Damascus

Love story

W

HATisbeinglostasSyria bleeds? Not

justlives, buta tradition ofpluralism

and tolerance, all too rare in the Middle

East, and a rich cultural treasure-house.

That is the message ofthese two very per-

sonal books by Britons who have lived in

Syria and fallen in love with it.

Peter Clark ran the British Council in

Damascus for five years in the 1990s. His

diaries—quirky, digressive, indiscreet—

chronicle his attempts to build cultural re-

lationsin a police state filled with fear, cor-

ruption and red tape. Even friendly offi-

cialsare waryofthe rulingBaath party.

When he startsEnglish classes, they are

infiltrated by the secret police. He persists,

organisingan exhibition ofphotographs of

Syria by Freya Stark, a travel writer, in the

1920s and 1930s—and then, more ambi-

tiously, an Anglo-Syrian production of Pur-

cell’s opera “Dido and Aeneas”, which,

against all odds, is a great success. In the

midstofall this, he somehowfindstime to

translate a novel by Ulfat Idilbi, a spry old

Syrian feministin her80s.

There are political insights into the per-

secution complex ofthe Alawites, the het-

erodox religious minority, historically

poorand marginalised, which hascome to

dominate the rulingcivil and military elite.

There isa chillingencounterwith the presi-

dent, Hafez al-Assad, whose “cold grey

eyes” seemed to “lookinto yoursoul”. But

the principal characters are the author’s

Syrian friends—the writers, lawyers, bank

managers and university professors with

whom he eats, drinks, dancesand gossips.

He relishes the odd details of Syrian life:

the old khan (orcaravanserai) that used to

be a lunatic asylum, the tea Syrian mi-

grants have brought back from Argentina,

the delightful word gommaji (an amalgam

of Italian and Turkish), meaning a man

who repairspunctures.

Diana Darke’sbookissetin the Syria of

Basharal-Assad, who succeeded hisfather

in 2000. MsDarke isa journalistand travel

writer, and much ofherearlytime in Syria

was spent walking its hills and exploring

its mosques, churches, monasteries and

fortresses. Butin 2005 she tookthe bold de-

cision to use her life’s savings to buy an

18th-century Ottoman house in the Old

CityofDamascus. Herbook, nowin an en-

larged third edition, tells the remarkable

story of how she did so, despite a succes-

sion of legal and bureaucratic obstacles,

and the onsetofcivil war.

Aswith MrClarkand hisopera produc-

tion, Ms Darke’s British and Syrian friends

thoughtshe wasmad. Like him, she perse-

vered. Interwoven with the story of how

she renovated the house are asides on an

array of issues—education, women’s

rights, Islamic art—and on the Assads,

whose regime she clearly detests. When

the warforced herto leave, she turned the

house into a refuge for Syrian friends

escapingthe violence.

Both authorsclingto the hope that Syr-

ia with its mosaic ofcommunities and tra-

ditions, and itsunique historyand archae-

ology, will somehow rebuild itself. In the

meantime their books serve as moving

tributesto the Syria thathasbeen lost.