



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Review Article: Some European Travellers in the Middle East

Author(s): M. E. Yapp

Source: *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Apr., 2003), pp. 211-227

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284300>

Accessed: 03/05/2013 04:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Middle Eastern Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Some European Travellers in the Middle East

M.E. YAPP

A curious characteristic of several European travellers in the Middle East, is their lack of interest in what lay immediately before them. The modern Middle East, its peoples and places, were of little moment as compared with the vestiges of older civilizations. By choice such travellers were wanderers in an antique land. Even some who were destined to play an important role in shaping the destinies of the region began with a concern for the ancient Near East. T.E. Lawrence's interest in the region began with Crusader castles and continued with Hittite remains. Henry Layard made his name as the excavator of Nineveh before he tried his hand at remoulding British policy in the East. Others, like Henry Rawlinson, reversed the process: in his case an official interest in the region came to be subordinated to the decipherment of cuneiform. Some looked for relics of a more recent past: early British travellers in Central Asia were obsessed with finding traces of the passage of Alexander the Great and Arnold Toynbee's travels were intimations of the past set off by glimpses of the present.

Absorption in the distant past is a familiar phenomenon among travellers in Iraq. Years before Layard began to dig up Assyrian monuments Claudius James Rich laid the foundations of the study of Babylonia. He began with a remarkable talent for oriental languages, continued with an interest in missionary work, gave some perfunctory attention to his minimal official duties, but was especially devoted to the study of the monuments of ancient Iraq. Fascination with the most distant past is, however, nowhere more conspicuous than in Egypt. Thinking of Edward Lane naturally brings to mind his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* but this work was conceived as only a part of a much larger book which was especially concerned with the relics of ancient Egypt and intended to be profusely illustrated. Lane was persuaded by the publisher, John Murray, to divide his book and to publish the modern part first. Subsequently, Murray withdrew from his promise to publish the ancient part, not because he thought ancient Egypt of lesser interest but because he had undertaken to publish two other

books on that subject. One of these books, by John Gardner Wilkinson, was entitled *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*. So Lane's work remained unpublished (although some parts of it appeared in his sister's book, *The Englishwoman in Egypt*) and the writer turned his attention to the *Arabian Nights*, the Quran and the great *Lexicon*. Three successive drafts of the account of the ancient monuments remained: one at the Bodleian, one at the Ashmolean and the final draft at the British Library, which last forms the basis of a substantial volume edited by Jason Thompson and published by the American University in Cairo.¹ Thompson remarks that he has edited the manuscript only lightly and sometimes one feels the editing might have been lighter still without loss. It is singularly useless to be informed, following a reference by Lane to a passage in Strabo, that 'Lane refers to a particular edition of Strabo' (p.803). Nor is it always easy to distinguish Lane's footnotes from those of the editor. But the introduction is certainly helpful.

The book does contain remarks on modern Egypt such as a mention of dancing girls whose 'performances are of a very indelicate kind, consisting in various amorous gestures, and particularly in a wriggling motion of the hips' (p.55). One should not read into this remark too great a degree of prurience on Lane's part: at another place the editor reproves him for occasionally hiding along the riverbank to watch women bathing in Upper Egypt. Lower Egypt is passed over quickly – one town is much like all the others, Lane comments – and some space is given to the history of Islamic Egypt and to Muslim dynasties and buildings. Copts, he remarks, are the most bigoted of all Christians. But in this book Lane's greatest interest is in the evidences of ancient Egypt. Of the pyramids at Giza he writes: 'the pleasure which is felt by the modern traveller in surveying the Pyramids is not a little increased by the consideration of their mysterious antiquity, and the reflection that many philosophers and heroes of antient times have in like manner stood before them, wrapt in admiration and amazement' (p.165). Lane is even more moved by the spectacle of the monuments at Thebes which present 'a scene of grandeur and desolation utterly indescribable' (p.305). This was, of course, the age of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque: ancient monuments, like mountains, forests and deserts, were expected to inspire various emotions and an observer who failed to respond appropriately to them was likely to be thought deficient in taste. Lane is careful to catalogue other ruins as picturesque. Even so Lane's response is much less passionate than that of Edward Daniel Clarke, author of six volumes of *Travels*, to whom the pyramids signified 'ideas of duration almost endless, of power inconceivable, of majesty supreme; of solitude most awful, of grandeur, of desolation and of repose'. To those who gaze today on the pyramids, engulfed as they are in the clamour of coaches, camels and tourists, or even enjoy the sugar plum, evening, *son et lumière*

entertainment, these emotions are bound to be regarded as somewhat excessive. Indeed, even at the time not all travellers were similarly affected. Some admitted humbler motives. Mrs Charles Lushington who visited Egypt in 1828 on her way from Calcutta to Europe was also keenly interested to visit Karnak and Giza and recorded that 'the greatest pleasure I felt in ascending the pyramid was to be enabled to say at some future time, that I had been at its summit' (*Narrative of a Journey from Calcutta to Europe by way of Egypt in 1827 and 1828*, London 1829, p.148). One is reminded of those many travellers who carved their initials with pride on every famous monument. Visitors to Persepolis may behold the graven record of several early European visitors and early excavators among the monuments of ancient Egypt habitually employed this method, apparently to identify their finds.

Essays on several searchers for ancient Egypt are contained in *Travellers in Egypt* edited by Paul and Janet Starkey, a book first published in hardback in 1998.² In their introduction the editors refer to the growing scholarly interest in travellers to the Middle East and to the establishment of the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East (ASTENE). One is tempted to speculate about the causes of this renewed interest in European travellers in the region. It is the case, of course, that for long the writings of Europeans were the principal, or at least the most prominent source used by Europeans when writing about the Near and Middle East. Some 50 or more years ago the use of European travellers as a source began to be looked upon with some disfavour and academic writers began to insist upon the greater importance of indigenous sources written in the languages of the region. If European travellers are returning to popularity to what is this circumstance due? Is it the result of a new appreciation of what their writings bring to the study of the region, or because their works lend themselves to the currently popular interdisciplinary studies, or because of disillusionment with indigenous sources, or simply because it is easier to write about European travellers than to learn Arabic or Ottoman Turkish and plough through difficult and often unrewarding material?

The excavators whose adventures are recorded in the Starkey volume were, for the most part, not scholars; more often they were men of humble background, sturdy physique and an understanding that satisfying the European demand for Egyptian antiquities could be a profitable business. Such a man was Giovanni Belzoni from Padua who began his career with a commission from the British consul, Henry Salt, to superintend the excavation and transport of antiquities. One seven ton head moved by Belzoni finished up in the British Museum; another, one thousand ton, fallen statue which he left behind at the same site was the inspiration for Shelley's *Ozymandias*, a poem which has recently enjoyed a renewed

popularity as a symbol of the vanity of human ambition and the evanescence of empires. Belzoni has been criticised as a typical 'cowboy' archaeologist of the time but Peter Clayton's essay provides a persuasive defence. In themselves these early excavators are of minor interest but grouped together they provide a picture of the early European invasion of the territory of the modern Egyptians in search of ancient Egypt. Modern Egyptians in this theatre are mere figures in a landscape, sometimes praised for their willingness to work hard and sometimes condemned for being dirty. The latter part of the volume, however, features travellers who were also interested to observe modern Egyptians. Several are travellers who are likely to be less familiar to English readers – some are French and they include Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert's visit to Egypt has been much discussed, in particular the celebrated episode of his congress with the slave girl known as Kuchuk Hanem. While admitting that Flaubert did enjoy greater sexual freedom in the Middle East than in France the author, Mary Orr, defends Flaubert against Ronald Hyam's charge of being a sexual exploiter. Orr remarks that 'like so many travellers before him Flaubert is more French outside France than inside' (p.192). The point is an interesting one and raises the questions of why people travel and what is the effect of travel on the traveller.

Lawrence Sterne categorized travellers by their reasons for travel and listed them under various heads, namely the idle, the inquisitive, the lying, the proud, the vain, the splenetic, the delinquent and felonious, the unfortunate and innocent, the simple and the sentimental, the last comprising himself. Although Flaubert progressed far beyond the gentle handholding which is such a feature of *A Sentimental Journey*, at heart he too was a sentimental traveller and can be regarded as a more literary version of the millions who annually journey to Spain and Thailand in search of romance, or at least, of sex. But in general the Middle East, unlike India, was not a destination much sought after by the sentimental traveller: the lure of the desert seems to partake more of asepsis and of the mortification of the flesh. Even *The Perfumed Garden* is little more than a revision of the *Kama Sutra*. Perhaps it is necessary to make a distinction between the traveller and the tourist. In *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) Paul Bowles attempted to distinguish between the two. A tourist, his leading character, Port, claimed, hurried home after a few weeks or months and was committed to his own civilization: the traveller, belonging to no one place more than another, moved slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the world to another and was inclined to compare civilizations, often to the detriment of his own. On this definition few European travellers in the Middle East were more than tourists: by their travels most were confirmed in their opinion of the superiority of their own country, religion and

civilization and in their conviction of the inferiority of Middle Eastern ways and of the unpleasantness of the Middle East. 'In the country of Iran', Walter Savage Landor laid down, 'one does not travel for pleasure nor is there any pleasure in travelling' (*Through Forbidden Lands*, i, p.33). Persia, he recorded, is a country of disappointments, to say nothing of filthy hotels.

Landor is not one of the British travellers described in Dennis Wright's *The English Among the Persians*, which has made a welcome reappearance.³ The organisation of Wright's book does raise a fundamental question about the concept of European traveller. Wright divides his subjects into categories such as soldiers, diplomats, merchants and business men. Some of them were plainly not travellers in the ordinary sense of the word, but, like other Europeans in the Middle East, they were, to all intents and purposes, residents. Some Levant families were residents for several generations. Why should they be subsumed under the phrase 'European travellers' when they have a much greater claim to be regarded as indigenous people than, for example, some Ottoman official or soldier who sojourned briefly in the Arab lands? The answer, one presumes, is that the European observer is an outsider, one who arrives with a different, European perspective and translates what he sees into a form which may be intelligible to European readers or at least acceptable to them. Certainly, when one reads accounts of Europe by early travellers from the Middle East the description seems vaguely familiar, rather as if one gazed upon a well known landscape through a heavy mist, but it is one in which some fundamentals seem to have been omitted and some features of minor interest elevated to what seems a wholly unjustified prominence. It would be good to have more studies of the ways in which Middle Eastern readers have received the writings of European travellers in their homelands. Robert Byron was told by a Persian acquaintance that Persians hated all books that mentioned them but that they particularly hated Arnold Wilson's *Persia* because the flattery was too thick. Certainly, that is an unusual and diverting view. Wright emphasises the importance of the impression the British left in Iran without, however, examining the course of the literary transmission of views.

The greatest pleasure of Wright's book lies in the details of the many eccentric Britons who visited or were visited upon Iran and who can only have left an impression of wealthy pottiness. (One should not rely too heavily on all Wright's details, however. Of the regimental affiliations of some early British soldiers in Iran he makes a dog's breakfast rather than a diplomat's reception: Passmore, Rawlinson and Sheil are all assigned to the wrong regiments and Charles Stoddart is placed in the wrong mission.) But leave such irritating details aside and take the case of William Tylour Thomson, a British diplomatic representative in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century. Thomson fell foul of the Honourable Charles Murray, whom

Wright describes, perhaps rather too severely for the man was certainly unfairly traduced by the London and Indian papers and the competition (as, for example, from Samuel Manesty and Sir Gore Ouseley) was very considerable, as 'probably the clumsiest and most inept envoy ever appointed by the British government to the Persian court' (p.23). As a result Thomson (who, like Murray, was also accused of adultery by the Iranian government) found himself exiled to Chile for nearly 13 years before he was appointed Minister to Tehran in 1872. In later years another British minister was instrumental in the banishment of a long-serving consul, William George Abbott, to Rio de Janeiro on the grounds that he was utterly incompetent. These incidents reminded me of the representative of the British Council in Mashhad whom I met in 1965. He had spent his entire career in South America, spoke Spanish fluently and had a Spanish-speaking wife. With only a very few years to go before retirement he had been transferred to Mashhad where he rattled sadly around the massive building which had once housed the powerful British consul. He spoke no Persian, seemed wholly lost in his post and slept away the afternoons. One wondered what awful sin he might have committed in order to experience such a fate or on what elevated toes he might have trodden.

Iran seemed to arouse more powerful emotions among British travellers than any other part of the Middle East. Britons either loved it or hated it. Most hated it; in particular they disliked the Persians. Unsurprisingly, Murray was among the majority and bitterly regretted being persuaded to serve in 'this nest of intrigue, falsehood and villany comprehended in the word Persia' (quoted Sir Herbert Maxwell, *The Honourable Sir Charles Murray KCB*, Edinburgh 1898, p.262) Those who share the facile assumptions that travel broadens the mind and that experience of other customs, cultures and civilizations promotes tolerance would do well to read something of European travellers in the Middle East and especially of travellers in Iran. It may be that the experience of Middle Eastern travellers in the West is similar – certainly the proposition would be worth more detailed study than the excellent account offered by Bernard Lewis in *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*. Wright remarks that most Persians did not like the British infidels who came their way, regarding them with contempt and even hatred (p.155). There were also Britons who took the opposite view, in particular those who spent considerable periods in the country such as the Thomson brothers and Percy Sykes, whose *History of Persia* and still more his *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia* conveys something of his liking for the country and its peoples. One of the best known of the British Persophiles was Edward Granville Browne, who tried (one feels largely in vain) to convey his appreciation of the land and its civilization to many who studied for the Levant Consular Service – he had little success with Reader Bullard

who found the Persians altogether too much to bear when he served in that country as Ambassador. Browne's *Year Amongst the Persians* is one of the great books of British travel in the Middle East and succeeds like almost no other book in conveying the fascination and the vividness of the intellectual life of Shi'i Islam. His *Persian Revolution*, however, suggests some of Browne's limitations because it indicates how European liberal ideas constrained his thinking on that event and led him to see it in the pattern of European revolutions of the nineteenth century.

The power to think in the manner of the society studied by the traveller is one which is rarely bestowed and is in any case a dangerous gift because the traveller must always translate his observations into the dialect of his own society if he is to be understood. The question is a complex one. It is sometimes assumed that travellers arrive already conditioned by the values of the society from which they come and consciously or unconsciously censor or condemn the society which they observe. But when one reads the work of many travellers one is struck by the amount of cultural relativism, by the readiness of visitors to accept local habits or customs without criticism. For every Arthur Conolly, disgusted to his soul by the spectacle of slavery, there are other travellers quite ready to accept the institution. Leaving aside Richard Burton, whose appetites were entirely catholic, Mrs Elwood was not greatly disturbed by slavery in Egypt and James Burton apparently kept several slaves and married one. It may be that, despite the prevalence of polygamy and slavery, Europeans found it easier to accept the habits of Muslims in the Middle East than those of Hindus or Chinese in further Asia. In India missionaries condemned Hindu but not Muslim social life: it was for Muslim government that they reserved their dislike. There was no equivalent in the Middle East of the Marabar caves which so disturbed Adela and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*.

It is misleading to describe early nineteenth century consuls, members of the Egyptian service and of the Levant Consular Service after its establishment in the 1870s, as travellers in the Middle East inasmuch as they spent their careers in that region, although they moved from one country to another within it. Their memoirs are always of interest: Ronald Storrs's *Orientalisms*, although too mannered for every taste, is without doubt a book of great interest as well as of some literary merit. Reader Bullard's *The Camels Must Go* is a fascinating account of diplomacy and travel in some of the remoter areas of the Middle East. But a particular favourite is *Bright Levant*, the memoirs of Laurence Grafftey-Smith, who spent most of his career in Egypt and Arabia and found 'a lifetime's enchantment' in the Near East. *Bright Levant* has just been reprinted and those unfamiliar with the book are strongly recommended to secure a copy because it is not only a pleasing literary composition and a source of

valuable information on some important political transactions but revels in a magnificent collection of anecdotes.⁴ To take one example: Lady Cheetham, wife of Sir Milne Cheetham, Counsellor at the British Embassy in Cairo and later partly responsible for the blunders which led to the 1919 uprising in Egypt, was given to playing golf at the Gezira Club. Preparing to putt on one of the (sand) greens she espied two small frogs on the line of her putt. 'She raised her putter and slew first one and then the other before holing her putt. She also won the game, for her opponent was too shaken to offer further resistance' (p.20).

Perhaps there still exist men of the breadth of interest and eccentricities of behaviour which marked the consuls, oriental secretaries and other long term devotees of the Middle Eastern equivalent of the smoke filled room. More recent memoirs, perhaps through diplomatic caution, perhaps for other reasons, fail to exercise the same fascination as the older memoirs. Horace Philips's *Envoy Extraordinary*, 1995, seemed to tell the reader little that he did not already know and repeated some old views which may be true but have never been securely demonstrated to have influenced British policy, for example the view that political officers in Aden 'following in the tradition of British Arabists since the nineteenth century, had a romantic affinity with the bedouin tribes of the protectorate' and distrusted the town Arabs (p.51). A recent memoir by Richard Long, *Bygone Heat*, records events in a long career spent in the Middle East, and deserves some attention in this review article.⁵ Intending readers should be warned, however, that Long has chosen to write his memoirs in the third person and to call himself 'Horace', a device which can be intensely irritating. Long approaches at times the character of that variety of traveller classified by Sterne as splenetic since he complains vigorously about many of the experiences he underwent, beginning with the education in Arabic and Persian which he received in the Oriental Faculty at Cambridge, an introduction to the eastern languages which indeed sounds to have been dreadful. The Adams professor at that time was A.J. Arberry, whose teaching techniques seem to have been as elementary as they were short. 'Good luck with your exams', Arberry said to his students as, after a brief encounter, he disappeared from their lives forever. Other lecturers were no better and Long largely taught himself. Much of the book goes on in the same way: there are complaints about people, places, hotels, not to mention some degree of self-dislike and a good deal of hypochondria or, at the least, a strong inclination to worry about the symptoms so often associated with travel in the Middle East. At times there seem to be tummy upsets on every page. Perhaps one should establish a category of anti-travellers, beginning with Laurence Sterne. There would be several recruits among travellers in the Middle East and they might include John Malcolm, Vita Sackville West and Robert Byron.

The only place in the Middle East which Long liked wholeheartedly was Iraq. 'The characterful, emotional, friendly and generous Iraqi people were unspoiled by political change', he writes of the 1960s (p.72). He liked his diplomatic colleagues much less and saves some heavy sarcasm for them. So much did he like Iraq that he would never go back lest he should be disappointed. He did not like Jordan or Israel. 'The western determination to retain control over actual and potential oil-producing areas played a significant part in the creation of Israel' he informs his readers (p.113). Grafftey-Smith was also sympathetic towards the Arabs but he could never have written such nonsense. Probably there is also a category known as the splenetic reader and I will leave this consideration of Long's book before I join it irrevocably.

Of all the categories of European travellers to the Middle East the largest and almost the oldest is that of the pilgrims, yet another group whose interest in the Middle East was not in the lives of its contemporary inhabitants. Jews tended to go to Jerusalem to lay their bones there but Christians usually aimed at shorter sojourns. Most came from the communities of Eastern Christians but from the fourth century AD onwards a steady flow came from western Europe and many of these pilgrims wrote some account of their travels. Palestine, wrote the elusive Sir John Mandeville, with more confidence than experience, is 'the best and most worthy land, and the most virtuous land in all the world'. Although there was some element of entertainment in the journey it was sufficiently arduous, not to say dangerous, as to deter the merely frivolous traveller and to ensure that the great number of pilgrims who found their way to the Holy Land were of a strong religious inclination. 'The main object of a traveller in Palestine must be to call up the historical associations of the country' as well as to put up with some discomfort, was the verdict of Baedeker's 1898 guide. This circumstance did limit the value of their innumerable narratives since to them the most interesting features of the journey were not the lands through which they passed or the people who inhabited those regions – indeed they had very little time for the Christians of Palestine – but the details of the sites associated with the life, death, resurrection and assumption of Jesus and of the rituals observed in worship there. Indeed their accounts of those rituals (representing as it were the fountainhead of wisdom on the subject) influenced the development of ritual in Europe. I am told that Muslim narratives of pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina (I have no information about Shi'i pilgrimages to Najaf and Karbala, some of which are anyway performed chiefly by the dead, or about those to Mashhad) adopt the opposite style, that is to say the authors write about the peoples and places but not particularly about the rituals observed in the sanctuaries; these were laid down in the law books and it was unnecessary to give more details.

The Body and the Blood is an ingenious variation on the theme of pilgrimage.⁶ The author, Charles Sennott, an American journalist who came from an Irish Catholic family (his wife was from a secular Russian Jewish family), decided to revisit the sites associated with Jesus and to hang on to those journeys some observations about the present situation, in particular the position of the Palestinian Christians who had traditionally congregated in these localities. His journey encompassed Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem and several other places. His travelogue is particularly interesting as being a record of a community fading towards total extinction. The Christian dilemma is not new: Sakakini once remarked that only by embracing Islam could the Christian Arab find peace and that was before the dominance of a new politicized Judaism in the Holy Land. The Palestinian jihadist fires from the vicinity of a Christian village content that the Israeli retribution should fall on the Christians: to the Israeli state there is little profit in favouring Christians – it is the Muslim with whom Zionists must settle one way or the other. So, in Nazareth, it was found convenient to allow the Muslims to expand their territory at the expense of the Christians. In Nazareth the percentage of Christians has fallen to 30 per cent. Upper Nazareth has become almost wholly Jewish. There, however, arrived a novel complication, namely, the Russian Christian spouses of Russian Jewish immigrants – these could live among Jews although they could not be buried among them. In the whole of what is often, rather misleadingly, termed ‘historic Palestine’ the number of Christians is little changed over the last 100 years but their share of the total population has fallen from around 13 per cent to two per cent. Of course this decline is not peculiar to Palestine, although a particular poignancy is attached to the misfortunes of the Christians of that country: despite the patronage of King Husayn the Christian population of Jordan has also fallen to only two per cent and the Christian element in Syria and Lebanon is also in decline. Rich Christians thought of emigration: poor Christians could not afford to go. It might be thought that the Christians of the Middle East and especially those of Palestine would be the especial objects of the solicitude of the Christian congregations of the United States but this is not so. American Christians come to Israel and Palestine as tourists or pilgrims or, in some cases, as would be observers of the end of days but, like their predecessors of long ago, they hardly notice the local Christians. Sennott remarks on their almost total ignorance of the country they visit – he might have been talking of medieval pilgrims. American fundamentalist Christians, with their eyes fixed firmly on the anticipated apocalypse, are primarily concerned with the fate of the Jewish community, not the Christian. There is a melancholy element in this book which gives it a distinction amongst travellers’ tales and, oddly enough, recalls the spirit of *Ozymandias*. One has difficulty,

however, with the statement that 'the Christian community was a disintegrating cultural interface between Islam and Judaism' (p.356). It is doubtful if it ever was: Judaism was always much closer to Islam and Islam to Judaism than either was to Christianity. And I was puzzled to encounter a character described as 'that fierce Arab nationalist Albert Hourani' (p.250). Could Sennott perchance be referring to the wise and gentle scholar once of St Antony's?

It would be pleasant to linger on the contribution of other groups of travellers, including the missionaries, in particular that strange and brave traveller, Joseph Woolf, who travelled throughout the region in search of Jews who might be converted to Christianity, eagerly awaited the Second Coming which he thought was due in 1847, and happily debated theology with all who crossed his path. His journals contain much information about matters outside the common currency of travellers. Another group of travellers for whom there is neither space nor time is represented by George Curzon and Mark Sykes. They wrote (there is some doubt as to how much of *Persia and the Persian Question* was actually written by Curzon) substantial books of some literary merits and which were packed with information. Did they write to supply information, to endeavour to bend British policy in a particular direction or to advance their own reputations? No doubt money was not a negligible factor in the case of Curzon but he never cared so much for that commodity. Their influence was considerable: as Elie Kedourie once demonstrated, some of our preconceptions about the Ottoman empire and the Levant have their origins in the work of Sykes or at least received a powerful impulse from his vivid writing. Unusually, both, in some degree, were to be given an opportunity to try out their own prescriptions for the region.

One substantial, but largely anonymous group of travellers is the exponents of the modern Grand Tour. Travelling in often humble fashion through the Middle East during the 1960s I became aware of a considerable group of young men travelling alongside me. They were mainly Britons, Canadians and Australians to which were added occasional Germans. They made their way overland from Australia to Europe and back again. All visited certain places: Bangkok and Katmandu. They moved through India into Afghanistan and thence into Iran. They had little money, they stayed in cheap or free accommodation, they travelled in coaches or on lorries. Many had mild dysentery, some were covered in sores, but all had notebooks into which in the evenings they inscribed the details of their days. What was the name of that place where we met the friendly policeman, they inquired. Where did we buy that pilau? Their ignorance of the history, religions, customs and languages of the lands through which they passed was immense but they saw the Middle East from a rare viewpoint. To my

knowledge that generation has not spoken yet but one day we will surely be deluged by memoirs of the modern Grand Tour.

Soldiers constitute a very large category of travellers in the region. Some, like Arnold Wilson, write with perception and style; others, like Toby Rawlinson, record remarkable adventures in a laconic style and without the knowledge of land or language which would enable them to extract from their observations some more memorable reflections. With soldiers as with pilgrims one is always reminded of the countless number who left no record of their experiences in the region. A poignant memory is linked to the cemetery in Beersheba which contains the graves of soldiers of the British Empire who fell in 1917 in the fight to defeat the Ottoman troops. Similar cemeteries elsewhere are larger but anyone must be affected by the number of young Welsh and Australian soldiers whose visit to the Holy Land had terminated so abruptly on the fringes of that country. Their's was little more than a Pisgah sight.

To this reviewer words have always conveyed much more than have pictures but such is certainly not the case for many armchair travellers whose interest in the Middle East is fed and watered especially by illustrations. Leaving aside the antique charm of sixteenth century German woodcuts depicting, for example, anguished parents bewailing the seizure of their son, a victim of the devshirme, one observes that it was the nineteenth century painters, engravers and photographers who especially popularised the Middle East through many handsome volumes of illustrated travels. 'All good colour is in some degree pensive', wrote Ruskin, 'but the loveliest is melancholy'. Ruskin was concerned to extol the merits of colour above monochrome tones but the early monochrome illustrations, found, for example, in illustrations drawn by W.H. Bartlett for *The Beauties of the Bosphorus* (1839) convey a sad departed splendour better than the cheeriness of colour. There is no movement, only an almost empty landscape populated usually by no more than one or two silent, motionless observers. It is interesting to compare Bartlett's work with that of David Roberts whose paintings of the Holy Land have become perhaps the best known and certainly the most expensive of the early nineteenth century pictorial recordings of the Middle East. The colour and light in Roberts's paintings give his scenes a vivacity which is absent in Bartlett's work. Roberts' figures are more alive and are not merely observers of the scene but are engaged with each other as they are in his painting of the shrine of the Holy Sepulchre. Even in his vast painting of Bethlehem, which more nearly resembles the Bartlett style, Roberts includes, in addition to the observer, two figures engaged in what seems to be a passionate dispute and who are apparently wholly indifferent to the tremendous scene in which they are placed.

The beginnings of photography in the Middle East are almost contemporary with the great painters. Lane employed the *camera lucida* in the 1820s and some of the results may be seen in his *Description*. By the mid-nineteenth century the great Victorian photographers were operating in the Middle East: Felix Bonfils and Francis Frith, about whom there is a useful article in the Starkey volume. Frith, it seems, endeavoured to convey as much information as possible in each photograph he took. Photography has its limits: an amusing passage in Long's book is a list of items which it was forbidden to photograph in Iraq. In some Muslim countries it is theoretically not allowed to photograph any living creature but that seems to be an ordinance little honoured today. Modern photography usually follows the animated, colourful style, but *Under the Spell of Arabia*, a collection of photographs taken in the 1970s by Mathias Oppersdorff, a professional travel photographer, relies on the use of sombre monochrome for its powerful effects.⁷ The photographer had no previous knowledge of Arabia or of Arabic, a circumstance which may possibly have been an advantage since one gets what the photographer saw and not what he thought he ought to see. Many of his photographs remind one of films directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. A figure is posed against a background of nothing – a desert or a blank wall. The scenes have a clarity, an impersonal quality and a stiffness which reminds one of Bartlett, although his pictures lack the quiet serenity of work by that artist. Rather the photographs seem to reveal men suffering some private disquiet. The older men often have a villainous appearance, enhanced by the deep lines on their faces and the black rags they choose to wear. Although there are scenes of children playing and even of occasional crowds the overwhelming impression is of a lonely place. 'I dreamed of Arabia and wanted to inhale it by the lungful, to travel freely among the bedouin tribes, to feel the crowded bazaars and to once again hear the call to prayer' writes the photographer. But if this passage suggests a lively scene it is misleading.

In Oppersdorff's work one is once again reminded of that great illusion of nineteenth century travellers in the Middle East, an opinion endorsed by the illustrators, that the population of the region and especially the Muslim population, was declining, that all the greatness of Babylon and Egypt, of Caliphs and Sultans, of Islamic civilization itself, was in the past and that the overwhelming atmosphere of the Middle East was one of decay, melancholy and bitter resignation. In the end that is the most notable impression left by the European travellers in the Middle East and it is the most misleading. With very few exceptions they completely failed to detect the signs of vitality in the region or if they did find some evidences they usually assigned them to the wrong causes or the wrong groups. Most nineteenth century travellers thought the future of the Middle East was

Christian but it turned out to be Muslim and Jewish. Early twentieth century travellers thought the future was European but they too were to be disillusioned. Later twentieth century travellers surmised that the destiny of the Middle East was to join what they thought to be the universal world civilization. They may also be mistaken.

A category unknown to Sterne was what may be called real or professional travellers, those whose journeys to the Middle East are motivated by 'lust of knowing what should not be known', as Ishak declaimed, although he was, at the time, in the guise of a pilgrim. In fact Ishak and Hassan took the Golden Road to Samarkand not so much from curiosity as from despair at the arbitrary horrors of Baghdad. The motives of travellers are always of much interest for their motives may explain much that they write. Pietro della Valle, Professor P.M. Holt tells us in an interesting essay in the Starkey collection, was induced to travel in the Middle East because he had suffered in love and that was certainly a motive for more than one traveller to the Middle East, including Arthur Conolly who traversed Iran and Afghanistan in the 1830s and met a brutal end in Bukhara. Hester Stanhope had an unrequited passion for Sir John Moore and it is sometimes claimed that an unhappy love affair was the cause of the travels of Gertrude Bell, although her interest in the East predated her unlucky engagement. Like Hester Stanhope, Jane Digby and Anne Blunt before her and Freya Stark afterwards, Bell was drawn especially to Arabia and travelled through the splendour and discomfort of the lonely places, periodically emerging to move again in society and to write her great travel books, in particular *The Desert and the Sown*. At least she could be sure of a welcome in every British embassy or consulate as they seemed to be mainly populated by her friends and relatives. The Middle East, it must be said, is an unlikely place for a woman and it is surprising that not only should the region have attracted so many notable women travellers from Egeria onwards but that so many should have been drawn towards the most barren and uncomfortable areas. Lady Sheil, the wife of the British minister, wrote about Persia and is an exception. So was Mary Wortley Montagu who travelled with her husband, never reached Asia and saw the Near East mainly as a source of fun for her friends. But the others put up with hard living and for what? There was escape from distress at home, romance of the Shaykh of Araby variety, an opportunity for distinction through discoveries and books, perhaps the chance of useful public employment as Bell and Stark found, and a very British interest in horses in the case of Blunt who also accompanied her husband. Freya Stark claimed that she travelled 'single-mindedly for fun'. Gertrude Bell once wrote that she longed for the constant companionship and the blessed security of being married but she seemed almost to run away from any chance of such

content. To me it remains a puzzle why these women chose such inhospitable places. No doubt, a feminist would argue, that is the consequence of a stereotyped view of women and their role. But none of the women mentioned was born as late as the twentieth century and their own view of themselves and their role was not conditioned by the 1960s, by which decade nearly all of them were dead. One would have thought that the great advantage that a woman traveller had over her male counterpart was her ability to enter areas from which men were excluded and thereby was privileged to observe the lives of women and the family. But so many women travellers spurned this opportunity and chose instead the society from which they were partly excluded and in which they would always be second-class citizens, namely the society of men.

But of course women were not alone in their choice of Arabia because the deserts were also a favourite destination for men travellers. Some men were there for official reasons, although some of these men seem to have sought appointments which would send them to the remote deserts: surely such was the case with Shakespeare, Philby and Glubb. But others deliberately chose the deserts. Wilfrid Thesiger claimed that his original interest was in places but that he became especially interested in the bedouin, and the bedouin, whose habits and style of life repelled most Europeans, not to mention Middle Eastern townsmen and peasants, seem to have exercised a singular attraction for several travellers. How old is the European concept of the noble Arab of the desert is a matter worthy of some research. The idea is usually credited to Carsten Niebuhr whose *Description of Arabia* was first published in 1772 but there are earlier intimations. Perhaps the 'badu' should be seen as just one case of the more general Enlightenment vision of the noble savage, which also has earlier manifestations. At all events during the nineteenth century the 'badu' was a figure respected or abhorred by travellers. The travels of Charles Doughty in Arabia certainly popularised the favourable picture, although how much this circumstance was due to the strange and elevated language with which Doughty endowed the Arab is debatable. Doughty seems to have been more interested in Anglo-Saxon than in Arabic and it may in part be his legacy that in popular fiction desert Arabs spoke in such elaborate and dignified phrases. But then again so did Zulus and Pathans.

There seems to be a perversity in the choice of favourite Middle Easterners by some writers. Rich liked the Kurds, detested by most travellers who frequently suffered their depredations. W.R. Hay (*Two Years in Kurdistan*) sought an unspoiled people in an unspoiled land and also found the Kurds quite admirable. Outstanding in their combination of fascination and horror were the Marsh Arabs, regarded by most travellers with loathing and usually given a wide berth, a people of whom the kindest

that could be said is that they were medically and morally challenged, and who inhabited a land (if that is the word) plagued by abominable insects and savage pigs. Inevitably, Thesiger, who had earlier been so charmed by the castrating Danakil, was drawn towards them like a bear to honey. It is ironic that the American and the British air forces should spend so much money, time and energy in endeavouring to keep them safe. The Pathans of the North West Frontier of India were just such another people, beloved by many European travellers and British officials, hated by others as murderous thieves. Was the fascination with the unlovable outcasts of the Middle East yet another symptom of the reluctance of European travellers to confront the mass of the people who lived in the region?

One of the categories mentioned by Sterne is the lying traveller. Perhaps he was thinking of Mandeville but many other candidates spring to mind. Indeed, Napoleon Bonaparte informed Volney, that master of the dry and detached observation, that he was the only traveller who did not lie. One may ask whether travellers are expected to tell the truth. After all their's is a literary trade and their obligation is to their prospective readers who do not include the historian, so distant in time and so unlikely to reward the writer. Perhaps it is legitimate for travel writers to embellish the truth, shape and reshape their material, omit inconvenient or dull details, introduce some special pleadings and feed the prejudices of their readers. Nowadays they may leave information to the newspapers although these too have moved into the entertainment business. But perhaps the first duty of travel writers is to entertain their readers. Travel writing tells us something about the people and places visited by the traveller, something about the traveller himself and his scale of values, and it also often amuses, as well as instructs. On the whole European travellers in the Middle East are a serious lot, or perhaps the region soon knocks the fun out of them. Even Richard Burton, probably the greatest European traveller in the Middle East and a man of such wide sympathies or tolerances that they earned him the soubriquet of 'Dirty Dick', can sometimes be too serious for the occasion – witness the Terminal Essay of the *Arabian Nights*. But occasionally a writer emerges who both instructs and amuses. Such a traveller was Charles Kinglake, whose *Eothen* remains the first book that any would be student of the Middle East should read. In these days of air travel, in which the traveller is borne from one featureless airport to another, the sense of entering a new world, which was the fortune of the older traveller by sea or land, has gone. That first, unforgettable, ripe smell of the East which met the nostrils of the traveller whose ship anchored off Port Said was one such experience. And Kinglake's account of the sensation of an alien world, which he experienced when crossing the Sava at Semlin, is another, which is captured for us for all time by a great literary talent. Yet another traveller who was determined to extract some amusement

from the Middle East was Robert Byron. *The Road to Oxiana*, with its mixture of snobbish architectural comment, social and political analysis, wit and occasional bitchiness can be very funny as well as cruel. I seem to be alone in the view that Sir John Malcolm's playful and amusing *Sketches of Persia* is also a work which has an underlying sour taste. But for gentle humorous mockery, of which the object is the author and his companion rather than the people they encounter, I still like best Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*. Towards the end of their lugubrious travels the unlucky climbers encountered Wilfrid Thesiger, travelling through the difficult country of the Panjsher. They joined him in camp and at bed time inflated their air beds. 'God, you must be a couple of pansies', cried out the great man. As my old Baedeker postulated: 'the style of travelling varies according to the traveller's means and his love of comfort.'

NOTES

1. *Description of Egypt: Notes and Views in Egypt and Nubia, etc.* by Edward William Lane. Edited with an introduction by Jason Thompson. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000. Pp.xxxii + 588, 160 illustrations. \$44.50 (cloth). ISBN 977-424-5253.
2. *Travellers in Egypt*. Edited by Paul Starkey and Janet Starkey. London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2001. Pp.xi + 318, bibliography, index. £14.95 (paper). ISBN 1-86064-674-3.
3. *The English Amongst the Persians: Imperial Lives in Nineteenth Century Iran* by Denis Wright. London: I.B. Tauris, 2001. Pp.xv + 218, bibliography, index, illustrations. £14.99 (paper). ISBN 1-86064-638-7.
4. *Bright Levant* by Laurence Grafftey-Smith. London: Stacey International, 2002. Pp.xiv + 295, index. £22.50 (cloth). ISBN 1-900988-429.
5. *Bygone Heat: Travels in the Middle East* by Richard Long. New York: Radcliffe Press, 2001. Pp.xviii + 238, bibliography, index, 16 plates. \$49.50 (cloth). ISBN 1-86064-593-3.
6. *The Body and the Blood: A Reporter's Journey through the Holy Land* by Charles Sennott. Oxford: Public Affairs Ltd, 2001. Pp.xxiv + 479. £18.99 (cloth). ISBN 1-903985-27-7.
7. *Under the Spell of Arabia: Photographs* by Mathias Oppersdorff. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001. Pp.xiv + 120, 107 plates. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8156-0700-8.