"The traveller observing in the light of the day and the scholar 'blundering' in the dark corner of a college library" (p. 2) are some of the protagonists of the 'commerce of knowledge' interrogated by Simon Mills in this accurate and elegantly written monograph. These Western characters, however, represented just the beginning of the story of the scholarly discover of the 'Orient'. *A Commerce of Knowledge*, in fact, is also a story of the role played in this process by Ottoman agents, a key role of Muslim, Oriental Christian, and, to a less extent, Jewish scholars in all its various facets. The result is a very wide-ranging fresco of the intellectual encounter of East and West in the early modern era, very much practical rather than theoretical, in which the author manages to clear the field of an ideological approach to the debate on Orientalism — nearly without even mentioning it.

Through an ample depiction of the intellectual background of early modern Syria, the reader is led, step by step, through the process of building knowledge of the East as a conversation or 'commerce' between "figures such as Huntington and […] Marhib ben Jacob, Europeans and Ottomans, West and East" (p. 11). The mapping of this very concrete intellectual exchange that happened between Ottomans and Europeans in the Syrian fieldwork of Aleppo and its subsequent academic elaboration in Oxford is precisely one of the main cores of the book. The author successfully contends with how the study of Oriental languages and cultures — so crucial in the intellectual life of Europe since the beginning of the 17th century — was not only linked to the directives and needs of scholars far away in their universities in England or on the European continent. It was a field in the making, in which the "experts" were the local Ottoman intellectuals, from whom Europeans learned not only to speak and read the different languages of the area but also to understand the 'access codes' to local cultures. The choice of manuscripts to collect, of Arab or Jewish authors to discover, was often a choice guided by local agents and not dictated by Western intellectuals, where Mills succeeds in providing historians a new access to the history of Oriental studies. Departing from the now classic Saidian reading of an East, born as a subject of study as an ideological construction of the West, the author supports his innovative approach through a meticulous philological work that shifts the focus of the entire narration. In fact, instead of focalising on the theoretical passage and flow of ideas between the 'Orient' and the West, Mills shows how this concretely took place in the experiences of the English chaplains serving the British factory in Aleppo between 17th and 18th century — ultimately also stressing the existence of a reverse intellectual movement that went from West to East in the form of printed translations of the Bible.

The chaplains are the central junction from which all the narrative and documentary threads of the book unfold. The volume is divided into three sections, which explore in different ways the cultural brokering carried out by the chaplains. The first section identifies the figure of the chaplain in Aleppo, from its origins to the end of the period analysed. The Levant Company's practices in employing its minster, the characteristics required by the job, and the average duration of the employment, as well as the influence that such a role could have on the chaplain's subsequent ecclesiastical and academic career, are outlined. The stage on which his role is played, Aleppo, is then described, a place of encounter and commerce with a long history of European merchants at work — originally mainly Venetians. Mills notes that Aleppo is also crucial in intellectual transmission due to the important presence of manuscript sellers and book auctions. In the second section, the history of the building of libraries as a consequence of collecting manuscripts by chaplains and its influence on the advancement of oriental studies in Europe is traced. Through the two differently exemplary experiences of Edward Pococke and Robert Huntington, two different types of approach to the Syrian cultural and intellectual space are in place. In both cases, however, the author convincingly emphasises the importance of the interaction of British chaplains with Oriental Christians and Jews in the process of manuscript collecting. The types of texts collected mainly belong to three categories: liturgical texts of the Eastern churches in Arabic or other local languages (such as Mandaic or Armenian); books from the rabbinic and Hebrew literature; and "Arabic-Islamic literature, with a substantial number of books on history, theology, philosophy, poetry, astrology, medicine, and grammar and lexicography" (p. 96). In this process, it becomes clear that the pre-existing dependence of the chaplains' interests on European scholars is complemented by the interests of their intermediaries on the ground, the Ottoman scholars. The role, for example, of Marhib ben Jacob and of the Maronite patriarch Istiḥfān al-Duwayhī thus become the pivot around which the chaplains' research interests are directed and then "exported" once back to Europe. The third section sees the chaplains engaged in more adventurous activities, such as visiting the ruins of ancient cities like Palmyra or making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, while exploring "English attempts to produce and to distribute Reformed liturgical and polemical texts in Arabic" (p. 4). Here Mills identifies the exchange with Catholic missionaries or the link with the Greek Orthodox church. The encounter with Catholics, who have been present in the area for a very long time, is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is presented as an opportunity for the chaplains to draw on the know-how that the Catholics have acquired over its centuries-long presence in the Middle East. On the other hand, the distribution of Reformed

texts is an attempt to contest this primacy, giving support to the Greek Orthodox Church against the Uniate movements supported by the Catholics themselves that led to the schism of the Orthodox Church in Syria in the 18th century.

The closing chapter of the book — while drawing together its various themes — offers a perspective on the relationship between trade and culture, framing it into first the Levantine and then the Asiatic experiences of the British factories in the second half of the 18th century. Mills traces the shift of scholarly interest from the Middle East to Asia as an effect of the change of the centre of gravity of British commercial interests that happened after 1761. In this context, the author argues how — on the micro scale — the knowledge produced by 'Orientalists' did not serve the interests of the Levant Company, while the presence of the Company itself furthered the knowledge of the Orient. Similarly — on the macro scale — the opening and strengthening of the Asian space made the East India Company not only a powerful political body but also promoted the birth of new academic curiosities. In this context, the expansion of new knowledge into Asian subjects "exploited fully the new opportunities for communication brought about by expansion of English commerce in Asia" (p. 262). Overall, the book is a fascinating example of how the confluence of commercial, religious, and scholarly interests could utmostly sustain the creation of new knowledge on different cultures.