



Pashas: Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World, by James Mather (Yale, £12.99)

The pashas were British merchants who, from the reign of Elizabeth I until the 19th century, worked within the Ottoman empire, bringing luxury goods such as silk and currants back to Britain and exporting woollen cloth in return. Unlike in India, the British came not as colonisers with guns and flags, but as guests who were welcomed into an already thriving open market. The pashas found Ottoman culture “alluring, dynamic and diverse” in contrast to the stultifying homogeneity of British society. In 1697, a chaplain wrote of Damascus that “no place in the world can promise the beholder greater voluptuousness”. Mather’s study adds to the debate about orientalism by exploring the response of Britons to the Middle East in the era before the British empire. His book is rich with details about the daily lives of the pashas and is filled with the evocative sights and sounds of Middle Eastern souks and cities. Mather concludes hopefully that “there was (and is) nothing quintessential, ineluctable or necessary about conflict and misunderstanding” between east and west. **PDS**