

2015

# "Now or Never": Collecting, Documenting, and Photographing World War I in the Middle East

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<https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/120267>

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and Photographing  
World War I in the Middle East

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14 January – 24 April 2015

Audubon Room  
University of Michigan Library  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

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This exhibit was curated by Kathryn Babayan and Melanie Tanielian of the Armenian Studies Program. They thank the ASP, Naira Tumanyan, and Michael Pifer as well as the following, all for their help in making this exhibit possible: University of Michigan Library: Pablo Alvarez, Cathleen Baker, Halaina Demba, Tom Hogarth, and Sanam Arab (N. Lobby Cases); Bentley Historical Library: Malgorzata Myc; Kelsey Museum of Archaeology: Sebastian Encina; and Clark Library: Tim Utter.

## **“Now or Never”**

### **Collecting, Documenting, and Photographing World War I in the Middle East**

World War I in the Middle East was a humanitarian disaster of unprecedented scale. Between 1914 and 1918, over 2.5 million civilians lost their lives on the battlefields or to hunger and disease. From among those, over one million Armenians were targets of a systematic genocidal campaign organized by the Ottoman state.

It was in the aftermath of this catastrophe that University of Michigan Professor of Archaeology Francis Willey Kelsey (1858–1927) and U-M staff photographer George Robert Swain (1866–1947) embarked on an expedition to the region, the purpose of which was to collect ancient Christian manuscripts destined to disappear in the postwar chaos. “Now or never,” wrote Kelsey, was the moment to salvage the remnants of ancient and medieval manuscripts and purchase them from “unappreciative hands” for a token price. Moreover, Kelsey’s diaries and Swain’s photographs, featured in this exhibit, are historical documents about witnessing the genocide. Aware of the widespread massacres against Christians in the Ottoman Empire and the work of Americans to alleviate the continued suffering of genocide survivors, Kelsey and Swain were committed to documenting and photographing the ongoing crisis and the humanitarian responses.

### **War in the Middle East and Its Aftermath**

World War I in the Middle East was far from over when Germany officially surrendered to the Entente forces on November 11, 1918. In the territories of the Ottoman Empire, now a shadow of its former glorious self, the guns continued to sound in a fierce battle for self-determination. As the European colonial powers sought to divide up the multi-ethnic population of the Ottoman Empire, the forces of Turkish nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal (1881–1938) fought to maintain their independence, claiming victory and announcing the establishment of a Turkish Republic in 1923. Years of ravaging war killed over 2.5 million Ottomans. Some died as soldiers fighting the enemy, but most were civilians who succumbed to hunger and disease. From among the Ottomans who lost their lives, over one million Armenians

were the targets of a systematic genocidal campaign organized by the nationalist Young Turk regime.

The Francis W. Kelsey Collection at the Bentley Historical Library contains numerous news clippings from the post-war period. These facsimile articles from *The New York Times*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Ann Arbor Times News*, etc., displayed on the case wall, open a window into diplomatic maneuverings, debates, and opinions circulating among the American public. (The original clippings are in the Bentley Historical Library.) Most notably, the Collection not only explicates the political fate of the Middle East, but also draws attention to the continued violence against the Christian population in Anatolia. Kelsey read the exposés of others and published a number of articles on the subject in *The Michigan Daily*. For example, Kelsey was not satisfied with simplistic explanations of religious hatred between Muslim Turks and Christian Armenians, instead he was interested in uncovering the deeper motivations for the genocide against the Armenians.

- *Atlas of the World and Europe Made Over (Today and Battlefields of Yesterday)* (facsimile map of Europe)  
s.l.: Rand McNally and Co. [?], 1919  
Clark Library

- *The Peace Conference Atlas. A Series of Maps to Illustrate Boundary & Other Questions under Consideration at the Peace Conference 1919*  
London: Edward Stanford, 1919  
Clark Library

These pamphlets show the geopolitical realities on the ground. The victors of the war, Britain and France, divided the region based on their economic and political interests in the region.

The imperialistic schemes of the European Powers did not go unchallenged. Local elites and nationalists, partially inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" promising self-determination, lobbied for their independence. Among them was Faisal Ibn Hussein Ibn Ali al-Hashimi (1883–1933), who led Arab forces in their take over of Damascus in October of 1918. Following the war, Faisal traveled to the Paris Peace

Conference to garner international support for an interdependent Arab Kingdom, but his demands went unheard. Instead France was granted the mandate over Syria during the San Remo Conference in April of 1920.

The Kelsey Collection includes photographs by George Swain who documented the return of Faisal from the Paris Peace Conference. (See John G. Pedley, *The Life and Work of Francis Willey Kelsey: Archaeology, Antiquity, and the Arts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012, 268.)

- Kelsey attended Faisal's speech and issued the report, a portion of which is on display here. Bentley Historical Library.
- Photograph of Faisal at the Paris Peace Conference with T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) behind and to his left. From: Rustum Ḥaydar, *Mudhakkirāt Rustum Ḥaydar* (Beirut : al-Dār al-'Arabī lil-Mawsū'āt, 1988.

### **Humanitarian Relief**

Witnessing the horrors of war and forced deportations, Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, issued an urgent appeal to aid victims of war and genocide, which spearheaded the solicitation of donations from concerned Americans to deliver and organize relief in the Ottoman Empire. A small committee, initially called the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) and later renamed the Near East Relief (NER), grew into one of the largest international humanitarian organization of the time. The NER worked hand in hand with the American Red Cross, the YMCA, and American Protestant Missionaries.

The Kelsey Collection includes reports and photographs of American relief organizations' work from Constantinople, Derindje, Konia, Adana, Tarsus, Aintab, and Jerusalem, as well as some of the NER publications collected by Kelsey. The Collection is unique in that it combines the official fundraising materials of the NER, Kelsey's formal reports on the work, and his very personal encounters with relief workers and the women and children in their care.

- George Swain

Orphanage for Armenian boys at Aintab, Cilicia, under the direction of Mr. R.P. Travis of Ionia, Michigan. January 5, 1920. Swain 7.0179 (facsimile), Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

About 350 orphan boys were being looked after by Mr. Travis and his staff, who are standing with their wards. The staff comprised 12 Armenians teachers, 2 Red Cross nurses, and 3 cooks.

- George Swain

Children in an Armenian orphanage, Aleppo. January 7, 1920. George Swain Collection, Box 1 (facsimile), Bentley Historical Library.

Here about 1,600 waifs had been gathered and were being cared for. This was only one of many similar institutions.

- “Map of Near East Relief stations...to which orphans have been safely transferred,” facsimile reproduced from *The New Near East*, February 1923. Original, Bentley Historical Library.

- One page of a report by Kelsey about refugees in the Constantinople area. Bentley Historical Library.

## **The Near East Relief**

The NER solicited funding from the American government and ordinary Americans. Besides extensive fundraising campaigns, the organization published a monthly report, *The New Near East*, to solicit donations. This report detailed the organization’s successful activities abroad and more importantly outlined its mission. The project was intended not only to save children from starvation, but additionally Armenian orphans were seen as the “raw material” from which American philanthropists and politicians sought to “mold leaders for a reconstructed country.” However, for the most part, children were taught practical skills such as baking, shoemaking, and weaving that gave them a profession through which they could survive. They were only taught elementary skills of reading and math.

- Center spreads from three issues of *The New Near East* featuring the plights of refugee children. Bentley Historical Library.

Within the 15 years of its operation in the Middle East and the Caucasus, the NER garnered and spent around 116 million dollars to assist victims of war and genocide with food, shelter, and education. The NER's stations took care of close to 2 million refugees including 100,000 orphans in the years after the war. So much relied on a careful recording of people in need and their overall expenses. In the month of June 1920 alone, 110,639 children received some form of aid through the organization.

The Kelsey Collection includes fundraising materials of the NER, reports authored by Kelsey, and photographs of the NER work on the ground. (See Suzanne E. Moranian, "American Missionary Relief Efforts," in *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.)

### **The 1919–1920 Expedition**

It was in the context of continued conflict that University of Michigan Professor Francis Willey Kelsey (1858–1927) traveled to the Near East. He was accompanied by his wife Isabelle (Mary) Badger Kelsey (1867–1944), his 15-year old son Easton Trowbridge Kelsey (1904–?), and U-M staff photographer George Robert Swain (1866–1947).

Kelsey instigated the "scientific" mission to, among other things, collect and purchase ancient manuscripts for the purpose of research and education at the University. He wrote that it was "now or never" that ancient and medieval manuscripts might be purchased from "unappreciative hands" for a token price. It was now or never that Greek, Syriac, Persian, and Armenian manuscripts could be easily picked up and the "possession of these, and their proper preservation, will be a gain to science of inestimable value" as he explained in a letter to Belle da Costa Greene in October 1918, quoted in Thelma K. Thomas, *Dangerous Archaeology; Francis Willey Kelsey and Armenia (1919–1920)* (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 1990). Other than his own field-specific interest, Kelsey agreed to work with Swain to photograph "ethnic types" of peoples from Asia Minor and Syria commissioned by the Bureau of American Ethnology. In addition,

they were to inspect the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and in particular the work of the American Red Cross and the Near East Relief (then called American Committee for Relief in the Near East or ACRNE) in the region. The group set out on their journey on September 1, 1919 and spent over a year in Europe and the Middle East.

- George Swain

On the way to Aintab, Turkey. “Professor Kelsey in the road talking with a number of natives. Wheel of Reo car (speed wagon) at right.” January 4, 1920. Swain KS 071.06 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

- George Swain

From Derindje to Konia, Turkey. “Our four freight cars deluxe. The Armenian cook is standing in the door of the dining car.” December 28, 1919. Swain KS 057.05 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

- George Swain

From Derindje to Konia, Turkey. “Five of the party in the door of the dining car.” December 28, 1919. Swain KS 057.04 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

- Two Kodak photo packets, each filled with negatives and contact prints. Bentley Historical Library.

- Map of the 1919–1920 expedition route that began in Constantinople (Istanbul). Reproduced from the online exhibit “A Man of Many Parts: The Life and Legacy of Francis Willey Kelsey” ([http://lw.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/fwk/first\\_ex.html](http://lw.lsa.umich.edu/kelsey/fwk/first_ex.html)). Original drawing by Lorene Sterner.

Francis Kelsey’s 15-year-old son Easton Trowbridge Kelsey accompanied the mission as assistant photographer and “helper in the Scientific Expedition of the University of Michigan.” Easton kept notes and wrote many letters to friends and family. The pages on display here are from his daily journal

describing his visit to Aleppo. Easton's unique diary allows us to view the aftermath of war through the observant and curious eyes of a youth socialized in a milieu of academics obsessed with studying, knowing, preserving and unearthing the ancient history of the Near East. In addition to writing about his experience, Easton photographed his impressions of the city, capturing everyday life as he walked through the streets and markets of Aleppo. (Some interesting elements in the document are his obsession with how clean Aleppo was. He remarked that in contrast to his earlier description of Adana, which was dirty and stuck in time due to the laziness of the people there. He described Arabs as friendly, clean, etc., while the Turks were vile.)

- George Swain

Istanbul, Roumeli Hissar (Bosphorus Castle). Detail of the stairway inside with Easton Kelsey carrying a camera case. June 19, 1920. Swain KS 203.06 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

- Two pages from Easton's notes made along the expedition. Bentley Historical Library.

### **Kelsey, the Collector**

Traveling in the Middle East, Kelsey utilized every opportunity to acquire materials that could be used for teaching at the University. He was especially interested in purchasing manuscripts and papyri from the Near East and Egypt. The University of Michigan (Special Collections Library) has a number of manuscripts purchased by Kelsey during his 1919–1920 expedition.

Rare manuscripts from the Near East, however, entered into the University's collection in a number of ways. This *The Michigan Daily* article described the curious journey of two manuscripts (November 26, 1922; original clipping is in the Bentley Historical Library). A very old priest living in the city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (then Abyssinia) handed these two manuscripts to an Armenian "fleeing from his unhappy country" to take with him to America. Unable to find someone to read the documents in New York, the man traveled to Detroit. He connected with the Armenian community in the city and was referred to the University of Michigan.

- Fragments of the Gospels

Luke 19:40; 20:17; 20:30; 21:26

Thirteenth century

vellum, 5 leaves, 32.5 x 26.5 cm.

Erkat'agir script

Mich. Ms. 143. Special Collections Library

In a letter to the University of Michigan Librarian W. W. Bishop, dated January 7, 1925, Francis Kelsey wrote:

Second, thinking that perhaps you would prefer to inventory with the Armenian manuscripts the five vellum leaves of an Armenian Lectionary purchased from Nahman in Cairo at the beginning of last May, inventoried in the British Museum as Box X. 106, and received with the papyri brought by me from London in November, 1924, I have therefore taken these leaves, which are referred to in the report of Professor Sanders sent herewith, and am handing them to you.

Maurice Nahman was a banker and one of the most important antique dealers from that period. He sold papyri and medieval manuscripts to the British Museum and a consortium of American universities.

These five leaves are our only extant witnesses evidence of what must have been an extraordinary codex. On the displayed page, the viewer can appreciate the large ornate capital and on the right hand side a marginal intricate ornament in red, blue, and green.

- Calendar Tables

Agulis, 1661

vellum leaf, 53 x 43 cm.

Notragir script

Mich. Ms. 91. Special Collections Library

In a letter addressed to the French antiquarian dealer I.E. Gėjou and dated May 5, 1923, Francis Kelsey wrote the following:

At last we have a report upon the contents of the Armenian General Calendar which you were good enough to send me. This is late and has not much value from contents, but it is carefully executed and the

destruction of Armenian material in Asia Minor has been so great that our committee will be glad to keep this specimen.

This single vellum leaf contains calendric tables showing the corresponding dates according to the Hebrew, Christian, and Armenian calendars. Moreover, it provides the dates for the Christian feasts, the lunar calendar, and tables describing the months of the year in the ancient Armenian calendar and their equivalence in the Julian calendar. While the main text is on the recto of the leaf, a colophon on the verso reveals crucial information on its original provenance and authorship. The scribe Yovhannēs Shurut'ets'i at the request of Yovhannēs Agulets'i copied it in 1661. The latter's last name suggests that these tables might have been written in the monastery of Agulis in the Goghtan region. The leaf is richly decorated on the four margins of the recto. It includes 14 birds, various floral designs, and 2 angels on the lower left and right margins.

### **Kelsey's Correspondence with Mr. P. Tonapetian, an Armenian Collector of Manuscripts**

In a series of correspondences written between December 1914 and 1917, we see how Mr. P. Tonapetian, an Armenian collector based in London, attempted to sell Armenian manuscripts through the intermediary of Francis W. Kelsey. Tonapetian talks about rare manuscripts of medieval Armenian Gospels in his possession that he compares to the manuscripts housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the British Library, and libraries in Vienna and Venice. Kelsey was able to broker the sale of five Armenian manuscripts owned by Mr. Tonapetian that were purchased by the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City.

In early letters that Tonapetian sent to Kelsey, he wrote that “With the present decline of Europe, America rises and grows richer. Therefore through your endeavours I trust a purchaser may be found for the manuscripts to present them to the New-York Library, or otherwise” and “I should prefer that [the manuscripts] be placed somewhere where they may become subject of attention and beneficial study by the American lovers of art.”

- Letter from Tonapetian (London) to Kelsey. December 7, 1917. Bentley Historical Library.

“From the Armenian papers in various countries I have noticed that the Armenians everywhere consider a heavenly the entry of the States into the War a heavenly blessing. The material interest of your countrymen to help our suffering people was far greater and they feel sure that at the final judgment the U.S.A. will stand the champion of claiming and obtaining security of life and lasting peace to the long tortured Armenian race.”

- The cablegram confirms that the Morgan Library will pay the amount of 800 pounds sterling for the 4 manuscripts. Bentley Historical Library.
- Envelope preserved by Kelsey originally containing five volumes of Armenian manuscripts sent by Tonapetian (from New York) to Francis W. Kelsey, Memorial Building, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. The package was received on December 29, 1914. Bentley Historical Library.

### **Kelsey, the Professor**

Francis W. Kelsey was a Professor of Latin Language and Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, from 1889 to his death in 1927. He received his PhD from the University of Rochester in 1886 before he joined the faculty in Ann Arbor. He was a dedicated and enthusiast teacher and researcher. He published numerous books, scholarly articles, and commentary on current events in local papers. Kelsey’s passion was collecting artifacts from the Near East and the regions around the Mediterranean.

For details about Kelsey’s long and exciting career, see John G. Pedley, *The Life and Work of Francis Willey Kelsey: Archaeology, Antiquity, and the Arts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

- Photographer, date: unknown (facsimile). KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

Prof. Francis Kelsey in his classroom at the University of Michigan.

Besides trying to purchase educational materials, Kelsey took daily notes witnessing life and daily struggles in the aftermath of genocide. Kelsey recorded not only his travels abroad, but also his family life and professional activities in Ann Arbor. The Bentley Historical Library holds all of Francis W. Kelsey's journals.

- Kelsey's 1919 and 1921 diaries. Bentley Historical Library
- George Swain  
Adana, Turkey. The Refugee Home for Armenian girls in Adana. December 31, 1919. Swain 7.0154 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

Here we see the girls in the courtyard with looms. Swain describes the scene as including "three or four Armenian girl-mothers at the left in the foreground." Kelsey briefly described the Adana refugee home in his diary. There were 70 girls in what he describes as an Industrial School. Isabelle Kelsey bought one of the rugs woven here.

- Some of Kelsey's diaries from 1904 through 1918. Bentley Historical Library.

### **Kelsey, the Humanist**

Francis W. Kelsey, no doubt, was a humanist who put words into action. For example in 1916, he heard a first-hand account of atrocities in Belgium and civilian suffering under German occupation. Kelsey immediately set out to help. He formed a Committee for the Relief of Belgian Children made up of faculty and Ann Arbor women and prepared fundraising materials. The Michigan governor endorsed Kelsey's efforts, which became known as the Dollar-a-Month Club, and turned it into a statewide campaign. Herbert Hoover personally congratulated Kelsey for his successful campaign. According to Kelsey's diaries, the work—mainly collecting clothing and money—continued until 1918. In the aftermath of the war, he turned to the victims of war and genocide in the Near East. He made it part of his expedition to visit, photograph, and report on relief activities on the ground. Even after the war, he continued to read and collect the latest news about the

state of Armenians, especially in places he had visited. (Pedley, *The Life and Work of Francis Willey Kelsey*, 251f.)

- George Swain

Aintab, Turkey. “Nine of the Older Armenian Girls working on cotton. The Armenian girl in the back row, at the extreme right was the prettiest Armenian girl I saw anywhere.” January 5, 1920. Swain 7.0184 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

- George Swain

Aintab, Turkey. “Large Group of Miss Kelley’s girls, assorted sizes, in the courtyard--nearly a hundred of them.” January 5, 1920. Swain 7.0185 (facsimile), KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

- George Swain

Aleppo, Syria. “Five Armenian girls whose cheeks and chins had been tattooed in blue by their former Arab owners. Tattooing does not [show] nearly so plainly in the picture as it did in their eyes.” January 7, 1920. Swain 7.0197, KM Archive Photographs, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

After returning from his trip into the Near East, Francis Kelsey wrote a report summarizing his impression of Relief Work on the ground. His impressions not only convey the magnitude of the disaster, but also his personal despair at the sight of thousands upon thousands of orphans. He writes “if you have had children of your own, you become subject to a depression that is not easily thrown off.” In detail he describes Refugee Homes as separate from the usual orphanage. In his words, “[In Refugee Homes] are gathered the young women seized by Turks, Kurds, and desert Arabs...rescued by force under military direction.” Some of them had been taken in by “upright” Turks, who had “opened their doors to daughters of Christian friends.”

- A few pages of Kelsey's draft report, "Aspects of American Relief Work in the Near East." Bentley Historical Library.

In 1923, Kelsey received this letter from John E. Merrill reporting on the events in Aintab, a city Kelsey had visited while in the Near East. Merrill reports that the "atmosphere became very tense" and that Armenians "could not hope to live in Aintab in safety." In the meantime, the work of Americans continued in the hospitals and clinics.

- Letter from John E. Merrill of The Aintab Associates to Francis W. Kelsey "Latest Aintab News." January 1923. Bentley Historical Library.
- Cablegram from the Near East Relief (NER). October 13, 1921. Bentley Historical Library.

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