

Algiers, 1956

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Brief notes about the relevance of L. P. Harvey [Francisco Franco-Sánchez]

The personality of Leonard Patrick Harvey, professor at London and Oxford universities, as researcher no needs any introduction in the academic fields of Arabic and Islamic studies, Mudejars and Moriscos or the Islamic heritage on Spanish medieval and modern Literature.

Prof. Dr. L. P. Harvey was until his retirement in 1990, head of Department of Spanish and Spanish American Studies in the King's College, University of London. After this retirement, he collaborated actively as Professor in the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, at the University of Oxford. His published works are numerous, over different thematic fields: *Islamic Spain 1250-1500*, *Muslims in Spain 1500-1614* and *Ibn Battuta. Makers of Islamic Civilization*, also he worked on Ibn Battuta, Don Quixote, Mancebo de Arévalo, Baray de Reminjo, etc., along more than 30 years of research's works. Some biographic sketch and his bibliographic production we can find in the volume edited as tribute by his colleagues (Hook & Berry) and more specifically in the volume dedicated to him in the review *Sharq Al-Andalus* –especially in the bio-bibliographic article of L. F. Bernabé.

Retired of teaching due to age, he has written by his hand these experiences in first person about his stay in Algiers in 1956, during the period of preparing his research of doctorate in this city. He authorized to me to publish this text, and he wrote as explaining note for its origin: “Pat Harvey wrote the following reminiscences of Algiers under French rule for one of his sons who lives now in Zimbabwe”.

We consider that this autobiographical text of Prof. Harvey has a great interest as a historical and historiographical personal testimony. Through its lines, the life in Algiers in mid-fifties it's described as a picture of great interest.

The specialist who wrote about Arabic travelers and the migration of Moriscos and his manuscripts along the Mediterranean world, writing over his own youth journeys.

LPH in Algiers 1956: On not having my cake and not eating it [L. P. Harvey]

I went to Algiers on New Year's Day 1956 in search of evidence to use in a future D.Phil. thesis on a possible refugee Spanish Morisco presence in N. Africa (after year 1600.) I was sure that some refugees had gone there, and I wanted to find out whether any manuscript evidence of their presence had survived. I flew there immediately after a productive spell of several months –more than 4– working on Morisco mss. in libraries in Madrid, (where I had been lodging with a Madrid family, –by then very good friends– the Kleins, this is no time to explain that German surname.) Now on my own after an incredibly busy stint, I was feeling homesick and ready for England, but to economize on air fares I thought I should not fly back to England, but combine the Spanish trip, (collecting material mainly in Madrid), with a first exploratory trip to Algeria. So I flew straight from Barajas to Algiers.

Algeria, of course was at that time French-ruled, and patriotic Frenchmen were apt to declare that it was “just part of France.” That was precisely what was at the heart of the political disagreements that were already in some regions (“Kabylie”) taking the form of armed rebellion, but in Algiers city and most of the country in fact, things were on the surface fairly calm –at least so I was told by people who ought to know. There were just occasional manifestations of discontent from the native Algerian population, but the

considerable number of French (or at least French-speaking) *colons* trusted that the French Army would be able to protect them. As I had anticipated, it proved much easier for me to socialize with *colons* –with whom I did not sympathize politically, however much I did sympathize with their human dilemma– than it was for me to make real contact at that juncture with native Algerians. Even though their political case was in my opinion immensely strong, they understandably distrusted me. I never did manage to solve this predicament of mine, and that circumstance, in the midst of a major political crisis, was really why my research trip was a very limited success.

[To compensate for my loss of the English Christmas, June said she would post me a Christmas pudding and a Christmas cake. I said I was unlikely to be able to get the pudding cooked properly, so just send the cake please: which she did. It failed to reach me in Madrid for Christmas however, so I arranged for it to be forwarded, when it eventually arrived, and sent on to Algiers. (The end of this part of my story will come later.)

New Years' Day was clearly not a time when people were supposed to be travelling to Algiers. When the plane landed there were just no officials, customs or otherwise, on duty, they were all off boozing, so I could not get my passport stamped, though I tried!. (This actually caused me several problems subsequently, because, in the words of French officialese, 'my papers were not in order'.) In fact I was not legally there at all, as an unhelpful bank cashier pointed out when I tried to get some cash that he admitted had been sent to his bank in my name, and I just had to go back to the airport some days later to acquire with difficulty the necessary rubber stamps.

I had no ready-made contacts in Algiers –the place did not seem to be on any Oxford don's established itinerary– and I started by booking in to a well-advertised hotel. It was fine, central, but obviously too expensive for me to stay on there very long. I went finally for a sort of pension or b&b¹ –with– lunch-thrown-in as part of the package, on the fringe of the Casbah, (where I knew the libraries that interested me were located.) I thought a far better plan might be for me to move into student accommodation at the University, and thus make student contacts and get more language practice. When I investigated that further however, I pulled out, fearing that at the advanced age of 27 (?) I would not be able to stand the shock of reconverting myself into just another underprivileged young student (most were, say, 18/19 year olds.) Probably I was right; I had to balance desirable contact with modern Algerians against the need to push ahead with the thesis to which I was already heavily committed, and which I needed to complete if I ever wanted an academic job in the future. In the student hostel the thesis would not have progressed at all, facilities (including the loos!) were abysmal. So I returned to my b&b, and got on with my work on mss.

I had better at this stage say a little about this pension. It was in many ways typical of Algiers as it was at the end of the French period. It was run by a tough old Spanish lady (well her Spanish seemed to me marginally better than her French or her Arabic, I don't think she ever told me what was her real nationality, but she did have an overworked Valencian maidservant from Oran, although no actual Spanish clients.) Live-in residents (occupying the fairly austere tiled bedrooms) were a mixture of Arabic speaking Algerian civil servants, clerks, and a French couple down on their luck and of course myself, clearly a mystery to the rest as far as my classification was concerned. What WAS this young man? What was he up to? Probably *No Good*. There were half dozen or so of us sleep-in residents, but many more customers had signed in for lunch, I found, because this was of such good quality at a reasonable price. These lunchtime clients clearly felt

¹ "Bed & Breakfast", a kind of hostel that offers the breakfast included in the price [n.e.].

they were on the whole ‘a *Better Class of Person*’ –and I suppose some were. There was an obviously *Important* but really quite affable Algerian Muslim Arab gentleman, a ‘caid’ no less, I suspect with a post in the government, and with him a young man, surely too well dressed for a student, he said his nephew. There were several commercial travellers and some female secretaries or civil servants. All Francophones of course. And there was the owner of my overcoat: of him, and it, more below.

The most promising library for my research purposes was called the “Bibliothèque Nationale”: at that time, in spite of the grand name, a quite small collection of mainly Arabic manuscripts, housed in an old building, once a Dey’s residence, high up in the Casbah. (As I say, it claimed to have been a palace of one of the Deys, but was in no way palatial.) It was, shortly after I left Algiers, to be rehoused in a spanking modern building –where, just a few months after that, it was hit by a terrorist bomb and largely destroyed (probably in a right-wing “Algeria is French” operation. Things very rapidly hooted up just about when I left.) The aged gent in a burnous who presided over the “library” such as it was, up in the Casbah when I arrived, obviously had no idea what might interest me, but there was a catalogue of sorts, with just a *Few* items of potential interest, I could see. I had soon transcribed the two uninteresting aljamiado mss. I spotted (such manuscripts are extremely rare outside Spain, so I was pleased to find them. Their presence at least showed me that Moriscos had passed that way, and encouraged me to continue searching.) Virtually nothing came to light subsequently, and I do not think this was because of my incompetence.

Readers in the library were: a sprinkling of aged Arabic-speaking scholars clearly there for pious purposes, me for the mss that were a survival from Algiers in the 17th century, and quite a number of youngsters from the Casbah in search of a quiet desk on which to do their maths homework. Comfort was minimal because the Deys had preferred lattice shutters to glazed windows. That worked well until in late Jan. and February it set in to snow, and the flakes often drifted sideways through the lattice on to the desks. The librarian very reasonably introduced for himself the fire-hazard of a charcoal open brazier of an under-the-table style familiar enough to me from Spain. The brazier of course was of scant benefit to me in my corner. That winter, January/February was exceptionally cold right round the western Mediterranean. Delicate crops and even vineyards in Southern France suffered. I had come from Spain without real ‘winter’ clothing, a light mac for example was my only outer garment for such weather.

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Here I was lucky in that in my pension I had got talking to one of the lunchtime customers, a middle-aged French refrigeration engineer and salesman with contracts all over Algeria, who, it emerged, wanted to revive his English. He pressed on me the loan of a very smart up-market warm *English* overcoat. I hesitated, but heavens, it fitted, I was *very* cold, and so accepted gratefully. The story he told to explain his ownership of the coat deserves recording. I *think* he was telling the truth, though I do wonder, it is a story I had never heard the like of, before or since. I have not been able to find any confirmation for it in any historical source, but as you will see, why should he lie to me?

In 1938-9 my benefactor (M. Marchal, but I am not at all sure I have remembered his name correctly) had been a member of a small French textile purchasing mission with an office in London. They were acquiring, *inter alia*, cloth from mills in Yorkshire for French military greatcoats. (!?) (Was this some official government assignment or a private maybe speculative initiative by an enterprising clothing contractor? That was not clear to me, but I *now* suspect the latter.) Mobilization etc. had made demands on stocks that could not all be met speedily enough from French sources (and there would be profits

to be made I suppose.) Checking on quality, up in the mill in Yorkshire, to make sure what was being supplied corresponded to what was contracted, to see to it that it met French Army specifications, particularly as to colour, did not of course require a large staff, and when the crisis just before the declaration of war came, in 1939, most of the purchasing mission were sent back to France or deployed elsewhere. *But*, and here is the element in what I was told that seems paradoxically sufficiently strange not to have been fabricated by my friend: his London office was instructed *not* to wind up their affairs, especially after the collapse of France in 1940 and the German victory, but to continue functioning under the general aegis of the British authorities, and to see the contracts properly completed (paid for with the credits they had already established.) M. Marchal's explanation, when I expressed my amazement at this, was that "they" [Who? I think he must have meant 'Whitehall'.] wanted to keep in being a functioning channel open between the U.K. War Office and a non-partisan already-established unit with some legitimate function and with French government status. His office was an entity that had existed before the defeat, and yet was not in any way tainted by being "Gaullist" and Free French in nature.

Was my friend (who made one thing clear at least, that he was *Not* a Gaullist, I think that is the point), suggesting perhaps that if De Gaulle ever got too impossible for the British –and he was of course pretty impossible at the best of times– "they" [i.e. the UK?] could ditch the impossible man and claim still to have some genuine French contacts? Surely not! *That does not sound at all convincing*, but what else could he have meant?) So M. Marchal claimed to have had a well-paid under-employed desk job throughout the war in London (comfortable apart from the air raids of course.) With his excellent textile contacts he had no difficulty, even in the days of strict clothes rationing for most mortals, in getting high-quality cloth, and the cloth (as witness the overcoat!) made up by excellent London tailors (I do wish I could remember the impressive name on the overcoat tag! Certainly Savile Row, but I can't remember the actual name of the tailor.) And, as he said, and as I as a London resident all through the war knew (because of the constant hostile gossip we all heard), in the West End, so long as one was willing to pay, there was always unrationed food available in the best London restaurants. Where he dined. He reminisced lyrically over the quality of the steak and kidney pudding at Simpson's in the Strand, I recall, and was surprised I had never eaten there.

When the cold spell came to an end in Algiers I returned the beautiful (it really was beautiful and very warm) overcoat to its owner with my sincere thanks. And, I am sorry to say, then lost all contact with him, his refrigeration contracts took him away from Algiers, so he stopped coming in at lunch time. Did he, as did most Frenchmen in business there at that time, move back to France when *les évènements* got under way in the city of Algiers? He was, after all, not a proper *pied-noir*, he was not born and brought up in Algeria, he was just earning a good living there. I am ashamed to say I just don't know. In the period following there was rather a lot going on for me to think about besides that coat.

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To return now from wartime London to Algiers on the eve of '*les évènements*': more or less every morning I struck up hill from my pension, following one of the steep lanes between blind high house walls (no gardens visible from outside of course, they belonged safely and securely *inside* the properties.) These narrow roads led up to the top of the Casbah –and my destination, that Dey's palace. I had my head down as I walked one day, puzzling I expect over one of the many textual problems in the manuscript on which I was working, when the tall muscular man in a burnous and a turban whom I vaguely

perceived as coming downhill in the opposite direction, suddenly seized me bodily, pinioning my arms, and slapped me flat against the whitewashed wall.

This is it, I thought. Am I going to have all my life flash before my eyes *after*, or will it be *before*, the knife goes in?

— “Attention monsieur!” I realized the man was saying to me. “Mind out sir!”

— “Il y a une voiture qui descend.” “There’s a car coming down the hill.”

I don’t think I have ever felt such an utter *fool* in all my life. I can’t even remember whether I thanked him. People driving a car down those narrow lanes reckoned they had done all that was expected of them if they occasionally sounded the horn at the top, it was up to the mere *piétons* to get out of the way. I guess that Algerian, a Kabyle he probably was from his splendid stature and his dress, saved my life.

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I was still a churchgoer in those days, and was much impressed aesthetically by the Anglican church building in Algiers. Up above the main city, more or less next door to the extremely up-market Hotel Georges V (Harold Macmillan in wartime had set up shop in the Georges V, and it was the setting for several crucial international negotiations.) This Anglican church had obviously been built (c. 1890?) in days when high-class British tourists would ‘winter’ in Algiers, designed by an architect who obviously admired the Islamic architecture of Granada. (I seem to think the church has since been confiscated/stolen? and has become the mosque that it looked like, but I may be mistaken.)

The church was attended by many on the British embassy staff, and by Americans and I think Dutch and other Protestants too, so the ‘bidding prayer’ (in favour of ‘the ruler of the country in which we are now’ ‘for whom we are in this place bound to pray’... started with the Pres. of the French Republic, then the Queen and all the royal family (mentioned individually in my memory at least), and went on to The President of the US, the Queen of the Netherlands –Uncle Tom Cobbley², and I daresay some more, it took ages! The chaplain (he would have hated to be called a priest I came to realize) of the British Embassy was a vary posh boozy hospitable character, and I hadn’t foreseen this moral lightweight had true Old Time Religion all the same – in its ultra-Low version (in spite of his upper-class gin-husky accent) Would I stay behind after the service to help him lift something heavy, he croaked in my ear after the service. I could hardly refuse, thinking it must be some misplaced pew to shift. It turned out it was the whole rather massive altar, that he found offensively High, and so needed cutting down to a more decent Low Church height. I hoped, once we had started, somebody would barge in and question what was going on. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked the chaplain, a question he did not deign to hear. So the High Altar became a suitably low table, and I was jointly responsible for this change. (I felt quite guilty and shifty.) The next week I wondered whether there would be protests from some Anglo-Catholic in the congregation, or even an explanation from the vicar himself, but if there were protests I heard nothing of them! And there was certainly no explanation from the pulpit.

Attendance at the Anglican church was for me a way of keeping in touch –you see it did occur to me already that if the activities of the *fellagha* reached the city, when they reached the city, an evacuation might have to be arranged by the Embassy at short notice, so it would be as well to be known and contactable. The other Anglican-organized institution I attended was something quite different. At the church I got to hear of this

² Uncle Tom Cobbley is an allusion to a famous folk song our (Widdecombe Fair) in which an endless string of each of the neighbors coming together at this fair is sung. It is a way of apologizing/permission for such detail” [Author’s note].

other place where the British community (not the Americans, they were *Not* excluded, but I am guessing it all felt too English for them) regularly forgathered, and by now, having failed largely to make more than a very few social contacts among the Algerian students, I really did appreciate some company of any sort once a week.

Down on the waterfront, I was told, was a branch of the Mission to Seaman (!). The main problem experienced by this Mission was a lack, no, a complete absence, of actual British seamen to missionize. (Those few British ships that put in at that time were crewed mostly by lascars who certainly wanted nothing to do with the Mission.) But the place was well attended by British of all shapes and sizes, and even others who, in that city conscious that a bombing campaign was pending, appreciated the chance to get away from it all in a very un-Algerian bar with much of the atmosphere of an English pub about it. So the Warden, appointed presumably by the Mission to Seamen, very sensibly settled into the role of pub landlord! He made sure he stocked enough good beer –though not on draught, that would be too much to expect. I guess he could honestly say he was fulfilling a socially useful function for the British expat community, who were beginning to feel the need to escape for an hour or so from endless talk about the war that was going on already elsewhere in Algeria, especially in Kabylie. By then the crisis had drifted into being a polarized *pied-noirs* plus French Army vs. *fellagha* conflict. Everybody knew it would sooner or later hit the city. (As indeed it did, very soon after I left. There are famous films about it: *The Battle for Algiers* – Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966– and *L'Ennemi Intime* – Florent Emilio Siri, 2007.)

Through these ‘Anglican’ contacts I met in the bar a young couple (I can’t remember his name), he French Algerian, she English from Huddersfield. When she heard I was married to a Huddersfield girl, I was instantly promoted to being a family member. (Though I found I really had little in common with them, they were *very* kind.) In their upper middle class block of apartments, the other resident on their floor was Ferhat Abbas, at the time a name of world renown: *The Algerian* ‘nationalist’ leader. “A really nice chap” my Huddersfield friend volunteered, and as proof of what she had said, added: “He has a French wife.” But He was not there at the time. In fact we know now he was off in Cairo (did my friends know that?) in the middle of negotiations relating to his switch from the ‘integrationist’ political position he had held up to then to outright membership of the freedom-fighting FLN and eventual presidency of newly independent Algeria in 1962 (after my time there, and for only a short spell. The *real* hard men soon took over.)

In my first visit, my Hudds hostess had served a very Mediterranean meal, with some delicious stuffed tomatoes that I had praised. When I arrived for my second visit she was full of apologies: “I did intend to do those tomatoes you like” she said, “but I don’t know why, there was not a tomato to be had in the market. Most unusual!”

When I read the local paper next morning I saw why. The fairly new Governor General of Algeria, Jacques Soustelle, appointed by Mendès-France, had arrived in town. (No place here to present Mendès-France or Soustelle’s varied careers, any more than there was to cover F. Abbas’s. Soustelle, world-famous anthropologist with declared ‘integrationist’ views - not so far in fact from F Abbas’s (at that stage!), was seen by the right-wingers among the French in Algiers as the unwise nomination of a dangerous intellectual (in fact he was maybe their last hope for survival in the country, but they were not bright enough to see that!) And the *colons* could later claim to have been right all along because Soustelle eventually came ‘treacherously’ to accept that Algerian independence, not ‘integration’ was the only viable policy available.) The *colons/pieds noirs* put on a great demo to deplore Soustelle’s arrival in Algiers (I had no idea there were so many of them!). Later in Paris it was the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale,

Algerian terrorists) who actually tried to shoot him, but in Algiers it was the right-wing settlers he had to face, and they on that occasion restricted themselves to insults and tomatoes. I suppose they had bought up all there were in the market that day! Hence the depleted menu offered to me by my hostess.

My mention of the local paper brings up the fact that at that time in Algiers, a great Arabic-speaking city, there was not a single newspaper in Arabic! The only Arabic-language papers were the expensive Cairo ones on the few foreign news stands in the hotels. The situation was a bit like that in Catalonia under the government of General Franco: 'Learned' highbrow publications in the Catalan language were permissible, but not anything current or political. I am not sure what the intention was in Algiers, but the actual result was that Cairo, etc., papers were read when available instead of local ones, and that can hardly have helped to keep French alive as the language of culture and of educated people or to project the French propaganda position! Similarly there was no native theatre, just once a week there was an Arabic-language evening at the opera house. This was a mish-mash of stagings of scenes from the Arabian Nights (honestly!), music-hall turns, jugglers etc. I went once only (it was bad theatre and *very* expensive!). Well attended! (It was after all the only acknowledgement permitted in public of the fact that this was an Arabic-speaking Arab-majority city.

So I got back to Oxford from Algeria after what I felt had been a rather failed expedition. I had failed to turn myself into a really fluent speaker of Algerian Arabic (and what is more, I now fully realized that the little I had learned was/is a particularly aberrant low-esteem local language variant, and of no great relevance to the thesis I was trying to write.) I had in any case made precious little progress with the thesis. I knew at that time a great deal about the FLN and the politics of French North Africa etc. But I had opted in my choice of thesis subject precisely *not* to do what most of my contemporaries had done, Arab politics, and had not specialized in current affairs. I rightly decided on my return that I should not belatedly try to switch horses in mid-stream into Politics of the Arab World.

So there I was in Oxford (72 High Street), and just getting back into my stride on the Morisco thesis material again, when I found a notice poked through the street door telling me to go to the main Oxford Post Office sorting department, to collect a fairly large parcel. From Algiers. We were mystified, as I had not expected to hear from there. There was 'postage due' (I think maybe about 6 pounds, a good round sum indeed then,) and that I would have to pay before I could collect it. I thought I had better try to find out what this mystery parcel *Was* all the same. The counter clerk said that was not their function to provide information on the contents of parcels, but I asked at least to see the outside of the package, and he did oblige: immediately I recognized June's handwriting! The penny dropped! Here at last was *Her Christmas cake!*

Now she made very good rich fruit cakes that if well kept might even improve over, say, six months. But tossed around, from pillar (box) to post (office), in Madrid, and Algiers and goodness only knew where, on at least three different air flights, and God knows probably subjected to weeks on a dirty shelf in the Spanish then North African heat, I guessed it would be largely just dry crumbs by then, and certainly not worth what was then for me a very substantial amount of money that would take us out to a nice celebratory dinner.

"Thanks very much. I won't be collecting it. You might care to have it for your tea break." I ventured. I am afraid I never did find out whether that was indeed what they did with it.

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