Eastern Mediterranean history

Coasts and

coalitions

Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs,

Jesuits and Spies in the Late

Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World.

By Noel Malcolm. Allen Lane; 604 pages; £30

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N THE 1990s, when the Balkans were at

war, Noel Malcolm wasbestknown as a

journalist and polemicist, though he was

already a promising academic. As a sharp

critic of Serb nationalism, he published

histories of Bosnia and Kosovo that won

praise for deconstructing Serb national

myths, even if some critics found him too

sparingofthe mythstold byothernations,

such asthe Albanians.

Thatmakesitall the more welcome that

Sir Noel (now an eminent British scholar

who was knighted last year) has written a

book that will serve as an antidote to all

crude nationalism, and to many historical

stereotypes. Itbringsthe readerback to an

era longbefore the nation-state, when per-

sonal loyalties and religious coalitions

were perpetuallyshifting.

“Agents of Empire” traces the fortunes

in the final decades of the 16th century of

one extended family whose members

struggled to survive at the interface be-

tween two empires, Venetian and Otto-

man. Theybore the surnamesofBruni and

Bruti, and theirrootswere in a small Alba-

nian-speaking port on the Adriatic, Ulcinj,

nowpartofMontenegro.

The book ingeniously reconstructs the

changing balance of forces in the eastern

Mediterranean, at a time when maritime

powerswere competinghard forcontrol of

islands, ports and their hinterlands. Ven-

ice, foritspart, belonged to a loose and frac-

tious Christian alliance that included the

papacy, whereas the Ottomans roamed

the sea underthe bannerofIslam.

On the ground, at the nodal points be-

tween empires and religions, things were

intriguing as well as messy. Some Chris-

tians lived more orless contentedly under

Ottoman control, and some Christian

leaders held local sway in the sultan’s

name. The Ottomanswere pragmaticrath-

er than zealous in the handling of their

Christian subjects. Individuals and clans

had to dodge between competingpowers,

lookingto take advantage ofimperial rival-

ry where possible (by working, for exam-

ple, asspies) and avoidinggettingcaught in

the middle. The price of being on the

wrongside atthe wrongtime wasterrible.

One of Sir Noel’s characters, Giovanni

Bruni, was a distinguished archbishop in

Serbia, with followers who straddled

Christendom and the realm ofIslam. This

made him useful asan adviserto the Vene-

tians on Ottoman affairs. But he was cap-

tured and made a galley slave in the Otto-

man navy. Duringthe sea battle ofLepanto

in 1571, in which the Ottomanswere defeat-

ed bya Christian coalition, the hapless pre-

late probably found himself less than a

hundred yards from his brother, Gasparo,

who wasa commanderon the otherside.

Although he shouted “I am a bishop!”

Giovanni was killed by Spanish soldiers.

But Gasparo restored the family fortunes

by winning favour at the Vatican and get-

ting a prestigious Jesuit education for his

son, Antonio, who later wrote about the

Ottoman landsin Europe. One ofSirNoel’s

mostintriguingpassagesdescribesAnton-

io’sItalian schooling, showinghowit bred

sophistication amongpotential clerics.

Yetthe bookismore than a gossipy tale

offamilyfortunes. SirNoel usesthe dynas-

tic saga to make clever points about the

functioning of empires, the Ottoman one

in particular. In hisanalysis, the story ofLe-

panto shows not the vulnerability of the

Ottomans, buttheirextraordinarypowers

ofrecoveryfrom defeat.

In one respect, this book links to Sir

Noel’searlierworks: the central figures are,

amongmanyothercharacteristics, Albani-

an. Backthen, asnow, people whose heart-

land is a poor, remote corner of Europe

needed to make difficult and sometimes

devious manoeuvres. Being Albanian has

alwaysbeen compatible with otheridenti-

ties, and in the 16th-centuryworld ofcom-

peting empires, members of a small, idio-

syncratic ethnicity always had to make

careful choices as to which wider loyalty,

or combination of loyalties, to proclaim.

Whether they live in Kosovo, Montenegro

or Albania, a country which in modern

timeshasswungfrom Maoistself-isolation

to loyal membership of NATO, today’s Al-

banianscould surelyrelate to that.