

## REVIEW

**Cristian Cealera, *The British Community in Kustendjie (1857-1882). Portraits from the Past*, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, Târgoviște, 2025 448 pp.**

The British presence in Dobruja during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was linked, on one hand, to the Ottoman Empire's attempts at modernization—in this case, by building new communication routes and by developing and operating the port of the settlement of Kustendje/Constanța. On the other hand, it was a result of British efforts to identify new business opportunities in the Black Sea region. These two visions found common ground and led to the concession of the construction and operation of the Kustendje–Bogazchioi (Cernavodă) railway and the nascent port for 99 years to the British company established for this purpose, the Danube Black Sea Railway and Kustendjie Harbour Company Limited (DBSR).

The book, titled *The British Community in Kustendjie (1857-1882). Portraits from the Past*, written by dr. Cristian Cealera of the National History and Archaeology Museum of Constanța and published by Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House from Târgoviște in 2025, approaches the activities of the DBSR not from the investor's perspective but from the accumulated aspects of the business. It covers the any other issues: life of engineers, workers, doctors, wives, children, governesses, priests; evolution of consular relations; diseases, conflicts; guards, distant families, letters, ancient artifacts, and lives ended in foreign lands—in essence, destinies changed by this venture for a quarter of a century or for a lifetime.

This British imprint was previously little known to the general public (with the exception of the remarkable studies by Constantin Ardeleanu). It was primarily recognized through architectural vestiges from that period, with the DBSR and the British community in Constanța as their "authors". We agree with the author of the volume's preface, Constantin Ardeleanu, regarding the community's importance for the future of Constanța and Dobruja. He states: "The British community was quickly established and built all the elements in Constanța to give them group cohesion, from a separate neighborhood where the houses copied those from home to an Anglican chapel. The transport infrastructure they built allowed them to maintain close ties with Great Britain (only a five-day journey away!), and the community's representatives were closely involved in the life of the city they had moved to, contributing fully to the economic and social development of modern Constanța" (p.8).

In a similar manner, the author himself notes in the book's historical context: "the construction of this first railway in Dobruja (inaugurated on September 22 / October 4, 1860) and the operation of the Port of Kustendjie [Cristian Cealera explains his choice of this name by its use within the British community and diplomatic personnel] were the elements that led to the creation of a so-called 'British colony' in the small settlement on the Black Sea coast. Over time, this community from the United Kingdom consisted of 80 to 150/200 people and lived in Kustendjie between 1857 and 1882. It was made up of DBSR company employees (engineers, managers, workers, diplomats) and their family members [...] In our opinion, the existence of this community in Kustendjie in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is of particular importance when we refer to the modern history of the city. Thanks to the activities carried out by the subjects of the United Kingdom, Kustendjie developed and became a flourishing small town that, at one point, reached a population of over 5,000 souls" (p.13).

The work is an atypical one, fitting the complexity of its subject. Cristian Cealera choose a different approach: that of case studies. The entire work is essentially a collection of case studies, focusing on individuals, destinies, and institutions. We believe this choice only increased the value of the work, offering the reader the opportunity to sequentially discover the numerous and spectacular events the British community in Constanța went through, even if only in a quarter of a century. These stories would have been difficult (or almost impossible) to string together in a classic historical narrative.

The titles of the case studies, which became the book's chapters, are both suggestive and intriguing: *Thomas Forester's Memoir – The City, Ancient Vestiges, and Serpent Island*; *John Trevor Barkley*; *Henry Charles Barkley and his Testimonies*; *About the Great Explorers Sir Samuel White Baker, Lady Florence von Sasz, and their Dobrudjan Experience (1859-1860)*; *The Journal of Edith Perkins*; *William Henry Cullen, the First Doctor of the British Community*; *Harry Leach and the Cholera Epidemic*; *Julius Kesler, Gentleman's Magazine, and the Tomitan Inscriptions*; *William Philip Price and the British Museum Collection*; *The City, New Railway Hotel, and two Romanian Tourists (1861 – the First Summer Tourist Season?)*; *Faces and Destinies – T.W. Bowlby, Jack Striver, the Murray and Robie Families*; *A Few Untold Stories*; *Reverend Curtis, Mary Walker, and the Problem of Anglican Priests*; *Abraham Irwin Bolton - Dr. Kesedjek (Cut-Everything)*; *The Brothers George and Henry Guarracino*; *The Genoese, British, French, Armenian, Romanian Lighthouse*; *Vice-Consul Sankey's Reports*; *Sir John Elijah Blunt and Lady Fanny Janet Blunt*; *Edward Harris III, the Last British Manager of the Port – The Salvation of the City, a Princely Visit, and the Redemption of Concessions*; *Major George Stoker, Dobrudja, and the Novel Dracula*; *Captain Thomas A. B. Spratt*; *The Inauguration of the Railway Line (Xenos vs. DBSR and a Long-Awaited Event)*; *A Province in Continuous Change – Tanzimat, the Danube Vilayet, and Midhat Pasha*.

These are followed by conclusions, a postface signed by Florin Anghel titled *Through the British Memory of Dobruja: The Black Sea-Danube Railway Company*

*and the Path of Modernization between the Danube and the Black Sea (1857-1882)*, and an English summary.

The author's British "adventure" was all the more difficult because he undertook an immeasurable effort to identify the biographical information of his subjects, searching with meticulousness and patience through a great complexity of online sources that supplemented the published and unpublished sources used in his research. Consequently, the reader will not only find British destinies highlighted from the perspective of their quarter-century spent in Constanța/Dobruja. On the contrary, the most important figures are given portraits that dig far into their family's past and future, highlighting their pre- and post-Dobrudjan ramifications. The information from British online or private resources was also supplemented by photographs from the same sources, published in the book, of the main British figures who lived and passed through this edge of the Empire.

Last but not least, Cristian Cealera successfully contacted contemporary descendants of the British families from that period, augmenting the originality of the work with the information he obtained and used. The author also utilized a vast bibliography dedicated to Dobrudja, Constanța, and the historical time, along with relevant archival documents. All of this contributed to a rigorous, well-documented construction of great importance for deepening the knowledge of the history of Constanța and Dobrudja in the last decades of the Ottoman presence. The British presence during this period, with its specific objectives and achievements, and its influence on the modernization of the area, are raised to a superior level of understanding through Cristian Cealera's research, compiled in the volume *The British Community in Kustendjie (1857-1882). Portraits from the Past*.

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