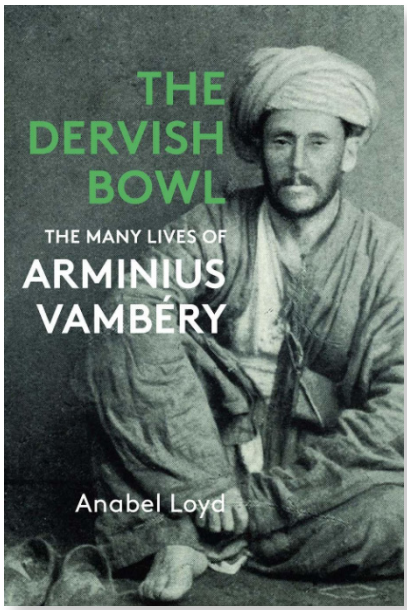

Anabel Loyd, *The Dervish Bowl: The Many Lives of Arminius Vambéry*. London: Haus Publishing, 2024.

The subject of author and journalist Anabel Loyd's latest book is the Hungarian scholar and traveller Arminius Vambéry, who enjoyed a degree of fame at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This was not only for his travels to Central Asia as a young man in 1860s, but also for his polymathic abilities which spanned languages, diplomacy, and academia. As with many prominent figures active during that era of imperial dominance, Vambéry's legacy – at least in the United Kingdom, a country which was to feature prominently in his life and professional trajectory – has dwindled over the ensuing decades, a situation which Loyd's incisive and well-researched biography remedies excellently.

Totalling 385 pages and divided into an introduction and eighteen numbered chapters, Loyd's study is aimed at the generalist reading public. In this regard, it largely follows a traditional chronological approach to Vambéry's life and times, making judicious reference to the Hungarian's own English-language writings and contextualising the material with information from a wide variety of historical and modern sources, including the previous English-language academic studies by David Mandler (see Mandler, 2016) as well as by Lory Adler and Richard Dalby (see Adler & Dalby, 1979).

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The book's Introduction opens, however, in the present day, when Loyd spots a dervish bowl – an item commonly used by the Islamic holy men for begging for sustenance on their pilgrimages and travels – in a museum on a visit to Azerbaijan. With Vambéry adopting the disguise of a dervish in order to make his way unencumbered across Central Asia in the 1860s, Loyd therefore uses this artifact to introduce the reader to the complex and enigmatic personality portrayed in the book's pages.

Chapter 1 ('The Lame Boy') charts Vambéry's early years. He was born in either 1831 or 1832 in a small town in rural Habsburg Hungary. From a humble Jewish family, Vambéry was raised by his mother and stepfather (his own father had died before Vambéry's birth) but his background and lameness did not stop him from excelling academically, particularly in languages. He attended grammar school and began work as a tutor to wealthy families, before embarking on his first set of travels. Chapters 2 ('Constantinople) and 3 ('Reshid Effendi') detail Vambéry's travels and first arrival in the Ottoman capital, as well as his attempts to settle himself within Turkish society by offering language lessons to diplomats, eventually reaching the crème-de-la-crème of imperial activity through access to the sultan's household (see also Hoyte-West, 2024).

Chapter 4 ('The Many Lives Begin') details Vambéry's initial successes following the publication of his first book and other writings, as well as presenting some of the geopolitical factors underpinning his often stridently-held opinions regarding the politics of the time – namely, the 'Great Game' concerning British and Russian imperial activities in Central Asia. After a brief return to Hungary from Constantinople, and motivated by an attempt to discover the supposed Central Asian linguistic origins of his native Hungarian, Vambéry embarks on his journey by obtaining a special passport from the sultan and then travelling to the easternmost realms of the Ottoman lands.

Chapter 5 ('Persia') presents Vambéry's journey by caravan through Khoy, Tabriz, and Tehran, meeting the European diplomats there before first donning his dervish disguise to make his way to Qom, Kashan, and Shiraz, before returning to Tehran. Chapters 6 ('The False Dervish') and 7 ('Khiva') illustrate the initial stages of the disguised Hungarian's journey by caravan out of Persia into what was then called Turkestan, a region then little-travelled by Europeans and considered highly dangerous territory. On arriving in the capital of the khanate of Khiva, the false dervish was accommodated by the local ruler, before proceeding onwards. In Chapter 8 ('Bukhara'), Vambéry journeys to that famous city, meeting with the emir and avoiding detection, as well as onwards to Samarkand and into Afghanistan in Chapter 9 ('The Turning Point').

Chapter 10 ('Going Home – From Mashhad to Tehran') outlines the Hungarian's journey back to Persia. From the Persian-Ottoman border, Chapter 11 ('The Dervish in London') details Vambéry's return to Europe, where he would make his reputation following his Central Asia escapades. He did not linger long

in Budapest, heading onwards to London where he met with the great and good of Victorian politics and society, before a short stay in Paris, where he was also feted by the social and political class. Chapter 12 ('The Prophet in His Own Land'), charts Vambéry's return to the Habsburg lands, including a meeting with the Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph. Indeed, it was the personal intervention of the monarch that ensured that the Hungarian received a permanent academic post in Oriental languages at the University of Pest. Yet Vambéry was to meet with considerable difficulties in the world of academia, in part owing to his religious and social origins (even though he had by then converted to Christianity), his lack of academic degrees and other credentials, as well as his seemingly difficult and combative personality.

With Vambéry firmly in favour of the British side during the 'Great Game', Chapter 13 ('The Russian Menace') is concerned with his antipathy towards the Russian Empire and its territorial designs on Central Asia and – potentially – British-ruled India. These were topics that he would deal with frequently in his writing and journalism over the next few decades, and thus gave him a considerable degree of visibility and prominence in British politics at that time.

Chapter 14 ('Royal Favour') depicts how Vambéry was welcomed by the British royal family and thus exemplifying his acceptance by the highest echelons of British society. He received an invitation from Queen Victoria to stay at Windsor for two nights in 1889, and also had a long-standing friendship with the then Prince of Wales, who would later rule as Edward VII. Chapter 15 ('The Sultan') continues Vambéry's personal acquaintance with a very different monarch, the Ottoman ruler Abdul Hamid II, and additionally expounds on the Hungarian's intelligence-gathering activities on behalf of the British at that time.

Building on Vambéry's links with the sultan, Chapter 16 ('A Jewish Homeland') examines his role and personal contacts with the Zionist Theodor Herzl regarding the complex issue of diplomatic and political discussions on Palestine. Chapters 17 ('The British Pensioner') and 18 ('The Last Act') deal with the Hungarian scholar's twilight years, including his passing and how this sad news was received at that time.

As this excellent volume testifies, it is clear that Vambéry undoubtedly led a very full and active life. Indeed, in some aspects (such as his penchant for self-promotion and celebrity), he seems to be quite modern in his behaviour and attributes, with the manifold references to Vambéry's own prolific writings helping to ensure that his voice also resonates through the text. Yet, in noting the Hungarian's tendencies to self-aggrandisement and hyperbole about himself and his own abilities, it is important to underline that Loyd's study supplies the necessary balance, nuance, and context to many of the remarks and events featured in the book. Indeed, some criticism is made of his contributions to academia and society, echoing the perspectives of several of Vambéry's contemporaries. Nor does Loyd shy away from presenting some of the less-favourable aspects of Vambéry's

character, and personality, including his treatment of his own family and close relations, his difficult behaviour and longstanding ability to hold grudges, as well as – despite receiving numerous state, royal, and academic accolades – his apparent conviction of having being overlooked for even greater honours.

In summing up, Loyd's masterly study goes beyond being merely a chronicle of Vambéry's varied diplomatic, linguistic, and scholarly activities. Rather, *The Dervish Bowl: The Many Lives of Arminius Vambéry* is an extremely thoroughly researched analytical portrait of a complex individual who, in an age of limited social mobility, was eventually to acquire many of the trappings of a successful and influential life during an era of immense geopolitical significance.

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