



An Arabic Vocabulary by John Covel (1638-1722)

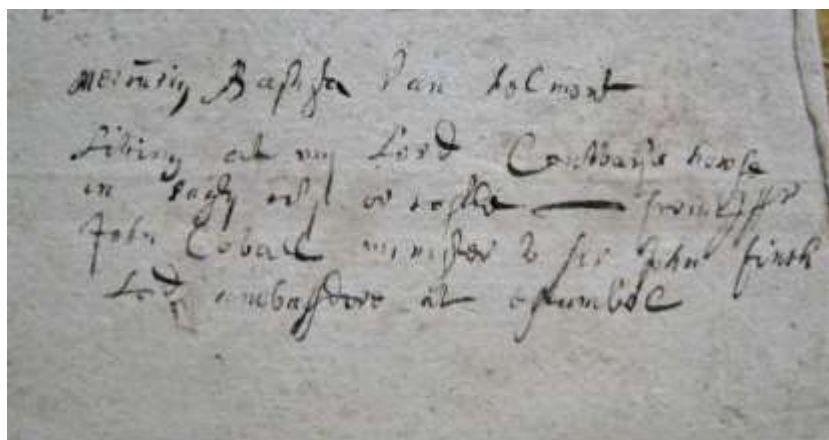
This leather-bound volume, written in a very small hand, is an Arabic and Turkish vocabulary. Its catalogue entry was based on a pencil inscription inside which reads “by Mr John Coball, minister to Sir John Finch, Ambassador at Constantinople.” [Sir John Finch \(1626-1682\)](#) was indeed Ambassador at Constantinople; but John Coball had never been identified.



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But it has recently been suggested that the author might actually be John Covel (1638-1722), who served as chaplain to the Levant Company at Constantinople from 1670-1677.

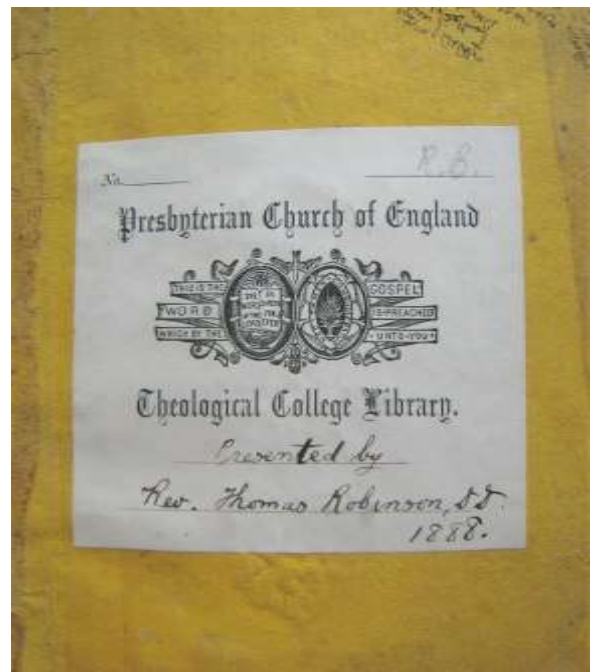
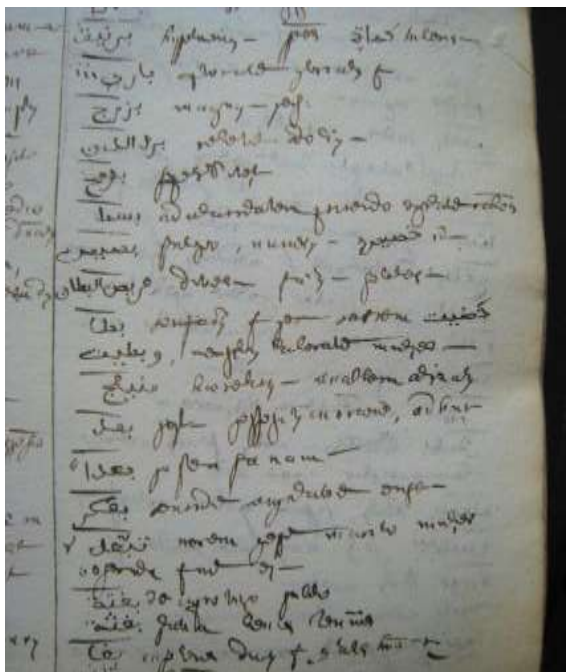
Nick McBurney, a London bookseller with an interest in manuscripts and early printing from the Islamic world, suggests that (bearing in mind the vagaries of C17th and C18th spelling!) [John Covel](#) – who is also recorded elsewhere as John Covell, Covill and Colvil – could be the author. The pencil inscription was based on an earlier note in ink, and if you look closely at the original ink inscription, the last two lines read “John Coball minister to Sir John finsh / Lord Ambassdore at estumbol”. Constantinople [has been known as Istanbul](#) since the tenth century.



Compare the word ‘living’ (first word in the second line), and the ‘v’ is similar enough that the original ‘Coball’ could be ‘Covall’ (second word in the fourth line).

John Covel was a clergyman, botanist, historian and collector, and during his time with the Levant Company he travelled widely and compiled a series of illustrated diaries. From 1688 he served as Master of Christ's College, Cambridge.

Nick says: "British scholars of Arabic and Turkish were few in the 17th century, and British travellers in the Ottoman world relied on local translators (dragomen) and Italian as a lingua franca. Although Covel is known as a scholar and a collector, he has not been recognised as a scholar of Arabic and Turkish before. The 17th century study of both languages in European circles was restricted to a handful of scholarly communities. The binding is a contemporary Islamic one and he clearly acquired this blank book while in Constantinople. A later owner (perhaps in the 18th century) has added tabs indicating letters of the Arabic alphabet, suggesting this manuscript continued to be used after Covel's creation of it."



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The volume was a gift to the English Presbyterian College – predecessor of Westminster College – from Rev. Thomas Robinson in 1888. Further manuscript papers by John Covel are kept in the archives collections at Christ's College, Cambridge; and the Beinecke at Yale hold [a commonplace book of Covel's](#) which they have digitised (MS Osborn b140).

Helen Weller, Archivist
March 2019