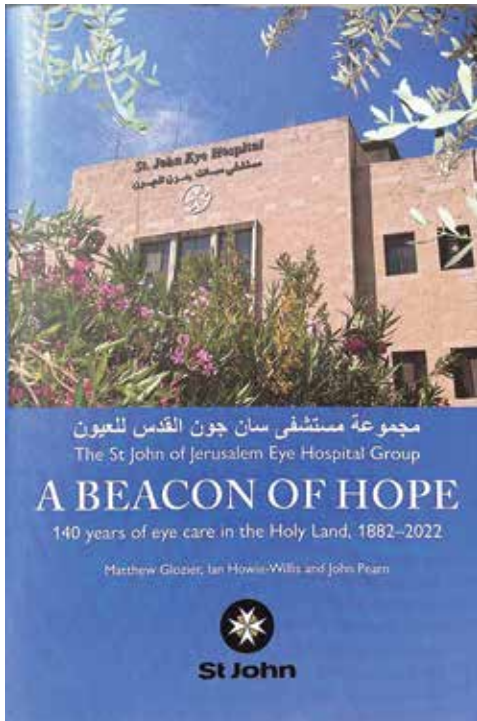


Visionary Health Care in the Most Trying of Circumstances

Review by Christopher Burnham

A Beacon of Hope: 140 Years of Eye Care in the Holy Land, by Matthew Glozier, Ian Howie-Willis, and John Pearn (Canberra, London, and Jerusalem: St. John's Ambulance Australia for St. John International and the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group, 2022). 630 pages. £36 paperback.



Abstract

Matthew Glozier, Ian Howie-Willis, and John Pearn's book, *A Beacon of Hope: 140 Years of Eye Care in the Holy Land*, provides a fascinating insight into the history of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, highlighting the challenges caregivers face operating against a backdrop of political change and ever-shifting restrictions of Israeli occupation that impact patients and staff alike.

Keywords:

Jerusalem; occupied Palestinian territory; ophthalmology; hospitals; health care; Ottoman Palestine; British Mandate; charity; fundraising.

Published to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital, this exhaustive six-hundred-page study of the hospital's history highlights the many complications of providing health care against a backdrop of political instability and Israeli military occupation, and the enduring resolve of caregivers to treat their patients in the most trying of circumstances. Written by three Australian historians – Matthew Glozier, Ian Howie-Willis, and John Pearn – *A Beacon of Hope: 140 Years of Eye Care in the Holy Land* offers insight into the challenges and practicalities of organizing and delivering high quality health care provision as a charitable organization that continues to offer its services free of charge to the population of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Drawing primarily upon the hospital's annual reports held at the London archives of the Most Venerable Order of St. John, *A Beacon of Hope*

undertakes a chronological exploration of the establishment and development of the order's work as a provider of ophthalmic treatment in the Holy Land, detailing the changing nature of optic ailments and the medical treatments available to correct them, and the importance of its priories around the world in raising funds. Yet the hospital's establishment is not the main point of departure. The first two chapters provide useful context around the significance of blindness in biblical tradition, the development of ophthalmology as a branch of medical science, and the relationship of the modern order with the medieval-era Knights Hospitaller and its Muristan hospital in the Old City of Jerusalem. Indeed, the hospital's links with the Musristan would see two clinics established close to the original site: the first operating between 1949 and 1960 and the second opening in 2016.

All of these factors would crystallize in the vision of British politician Sir Edmund Lechmere, secretary-general of the order and a key figure in the establishment of the hospital in 1882. A frequent traveler to the Holy Land, Lechmere was motivated by the stark necessity for ophthalmic treatment in Palestine given the high rates of severe eye infections among the local population, the need for the Order of St. John to have a charitable mission and a foothold in the area, and national pride considering the presence of hospitals run by other nationalities in Jerusalem (37–39). It is at such moments that the narrow focus of the book would benefit from a wider analysis – in this instance, further consideration of European involvement in Jerusalem and the Holy Land – although such an oversight is understandable given the nature of the text as a commemoration of the St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital. Nevertheless, the authors are aware that in order to understand the different challenges the hospital faces, one must be familiar with the changing political landscape of Palestine, which is cogently distilled at the start of each new epoch: Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and Israeli control.

In marrying this context with a detailed examination of the hospital's records, revealing snapshots emerge of everyday life for Jerusalemites over the last 140 years. Given the continued existence of widespread misconceptions about the assumed religious nature of the conflict between Palestine and Israel, it is noteworthy (yet hardly surprising) that in its nascent years the hospital's clientele was a microcosm of late Ottoman Jerusalem. Between July 1888 and December 1889, 62 percent of patients were described as “Arab and Fellaheen,” and 34 percent as Jews. The remaining 4 percent of patients were made up of Greeks, Russians, Armenians, and Turks, among others. By 1905, Jewish patients would account for three-quarters of all attendees, partly because the population of Jerusalem had become predominantly Jewish at this time, while the “Arabs and country folk” often had further to travel and fell afoul of the hospital's policy to open the doors at 7:00 am, only to close them once they had reached their capacity for outpatients. These demographics eventually altered with the opening of further hospitals in Jerusalem throughout the 1910s, including a German eye hospital for Jews (74–79). Yet the expansion of health care in Jerusalem was not the only factor that had an impact on the hospital and its patients. It soon becomes clear that external events have often impeded the hospital's work in administering treatment to the sick and needy.

The ability of the hospital and its employees to adapt to changing and challenging circumstances is a core thread of *A Beacon of Hope*, with the practical implications of this shifting context on the provision of health care in Jerusalem adeptly chronicled. Political change would impact not only the treatments available but also where they were administered. These fluctuations meant that the hospital has occupied three principal sites within Jerusalem: south of Jaffa Gate on the Bethlehem Road between 1883 and 1948; within the walls of the Old City between 1948 and 1960 following the Arab-Israeli War and the Nakba; and in Shaykh Jarrah where a new purpose-built hospital was established. Restrictions placed by successive Israeli governments on freedom of movement within the occupied Palestinian territories meant that patients increasingly struggled to access the hospital, leading to the introduction in 1980 of a more decentralized model with mobile outreach clinics operating across the West Bank. The program was extended to Gaza in 2017. Three satellite hospitals were also opened: in Gaza in 1992, in Hebron in the southern West Bank in 2005, and in ‘Anabta in the northern West Bank in 2007, extending the outreach of the hospital still further.

A Beacon of Hope makes clear that at various points in the hospital’s history its ability to provide treatment has been under threat for three reasons: as a result of the political environment both domestically and abroad, as a result of funding issues, and due to conflict. All three factors have now coalesced at once. My reading of this book has coincided with Israel’s continued assault on Gaza since October 2023, and the subsequent devastation of the region’s health infrastructure. For six months, the St. John’s Eye Hospital ceased to operate in Gaza, with its staff being displaced to Rafah and Dayr al-Balah alongside the 1.2 million Palestinians currently sheltering there. However, as so often recounted in this book, the hospital has endeavored to find a way to provide health care to those most in need. As of 20 April 2024, three workstations have been set up in the south and middle of the Gaza Strip with the assistance of UK Med, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and the United Nations, providing Gazans with access to vision screening, comprehensive eye examinations, treatment of eye infections, inflammations and chronic diseases, and the suturing and dressing of wounds. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the main hospital at Shaykh Jarrah and its satellites continue to provide health care, albeit at a reduced capacity, in the face of increased Israeli restrictions that impact staff and patients alike.¹ The clinical excellence, tenacious spirit, and humanitarian ethos of the hospital’s work over the past 140 years captured in *A Beacon of Hope* looks set to enable it to continue to help future generations of Palestinians.

Christopher Burnham received his PhD from the European Centre for Palestine Studies at the University of Exeter in 2022. His first book is Sir Ronald Storrs: Personality and Policy in Mandate Palestine, 1917–1926 (Routledge, 2024).

Endnotes

1 St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group, “Israel-Gaza Hostilities – Monthly Bulletin,” online at www.stjohnseyehospital.org/israel-

gaza-hostilities-weekly-bulletin/ (accessed 13 May 2024).