



## Desert self-discovery

*Desert Travellers from Herodotus to T E Lawrence, Janet Starkey and Okasha El-Daly eds., London: Astene, 2001.*

The present book contains a series of studies first presented as papers at conferences at Durham, Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the United Kingdom, all of them dealing with travellers in Egypt and the Near East. As the book's title indicates, desert travellers are concentrated on, and many of these, it seems, tried to come to terms with themselves through the harsh experiences they had in the desert. The studies cover a wide time span, from half a century before Christ in the case of the Greek Herodotus to the 20th-century British traveller T E Lawrence.

For the Greek travellers, Charles Foster writes on the zoology of Herodotus and on that of his Greek descendants, particularly in relation to Egypt. In their accounts these early travellers talked of Egypt and of the Nile as the source of life, and they described how amphibians could emerge from the Nile mud. Knowledge recorded by the Greeks about the zoology of the Middle East, both real and imagined, was passed on through the Romans to become part of European culture. Through the Dark Ages little was added to this knowledge, and it was only in the 13th century that these animals, first given attention by Greek travellers centuries earlier, lived again in the various mediaeval bestiaries, those strange books created in monasteries that sought to describe the various animals the Creator had brought into being. Among the more exotic species that Herodotus himself brought into being were the unicorn and, even more spectacularly, the phoenix with its ability to rise out of its own ashes.

In his essay in the book Okasha El-Daly, an Egyptian who teaches Egyptology in London, presents us with a short study of mediaeval Arab writers who have left accounts of their travels. He admits that, sadly, these travellers are outnumbered by those who wrote in languages other than Arabic, pointing out that such Arabs as did write about Egypt's deserts were mostly passing through them rather than staying in any one particular area. Of such writers, however, the historian Al-Mas'udi, in his well-known work *Muruj Al-Dhahab*, wrote of various desert areas, while Ibn Hawqal has left in his work *Surat Al-Ard* a detailed map of Egypt's oases and mountains. Other Arab travellers referred to include Al-Idrisi in the mid-12th century, and also of course Ibn Jubayr.

The visits of two pilgrims to Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, as described by Anne Wolff, make amusing and instructive reading. The site first became a place of refuge for monks fleeing from Roman persecution. In the fourth century the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, had a sanctuary built on the supposed site of Moses's Burning Bush. Later the Emperor Justinian gave orders for a fortified monastery to be constructed enclosing a basilica dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Later, owing to the cult of the legendary Catherine of Alexandria, it was named after Saint Catherine. The fame of Saint Catherine quickly spread, and many European Renaissance artists depicted her, religious indulgences being

granted to those making the pilgrimage to her monastery. The author tells us that in many depictions she was granted three haloes: white for virginity, green for learning and red for martyrdom.

The first pilgrim dealt with, Niccolo di Poggibonsi, a Franciscan friar, who visited the monastery in the 14th century. He was probably the first person to write of his travels in vernacular Italian, and the dangers encountered by his party were typical of the time. Obtaining supplies en route was merely one of the party's difficulties, though it is said that among the provisions they took with them were hens and a cock to wake them in the morning. In this context, the writer tells us that when the Mameluke Sultan Al-Nasir Mohamed Ibn Qalawun made his journey through the desert to Mecca, he took with him "portable vegetable gardens carried on frames on camels' backs."

The second pilgrim Wolff describes is a certain Christopher Harant, who paid his visit to the monastery at the end of the 16th century. Harant was a nobleman, having served as a councillor at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor in Prague, and he apparently had a knowledge of five languages, as well as many other accomplishments. Upon the death of his wife, he left his two children in the care of his parents and set off on a pilgrimage, of which he left a detailed account. Wolff suggests that since Harant was a military man and a confidant of the Emperor's, he had been asked to provide information about the Ottoman Turkish Empire that then controlled the area. However, it seems that Harant had a much more precarious journey than did Niccolo two centuries earlier: after braving numerous dangers, he eventually arrived back in Cairo, took a ship back home from Alexandria, but arrived in Prague to find the city in a state of religious unrest. Harant was a Protestant Christian, and he paid for this with his life when the Catholics regained the ascendant. "His last words," Wolff tells us, "were to give thanks to Almighty God for preserving him during all his travels, so that he could die in his own country at the hand of the executioner."

Elsewhere in the volume Carl Thompson provides an intriguing examination of the character of James Bruce, a European traveller in Abyssinia. Thompson considers Bruce to have had a complex personality similar to that of the 19th-century British orientalist Richard Burton, whom he oddly calls "that rather less than eminent Victorian." Edward Said is, however, quoted as saying that Burton tried to see Oriental life from the viewpoint of a person immersed in it, "having shaken himself loose of his European origins," and Thompson, for all the faults he finds in Bruce's writings, makes a convincing case for seeing the Abyssinian traveller as someone who identified himself with the people of the country in which he travelled. The writer talks of a "narratorial generosity" on Bruce's part, by which he means that Bruce considered that the Abyssinians "can be every bit as intelligent or courageous as Europeans."

Two items in the book of special interest to this writer are, firstly, a piece in French by Marcel Kurz and Pascale Linant de Bellefonds concerning Louis-Maurice Linant de Bellefonds's journey in the Nubian desert in the early 1830s looking for gold mines, and secondly the following piece, on the same area, by Janet Starkey entitled "Gold, Emeralds and the Unknown Ababda." De Bellefonds's journey was made at the instigation of Egypt's ruler, with the object of discovering the gold and emerald mines for which Nubia was then famous. This was the myth of "l'opulence nubienne" [Nubian riches], which was very much alive in the ruler's mind. De Bellefonds, for his part, was delighted to be given this opportunity to travel in a part of the world so little visited, having a passion for deserts and

an admiration for their Bedouin inhabitants. He had previously travelled widely in both Egypt and the Sudan, but this was his only retirement expedition; he wrote it up in great detail, giving minute details of this great tract of desert that stretches from far inland to the Red Sea.

Janet Starkey's contribution also gives us a vivid picture of this inhospitable region and of the few who have travelled there since Al-Maqrizi wrote of it that he who escapes from it is "as if risen out of his winding sheet, entirely altered in his features." She gives information about the Ababda people, most of whom inhabit an area east of Luxor at Daraw where they control the camel market, and which the present writer visited some years ago. Starkey summarizes the opinions of classical authors on the area, and then gives the views of European explorers, particularly those of the British writer Lucie Duff Gordon who lived in Egypt from 1863 till her death in 1869, most of the time in Luxor, and of a certain Karl Klunzinger, who seems to have had a particular aptitude for adapting to life in the Red Sea port of Al-Qusayr and who wrote in great detail -- with instructive drawings -- about the daily life of the Ababda.

The final contribution to the volume is by John Rodenbeck and is about the British writer T E Lawrence. Not so much a piece about travel, though Lawrence certainly qualifies as a traveller, it is a fascinating examination of this enigmatic character whose charisma has intrigued so many people. Rodenbeck focuses on the well-known incident at Deraa, obliquely related in Lawrence's autobiographical *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, where Lawrence was captured by the Turks and apparently subjected to a beating and the sexual attentions of the local Turkish governor. The author quotes from Lawrence's official report of the incident, made no less than 18 months after it occurred, in which he attributes his capture and identification to "Abd el-Kadir's description of me."

Some nine months before filing the report, Lawrence had made his entrance into Damascus, taken over from the Turks by the British under General Allenby. Abdel-Kadir and his brother, however, grandsons of the Algerian patriot Abdel-Kadir Al-Jazairi had previously tried to declare the city to be an Arab possession, ruled by King Hussein of the Hijaz, thus trying, as Rodenbeck points out, to "put paid to the bland ceremonial envisaged by the Franco-British technical team charged with stage-managing the event, of which an important member was Lawrence." Later Lawrence declares that he had tried to have the two brothers shot, and at the very least his report from Deraa seems to have had the intention of discrediting them.

The whole incident is puzzling, and some of Lawrence's biographers are of the opinion that it was a piece of fiction put in to spice up the narrative of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. As Rodenbeck puts it, "The episode has been a god-send to professional and amateur psychologists, [as well as] to playwrights and movie-makers." He also points out that the British playwright Terence Rattigan's play *Ross* hinges on the supposed happenings at Deraa, while "for certain Zionists it has been useful in providing the basis from which to suggest that "any friend of the Arabs must be mentally deficient, perverted, or plain loony."

Rodenbeck strengthens his case by collating the two versions of the *Seven Pillars* text, indicating where passages have been altered. Most surprising of all, however, is the fact that neither of the two texts of the book contains any reference to the supposed treachery of Abdel-Kadir referred to in Lawrence's report. In general, Rodenbeck's meticulous examination of the Deraa incident shows that Lawrence was less than honest about it, as

well as, perhaps, that the whole incident was a fabrication. In fact, towards the end of this well-researched piece, Rodenbeck tells us that Peake Pasha, one-time commander of the British-controlled "Arab League" army, is on record as having said that he had once challenged Lawrence about the veracity of the Deraa story and that Lawrence had replied, "Oh, give the public what it wants!" This comment perhaps shows that those of us who had always entertained doubts about this "best known public relations avatar" were right all along.

Reviewed by *Denys Johnson-Davies*

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