A Barren Legacy?

The Arabian Desert as Trope in English Travel Writing, Post-Thesiger

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis examines the anglophone literature of the recent expeditioners, scientists and travellers who have been inspired to write about their experience of the Arabian desert in the period since 1950. Many of these texts respond to the writing of earlier generations of travellers to the region, and especially to the key desert narratives of T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger. All the modern texts under scrutiny participate in a rich intertextuality that contributes to an imaginative landscape that exceeds the sum of its geographical parts. This in turn offers an opportunity, exploited in this study, to examine how modern travellers have been able to redefine the wilderness encounter in light of wider discourses concerning postcolonialism, globalisation and ecocriticism, or whether they continue to project primarily Western preoccupations onto the supposed *terra nullius* of 'Arabia'.

Texts contributing to the desert literature genre are identified and analysed through this study, including work by so-called 'footstep travellers' Charles Blackmore and Mark Evans; those drawn to the urban experience within the desert context, including James (now Jan) Morris and Tim Mackintosh-Smith; women desert travellers, such as Adrienne Brady and Marguerite van Geldermalsen, and a number of writers whose travels have taken place since 2010 and whose work helps to throw light on emerging theories such as the 'accelerated sublime' – a concept defined by sociologists Claudia Bell and John Lyall and adapted to literary criticism by Graham Huggan. Many of the texts are little-studied combinations of travel and memoir that have hitherto attracted little or no scholarly attention; by bringing them together with more prominent modern desert texts, this thesis aims to establish the existence of a subgenre of Arabian desert literature that both engages with the celebrated canon of literature connected with the region while providing new ways of reflecting on Arab modernity. This thesis contributes new scholarship, therefore, to the study of anglophone travel literature, as reflective of broader cultural discourses, and demonstrates the potential of that literature to contest divisive stereotypes of the Arabian 'other'.

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Writing this thesis has been rather like crossing a desert – an adventure in which I have had to confront apparently barren ground but in which seams of productive thought have bloomed unexpectedly in the wilderness. Provoking those thoughts have been the many friends, colleagues (especially Dr. Ahmed Al-Bulushi and Dr. Salim Radhawi) and fellow travellers I have met during two decades of living in Oman and who have generously allowed me to interview them in the context of my professional work in higher education and as a guidebook writer. Specifically, I would like to thank His Excellency Jamie Bowden, Sir Simon Bryant, Mark Evans, Anthony Ham, General Rupert Smith, General Charles Fattorini, Levison Wood, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, Tony Wheeler, Nigel Winser and Mohamed Al-Zadjali. The oral and written accounts of these distinguished Arabian desert travellers not only formed the primary inspiration in my wanting to consider the desert trope in modern travel literature but have also demonstrated that the genre is reinvigorated in each new generation.

I love the desert and I owe my deep respect of this provoking landscape to my father, the late D. H. Walker, who took my beloved mother and me, nets waving in the wind, across the interior of Saudi Arabia in the hunt for bugs. He went on to write a book on insects, illustrated by one of my three brothers, Allan Walker (a cherished mentor), and the memory of those field trips made an impression on me that has lasted a lifetime.

And so to beloved Sam, my husband, fellow traveller and joint author of an off-road guide to Oman. Quite simply, this project would not have been possible without his loving support and encouragement. I dedicate this thesis to him.

Introduction: Arabia, the Land of Legend

There is a point in Oman's Sharqiya Sands where the undulating rhythm of the dunes as they extend into the distance appear to be without human interruption. At a casual glance, it may appear as if nothing other than the name has altered in that landscape for centuries, or at least since geographer Nigel Winser and his team set up Taylorbase nearby from which to conduct a survey that still represents the most complete study of any desert anywhere in the world. But then on closer inspection, a series of tracks leading to left and right of the ergs comes into focus and along each of those tracks some kind of despoliation has occurred – a snapped branch of acacia, a dung beetle that was too slow in the path of oncoming traffic, and sadly the trail of litter that is an inevitable part of the local picnic culture. On further inspection, it becomes clear that other factors have transformed this view – a telephone mast and the glint of water in a swimming pool at one of the tourist camps that now dot the landscape. It is to these camps, in motorised convoys of a hundred cars, that tourists head, seeking in the surrounding dunes the kind of sublime wilderness that Winser describes so affectingly in his expedition narrative, *Sea of Sands and Mists*.[1]

To be clear, this is not to suggest that Winser's 1980s project led directly to the incursion of roads and the setting up of camps; rather, it facilitated the sense that once the sands were known and mapped, they were less alien and less hostile. In the project's wake, emboldened amateur naturalists followed in the footsteps of the scientists, and they were followed in turn by visitors whose desire to frame the same view with less energy and less risk has generated an entire desert tourist industry. This industry, of which guidebooks form a part, somewhat disingenuously offers the semblance of a wilderness experience without the attendant dangers, instructing the visitor how to access the dunes while supplying checklists on how to minimise their impact. I know this because I am complicit in this activity. Indeed, I have spent the best part of two decades not just travelling through the deserts of the region, but also promoting them as a tourist destination in my role as a professional guidebook writer and a contributor to the higher education sector in Oman.[2] It was through these activities that I recognised that I am part

[1] Nigel Winser, *The Sea of Sands and Mists - Desertification: Seeking Solutions in the Wahiba Sands* (London: RGS, 1989), p.137.

[2] I have been resident in Oman since 2000, working formerly as an Associate Dean (Caledonian College of Engineering), and currently as the Deputy CEO of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority. I am a member of the British Guild of Travel Writers and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and have authored and co-authored (as Jenny Walker) many books on the region, mostly for Lonely Planet Publications.

of a modern dilemma, wanting both to share and celebrate the desert wilderness while lamenting a despoliation for which I am partly responsible – in other words, romanticising the desert and those who occupy its settled fringe (some of whom stand to gain from increased tourism), while also contributing to the agencies of change therein.

This thesis, which examines mostly British travel writing connected with the deserts of Arabia since 1950, came about, then, through a desire to probe the ethical dimensions of my professional practice – as perhaps one of the 'planes of activity and praxis' advocated by Edward Said – and I looked to travel literature as a point of departure.[3] When Wilfred Thesiger wrote of his 1945-1950 desert expeditions with the Bedu, 'I went to Southern Arabia only just in time', he appeared to be signalling the end of an era, both in terms of exploration of the desert fastness and of the long literary engagement with the region.[4] But the fascination with the arid lands of the Middle East has continued regardless, ironically intensified by the challenge for authenticity that Thesiger's epitaph to Eastern travel represented.[5] The resulting expeditions, motivated by science, adventure or by tourism, have left a new legacy of what is referred to here as 'desert literature' and have contributed in their own way to the 'common grounds of assembly' accruing to the subject of Middle Eastern travel narratives.[6] Arabia, as the locus of exploration by a long tradition of British travellers that includes T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger, is 'haunted, holy ground', – a land greater than the sum of its geographical parts.[7] My main objective in this study has been to use desert literature connected with Arabia as a lens through which to examine whether Orientalism continues to be relevant to the perception of the Middle East today or whether its laboured binaries have been superseded by the emerging configurations of globalisation. This subject is specifically approached by analysing how modern travellers have engaged nostalgically with the Oriental legacy connected with the region and the extent to which their work either incidentally or consciously reinforces, contests or extends beyond Orientalism. While this study sets desert literature within *the scope of* Orientalism, however, it is not

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3 Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', in *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference, 1976-84* [1986], ed. by Francis Barker et al (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.210-29 (p.228).

4 Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.11.

5 This thesis refers to interviews with selected Arabian desert travellers gathered for a separate project entitled, 'Desert Conversations'. Interviewees, listed in the Appendix, include expeditioner Mark Evans, who crossed the Empty Quarter in 2016, travel writer Tim Mackintosh-Smith and geographer Nigel Winser, former RGS Deputy Director.

6 Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', p.228.

7 George Gordon Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* [1812], Canto II, LXXXVIII, line 1.

specifically a study *about* Orientalism, a subject which, as the focus of intense modern scholarship for over four decades, has left limited opportunity for new comment.[8] Instead, by considering why the Arabian desert should continue to exert a strong fascination for primarily Western writers and analysing the presentation of the desert and the human story therein, I consider desert literature as one strand of a dynamic and complex inter-cultural practice of representation and cultural self-reflection. In this way, these modern desert texts are released from being read only as a continuum of the now-familiar project of othering; instead they are interrogated to reveal more productive discourses, befitting of a postcolonial travel experience that, in anxieties about identity and representation, the effects of globalisation and the human impact on the environment, are essentially modern.

In an era when it is predicted that sixty-eight per cent of the Earth's population will live in cities by 2050, there is arguably a human need for wild spaces.[9] This need can be read, in ecocritical terms, as a 'deep nostalgia for a unity with the natural world that seems for ever lost'.[10] The desert fulfils an imaginative function in providing a locus of that connection with nature and many of the writings examined in this thesis revel in describing the desert in what appears to be unpoliticised, topographical detail. If, however, travel literature as a whole cannot be read naively as being, in Carl Thompson's words, 'just a transparent window on the world', then neither can desert literature.[11] This thesis additionally probes, therefore, how the Arabian desert remains other to the globalised reality of a digitally-connected world in modern travel literature. As such, by considering what modern desert literature has to say about national identities, and in particular Arab modernities, it contributes a contemporary perspective to discussions on the 'desert and the sown' – and crucially the one bordered within the other.

A word regarding the selection of texts may be useful here. Many of the texts chosen for discussion (for example, work by Charles Blackmore, Barbara Toy, Marguerite van Geldermalsen and Nigel Winser) are relatively obscure and can be considered as hybrid 'subspecies of memoir' that have hitherto attracted little or no

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[8] A.L. Macfie, ed., *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) has a useful anthology of twentieth-century scholarship in the field and Edward Said's place within it.

[9] United Nations, '68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, says UN' [online], United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018), available at https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html [accessed 12 July 2019].

[10] Karla Armbruster, 'Creating the world we must save: the paradox of television nature documentaries', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), pp.218-38 (p.228).

[11] Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.30.

scholarly attention;[12] the intention of drawing them into this work, alongside more prominent modern desert texts (for example, by Jan Morris, Geraldine Brooks and Tim-Mackintosh-Smith), is to establish the existence of a subgenre of modern Arabian desert literature that both engages with the canon of anglophone literature connected with the region while providing new ways of reflecting on cross-cultural representation. My primary sources, then, include texts written in the first-person that give an account of non-fictional desert encounter, whether they appear in works of science, cultural commentary or mainstream travel accounts.

The study is not intended as an exhaustive survey of modern desert literature but rather a discussion on the ways in which the selected texts participate in key critical discourses surrounding the much broader themes of travel and wilderness encounter. Some texts that represent a repetition of theme have been omitted: there are only passing references, for example, to the works of Ranulph Fiennes and Nicholas Clapp, whose desert explorations in Oman in search of the lost city of Ubar mirror much that is already covered here under the analysis of footstep journeys; this is not to underestimate the contribution these travel writers make to the genre and whose work may warrant a separate study. This discussion touches on contemporary travellers and their texts relating to other desert regions, including Geoffrey Moorhouse's Saharan odyssey, *The Fearful Void* (1974); Robyn Davidson's Australian desert classic, *Tracks* (1996); Sara Wheeler's Antarctic desert descriptions in *Terra Incognita* (1996), Jay Giffiths who writes a chapter on various deserts in *Wild* (2006), and Lois Pryce, who describes a motorbike incursion into the Iranian desert in a chapter of *Revolutionary Ride* (2017). The work of all these travellers to 'non-Arabian' deserts is referred to in this study either in contrast to the imaginative geography of the Arabian region or, conversely, to show that Arabian desert literature participates in broader, globalised discourses that touch on, for example, the distinction between traveller and tourist, and between male and female narrations of wild space.

Given the influence of Thesiger on almost all modern desert literature, the year 1950 makes an obvious opening parameter of this study as it marks the point at which Thesiger withdrew from the field, leaving it open to a new generation of expeditioners.[13]

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[12] See relevant chapter for bibliographic details. The term 'subspecies of memoir' is taken from Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.30, in relation to travel books in general.

[13] Although his acclaimed desert text, *Arabian Sands*, was not published until 1959, Thesiger left Arabia in 1950. See Wilfred Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice* [1987] (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1988) and Michael Asher, *Thesiger: A Biography* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1994).

While there has been a small but growing number of studies recently about the work of particularly male desert travellers who preceded Thesiger,[14] there has been very little systematic study of those who followed in his footsteps.[15] This study bridges that gap by considering the work of subsequent desert travellers up to 2016, the date of the last major crossing of an Arabian desert (by Mark Evans and his Omani co-expeditioners). There has been opportunity to give only passing reference to desert journeys since 2016, such as Levison Wood's circumperambulation of Arabia from 2017 to 2018. An extended trek entitled 'Her Faces of Change' across the Eastern fringe of the Omani Empty Quarter by three women (Baida Al-Zadjali, Atheer Al-Sabri and Janey McGill) in February 2019 is as yet undocumented in a full travel narrative. Texts are mostly considered chronologically within (but not across) chapters to show how each discourse develops from one generation of travellers to the next.

In a survey on British travel writing on Oman prior to 1970, Hilal Al-Hajri writes as his reason for choosing 1970 as the farthest limit of his own study:

> the inaccessible Inner Oman is quite open to foreigners, the 'unknown people' of the southern Oman have been 'discovered', and the dangerous Empty quarter has been 'penetrated'. Thus, the curiosity of exploration, the allusion of untrodden paths, the lure of the unknown, and the risk of adventure that imbued travel writing in the past began gradually to vanish after 1970. In short, travel to Oman after 1970 became a kind of tourism.[16]

Al-Hajri's stated enterprise focuses on a historical account that is part of a wider project to document overlooked aspects of regional history. His discussion ends with the succession of the current sultan, Qaboos bin Said, in 1970 – a point in Omani history generally referred to as the 'renaissance'. This term, akin to *al-nahda,* and sometimes translated as 'enlightenment', has been used in Arab anglophone literature to refer to the concept of 'Arab awakening' and, as Tarik Sabry and Joe Khalil show, spans a diverse lexicon of meanings from cultural productions originating in the nineteenth century and

[14] See, for example, Richard Trench, *Arabian Travellers* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Andrew Taylor, *Travelling the Sands: Sagas of Exploration in the Arabian Peninsula* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1997); Geoffrey Nash, *From Empire to Orient: Travellers to the Middle East 1830-1926* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), and James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* (London: I B Tauris, 2014). See chapter three for surveys of female travellers.

[15] Only one such work is cited here: Hilal Al-Hajri, *British Travel-Writing on Oman: Orientalism Reappraised* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2006). This helpful study focuses, however, on texts written prior to 1970 and relating only to Oman.

[16] Al-Hajri, *British Travel-Writing,* p.23.

a growing consciousness of Arab modernity in the twentieth century.[17] More recently it has come to define the period of intense modernisation and infrastructure development since the discovery of oil in Arabia. By broadening the scope of my own study beyond 1970, therefore, I am deliberately choosing to engage with Arab modernities, to examine the extent to which modern desert literature challenges the traditional tropes of the desert's supposed immutability and, by extension, unsettles the implied fixity of those who live in it. In so doing, it becomes possible to explore the fault lines between exploration, travel and tourism, problematised by rapid globalisation, which in turn sets these texts within a broader range of concerns common to all modern travel literature. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, applying the insights of various fields, including literary criticism, anthropology, feminism and eco-criticism, the study applies the perspectives of postcolonial theory, postmodernism and globalisation to make sense of the modern discourses in relation to the subject of desert literature and its wider context.

Thus far this introduction has stated the main objectives and outlined the broad scope of this study in terms of genre, time and approach but it has yet to address the 'geography' of the enterprise. While it may be easy to define 'desert' (generally regarded as an area receiving 'less than ten inches of precipitation annually'),[18] attempting to define '*Arabian* desert' is made challenging by both the 'imaginative geography and history' – in other words 'Orientalism' – that impinges upon it.[19] The next section of this introduction attempts therefore to provide some tangible geographical parameters and to sketch out a brief history of desert travel within those parameters. This anchoring exercise is engaged in at some length because without it, the examination of texts in the chapters that follow would be left in an abstract space; indeed, without the context of Orientalism, it is difficult to explain why modern travellers continue voluntarily to undertake journeys of deliberate hardship in the Arabian desert, spending time, money and energy in the process and for uncertain reward. The discussion turns first, therefore, to the region's geographical orientation, and then proceeds to map Arabia as a 'country of the mind' and as a place of desert exploration.

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[17] Tarik Sabry and Joe F. Khalil, *Culture, Time and Publics in the Arab World: Media, Public Space and Temporality* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2019), p.169.

[18] An area is technically 'classed as a desert if it receives less than ten inches of precipitation annually'; see Uwe George, *In the Deserts of this Earth* [1976], translated by R. and C. Winston (New York and London: First Harvest/HBJ, 1977), p.10. The international Aridity Index also measures the potential evapotranspiration (P/PET) in relation to precipitation by 'rain or fog or dew'; see William Atkins, *The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places* (New York: Doubleday, 2018), p.12.

[19] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin – Peregrine, 1978), p.55.

Locating Arabia

As a result of Orientalism, the representation of 'Arabia' may be somewhat fluid in terms of imagined and imaginative borders, but that does not mean the term lacks specificity entirely. According to Zara Freeth and Victor Winstone, the first Western geography of Arabia was produced in 1592 by the Medici Press in Italy and it covered a much broader territory than currently embraced by today's Arabian Peninsula.[20] A German map published by Christoph Weigel in 1720 shows Arabia as covering three distinct zones: Arabia Felix occupying the southwestern diagonal of the Peninsula, Arabia Deserta occupying the north-eastern diagonal, and Arabia Petraea, covering the Sinai and parts of the Syrian Desert. A similar demarcation is shown in the J. Rapkin map, published in London and New York by J. and F. Tallis in 1851.[21] Today, however, the term 'Arabia' is generally avoided locally in preference for 'Arabian Peninsula' which covers the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (founded in 1981) and Yemen, unified since 1990.

The 'Arabian Desert', which according to *McColl's Encyclopaedia of World Geography* is the fifth largest in the world, extends beyond the Peninsula to encompass parts of Jordan and Iraq.[22] In this it comes nearer to, in ecocritical terms, a 'bioregion', a common ecosystem 'that has its own distinctive natural economy'.[23] It comprises many specific arid zones including stony plains, volcanic *harrat* and the largest sea of sand in the world; shared by Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE and Qatar, these sands are known in the West as the Rub Al-Khali, or 'Empty Quarter'. Despite its Arabic translation, the name is a Eurocentric one, implying *terra nullius* – empty land. For Arab people, the area is known simply as *al-ramlah* (the sands) and is recognised as the home of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, generally referred to as 'the Bedu'. While Thesiger used the term 'Arab' interchangeably with 'Bedu' to refer to the nomadic 'camel-breeding tribes' of the Arabian desert, he was somewhat out of step with the evolution of the term; through the nationalistic movements of the early twentieth century, the term 'Arab' came to encompass 'anyone who speaks Arabic as [their] mother-tongue ... regardless of origin'.[24] In summary, this thesis uses the term 'Arabian Desert' in its physical geographical sense

[20] Freeth, Zara and Victor Winstone, *Explorers of Arabia: from the Renaissance to the Victorian Era* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p.295.

[21] I am indebted here to the Royal Geographical Society for access to rare maps of Arabia.

[22] R.W. McColl, ed., *Encyclopaedia of World Geography* (New York: Facts on File, 2005, 3 Vols.).

[23] Johnathan Bate, 'Poetry and biodiversity', in *Writing the Environment,* ed. by Kerridge and Sammell, pp.53-70 (p.54).

[24] Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p.12. The Bedu are not confined to the Empty Quarter but range across Arabia.

to allow discussion of desert travel that encompasses modern-day Jordan but excludes travels in Iraq which are made distinctive by an entirely different modern history. The term 'Arab' is used in its modern sense as denoting someone from the Arabian Peninsula but the diasporic dimensions, of 'Arab modernity' for example, are beyond the scope of this study. Taking the lead from Alan Keohane, the term 'Bedu' is used throughout as the term used by Arab nomads in their own language. It is used in its anglicised, plural form to avoid confusion. The term 'Bedouin', a Westernised term, is only used in citation and occasionally adjectivally where the use of Bedu would appear otherwise forced.[25]

While geographical specificity is important in giving a physical context to modern works of desert travel literature, it is inadequate when trying to describe the psychological impact of the term 'Arabia'. For this we have to turn to the 'Orient' and to chart in its delineation some of the features that act as waypoints in the study of Europe's 'cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other'.[26] This next part of this introduction, therefore, considers the location of 'Arabian Desert' in its amplified sense as part of 'a created body of theory and practice', and sets it in a very brief epistemological history of Western travel to the region.[27]

In a book entitled *Desert: Nature and Culture* which synthesises the responses of geographers, explorers, artists and anthropologists to wild, desolate places, Roslynn Haynes singles out the deserts of Arabia as the locus of a particularly rich seam of intellectual and imaginative literary involvement for Western writers:

> Long before Lawrence of Arabia captivated the West with romantic images of desert Bedouin, the Arabian Desert and its traditional inhabitants held a fascination for the Western mind, woven from stories of the Crusades, nineteenth-century travellers' tales of danger and disguise, and associations with harems and the holy places of Islam forbidden to infidels.[28]

In the above passage, Haynes identifies some of the key tropes of this literary engagement. There is the 'fascination for the Western mind' that translates into a quest for knowledge; there are the woven 'stories of the Crusades' which inform Orientalism's

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[25] Alan Keohane, *Bedouin Nomads of the Desert* [1994] (London: Kyle Books, 2011).

[26] Said, *Orientalism*, p.1. Despite the inherent vagueness of the term, the Orient usually comprised 'those countries, collectively, that begin with Islam on the Eastern Mediterranean and stretch through Asia'. Martha Pike Conant, *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), pp.xvi-xvii. Where Conant argues that the Orient generally excludes Palestine on the grounds that, as a zone of Christian pilgrimage, it registers less successfully as an imaginative 'Other', this thesis adopts the more common approach to the term that is inclusive of Palestine.

[27] Said, *Orientalism*, p.6.

[28] Roslynn D. Haynes, *Desert: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p.13.

blurring of fact and fiction; the 'tales of danger and disguise' that signal a relationship between the self and the landscape and the encoded encounter with 'the other' (through the harem and 'holy places of Islam'). This is the Orient that Said describes as being 'almost a European invention', the place which 'since antiquity' has been associated with 'romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences'.[29] Haynes, then, in highlighting these tropes is firmly positioning her own text within a tradition that spans more than three centuries.

It is hard to define the exact moment at which Arabia became embedded in the British imagination but it certainly dates back at least to the work of Joseph Pitts.[30] Pitts is widely accredited with writing one of the earliest substantiated accounts by an English traveller to the Arabian Peninsula (in 1704), and 'the first detailed account through Western eyes of the observances of Mecca'.[31] Whether his narrative lives up to its title as *A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammetans, with an Account of the Author's Being Taken Captive* has been the subject of enquiry by subsequent explorers and scholars of the region who have questioned his enforced conversion to Islam and some of his descriptions of captivity; but that is hardly the point.[32] Pitts's profession that 'I cannot pretend to abilities that are required in a person who writes such a history', whether a cynical attempt to disguise his mendacity or not, show how Western travellers have for centuries felt at liberty to write just such a history.[33] Towards the end of the eighteenth century, under the purview of that exercise, there was little that fell beyond a traveller's attention, partly encouraged in their endeavours by the apparatus of colonial administration at home. The instructions that the Society of the Dilettante, for example, issued to their Eastbound travellers reflects the empiricism of the era:

> You will be exact in making distances and the direction in which you travel, by frequently observing your watches and pocket compasses, … and you will … report to us for the information of the society whatever can fall within the notice of curious and observing travellers.[34]

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[29] Said, *Orientalism*, p.1.

[30] Pitts did not date his travels but Richard Burton postulated approximate dates. See Richard Burton, *Appendices to Pilgrimages to Al-Madinah and Meccah* [1855], ed. by Isabel Burton (London: Memorial Edition, 1893, 2 Vols.).

[31] Freeth and Winstone, *Explorers*, p.50.

[32] See Claire Norton, 'Lust, Greed, Torture and Identity: Narrations of Conversion and the Creation of the Early Modern "Renegade"', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East,* 29, no.2 (2009), 259-268, and Douglas Pratt et al, eds., *The Character of Christian-Muslim Encounter: Essays in Honour of David Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p.248.

[33] Freeth and Winstone, *Explorers*, p.60.

[34] Lionel Cust and Sidney Colvin, eds., *History of the Society of Dilettanti* (London: MacMillan, 1898), p.85.

In this exhortation to be observant, and to apply the instruments of Western measurement to the dimensions of the East (in a fashion that pre-empts the measuring of Bedouin heads by Bertram Thomas and his callipers in the twentieth century) it is clear that the mapping of the Orient had begun. Indeed, it was remarkable the kinds of things that fell within the notice of 'curious and observing travellers.' J.L. Burckhardt, one of the first Europeans to explore the Arabian Desert in earnest at the beginning of the nineteenth century, records the thirty-one tobacco shops in Jeddah, the eighteen dealers in fruit and vegetables, two men selling sour milk, and spice shops run by East Indians selling rosebuds from Taif (which scented the washing water of Jeddah wives) and notes that men drank three to thirty cups of coffee per day.[35] The recording of such minutiae several decades later, in the voluminous footnoting of Richard Burton's travels and those of subsequent Victorian travellers to Arabia, becomes almost obsessive in nature – as parodied by Thackeray in an article in *Punch* in February 1845, who allegedly 'pasted up the Standard of our glorious leader – at 19 minutes past 7, by the clock of the great minaret at Cairo, which is clearly visible through my refracting telescope'.[36] If partly validating the observations of these travellers, the recording of customs and manners in Arabia also contributed to the validation of a received representation of the region; in this it can be seen as part of the growing resource – the 'considerable material investment' – that Said argues helped to prop up the imperial project in the region.[37]

While much information gathering took place in the cities, however, the deserts of the region remained largely unexplored. Helen Carr reminds us that the trains and steamships of the 1840s facilitated longer-distance travel for a wider franchise of travellers, helped upon their way by Karl Baedeker's guidebooks,[38] and that Thomas Cook's first tour of the Continent took place in 1855, the same year that the first edition of Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* appeared in print, but the desert heartland of Arabia remained the locus of specialist travel reserved for diplomats and explorers for most of the nineteenth century.[39] Even later in

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35 John Lewis Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys, Collected During his Travels in the East* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831, 2 Vols.); quoted in Brent, *Far Arabia*, p.75.

36 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Contributions to 'Punch', Etc.* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1903), p.86.

37 Said, *Orientalism*, p.6.

38 Helen Carr, 'Modernism and Travel (1880-1940)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs [2002] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.70-86 (p.70).

39 See historical timeline in Hulme and Youngs, *Cambridge Companion*, p.292.

the century, when, as Carl Thompson notes, 'it was possible to travel by train all the way from Paris to Istanbul, in modern-day Turkey, on the famous *Orient Express*', few casual travellers ventured beyond the Ottoman Empire or strayed from the beaten track along the Nile.[40] Various modern anthologies and biographies, including Andrew Goudie's recent Royal Geographical Society publication, *Great Desert Explorers*, chart the occasional intrepid exploration that probes the Arabian desert fastness at this time, but by and large Arabia proper, despite (or some suggest because of) being the home of the two holy cities of Islam, lay largely beyond the purview of Western travel interests.[41]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there begins to be more interest in exploring the region. Gifford Palgrave, Wilfrid Scawen and Lady Ann Blunt and Charles M. Doughty were all drawn to the Arabian Desert, albeit for very different reasons. In a study that considers the contribution of these writers to Orientalism, Kathryn Tidrick identifies the desire of each to find in the East something that eludes them at home. Palgrave was highly religious and a Jesuit priest but plagued with doubts, Wilfrid Blunt was a minor aristocrat early orphaned and left without estate, and Doughty was a misfit. Tidrick relates their white, upper middle class, public school experience to the desire to purge the 'sins of their fathers' in a sacrificial, hard, loveless environment and the desert presented a good backdrop for this. All these travellers found Arabia fulfilling because of 'the oddness of their own personalities; for various reasons, all of them were ill at ease in Victorian and post-Victorian England'.[42] Ill at ease with the reality, perhaps, they remained consistent to the presentation of Englishness in their texts, a fixed English identity that Robert Young argues was 'doubtless a product of, and reaction to, the rapid change and transformation of both metropolitan and colonial societies'.[43] Reading (through Young) fixity of identity as evidence of a culture in flux, these travellers become marginal or 'hybrid' figures that occupy the space between two cultures while belonging fully in neither. While the reading public may have enjoyed tales of derring-do with the Bedu encountered by these travellers, and the exotic otherness of the Orient, few would have welcomed the reality. As Young writes, 'Exotic romance is one thing. But its dusky human consequences are another' (p.xi). In the Victorian era, few believed that the Orient offered a workable alternative to Western culture, and the narratives of these *fin-de-siècle*

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[40] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.54.

[41] Andrew Goudie, *Great Desert Explorers* (London: Royal Geographical Society with IGB, 2016).

[42] Albert Hourani, 'Preface' in Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* [1990] (London: Tauris Parke, 2010), p.xiv.

[43] Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.3-4.

travellers shows the extent to which all kinds of subversive fears and desires could be legitimised by externalising them to an alien landscape and thus rendered harmless. In this the desert texts of these writers conformed to the Orient's function, therefore, to maintain the status quo – not to change it.

In the early twentieth century, desert travel in Arabia became more strategic and mapping the space, both literally and politically, took on particular urgency during the first world war. Travellers until at least the middle of the twentieth century continued to assume a superior moral and intellectual centre peripheral to which were arrayed an assortment of inferior cultures. What changes, perhaps, is the degree to which their accounts interfere with the lives of those they observe. The information they place in the hands of politicians, diplomats and generals in the first half of the century, for example, demonstrates the power of racial stereotyping in influencing the course of history in the region.[44] The works of T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell are not objective observers and explorers of Arab lands and their inhabitants: they are part of a general license to meddle and their work marks a shift in the desert travel writing genre from picaresque to political that prevails throughout the early twentieth century.[45] After the first world war, travel narratives become motivated less by politics than by geography; undertaken ostensibly in the interests of the emerging discipline of anthropology, journeys to the Arabian Desert became an opportunity to test new theories regarding primitivism and racial stereotyping.[46] It was also an opportunity to engage in intense competitive endeavour, demonstrated in the rivalry between Bertram Thomas and St. John Philby, for example, to be the first to cross the Empty Quarter. The quest for 'firsts' becomes the race for 'lasts' in the travels of Freya Stark, and more especially Wilfred Thesiger who many regard as bringing the era of desert exploration to a close.

After this point, many critics dismiss subsequent desert journeys, where they receive attention at all, as the journeys of commercial expeditioners and tourists. 'Some of the great desert explorers are now very little remembered or appreciated', writes

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[44] See Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies* [2006] (London: Penguin, 2007), p.217. Irwin's defence of Orientalist scholarship concedes a link between Oriental scholarship and politics and traces elements of racial stereotyping (p.184), although he does not explicitly make the link between all three.

[45] See Billie Melman, 'The Middle East/Arabia: "the cradle of Islam"', in *Cambridge Companion,* ed. by Hulme and Youngs, pp.112-119. Melman writes that engagement with Arabia at this time 'took on institutional form; with the exception of the Blunts, all the major explorers of the peninsula were affiliated to British political and military agencies' (p.113).

[46] Peter Whitfield, 'Post-War English Travel Writing', *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012).

Andrew Goudie, 'in comparison, say, with those who ventured to the poles, climbed Everest, or sought the source of the Nile', despite the comparability of the challenge.[47] Searching for a reason for this, Billie Melman notes that Arabia's 'geography and climate have made its hinterland almost inaccessible to non-mechanised travel' leaving Arabia 'peripheral from both touristic and imperial viewpoints'.[48] Between 1950 and 2000, at the point when an increase in jet travel and oil production in the Gulf region, together with regional political determination to promote tourism as a means of diversifying local economies may have encouraged more comprehensive travel across Arabia, interest was deflected from the desert at its core to the cities of the peninsula's urban edge. As a result, the desert or 'the *locus idealis* of the Arabist utopia', has become peripheral in many recent travel narratives as writers such as Jonathan Raban and Tim Mackintosh-Smith moved their attention towards the new cityscapes.[49]

So why, it may be wondered, do modern travellers continue to organise expeditions into the Arabian Desert fastness; what is the continuing appeal? Mark Evans, who in 2016 completed the first crossing of the Empty Quarter since Bertram Thomas's landmark journey of 1930, recorded in *Arabia Felix* (1932), observed that the sands have never been more empty, never been more wild, as the Bedu by and large have migrated to towns and the hermetically-sealed camps of oil companies move on when wells run dry:

> Some 85 years after Thomas's crossing, the Empty Quarter is today emptier than it has ever been. The tribes that once occupied the central sands have long since migrated to the periphery, where blacktop roads and electricity offered an easier life, with employment opportunities, the option of keeping a toehold on the edge of the sands, and a connection to their animals and their heritage.[50]

This surprising observation by Evans reminds us that while all deserts are by their nature wild, some are more accessible than others. Part of the Arabian desert's unique appeal has involved the sense of remoteness that the region's isolation has implied. Human incursion (through scientific study, resource exploitation, urbanisation, modern tourism and travel) appears to dent that perception of wilderness to some extent, while in reality

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[47] As Andrew Goudie points out in his preface, there are 'many books on exploration but remarkably few' on desert exploration, *Great Desert Explorers*, p.xi.

[48] Melman, 'Middle East/Arabia', p.112.

[49] Melman, 'Middle East/Arabia', p.118.

[50] Mark Evans, *Crossing the Empty Quarter in the Footsteps of Bertram Thomas* (UK: Gilgamesh Publishing, 2016), p.31.

making relatively little mark on the expanding desertification – what geographer Uwe George terms the 'apparently inevitable spread of deserts' – across the region.[51]

At the same time as the Arabian Desert has attracted relatively few travellers, then, it has nonetheless been the site of disproportionately more imaginative speculation. If, as F.A. Patrick wrote in 1927 in an early appreciation of travel literature, travel writing 'more than any other both expresses and influences national predilections and national characteristics,' the Arabian Desert has similarly proved sufficiently unknown and sufficiently unpopulated to work as a perfect *tabula rasa* upon which to play out three centuries-worth of primarily Western preoccupations.[52] These preoccupations may have evolved or dissipated over time, but some remain constant, including the quest for knowledge, pitting self against nature in an extreme landscape, the sense of encounter with 'the other', the desire for escape (albeit briefly) from urban sophistications, achieved vicariously through the lives of the 'authentic' Bedu. The Arabian desert functions, in other words as a 'country of the mind more real than any place on a map', and continues to draw those whose journeys are 'undertaken in search of themselves'.[53] Constructing that country, as Said famously pointed out, has been the project of Orientalism and the discussion pauses here to consider briefly the recent study of Orientalism – a subject that continues implicitly to motivate much desert travel, through both its latent and manifest tropes, and to play a significant role in shaping the contours of the resulting desert literature.

Studying Arabia as a country of the mind

While not necessarily explicitly aware of Orientalism as an academic concept, most modern Arabian desert travellers deliberately reference the East and its attendant discourses, either overtly – as in treading the path of a former desert explorer and using a former text as a pretext for a modern journey – or in more subtle, self-authenticating ways that show the writer is part of a continuum of Arabian encounter. In this way, some (but not all and not all of the time) belong to the imaginative category of Orientalism postulated by Said characterised by those who 'have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social

[51] George, *Deserts of this Earth*, p.285.
[52] F. Patrick, *Cambridge History of English Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1927), pp.2-3.
[53] Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby*, p.37. See also Gillian Tindall, *Countries of the Mind: The Meaning of Place to Writers* (Boston: Northeastern, 1991).

descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on'.[54] The familiar tropes arising out of the East-West binary are easy enough to detect in modern desert travel literature: there is the portrayal of the Bedu as offering glimpses of a prelapsarian past; the notion of the desert (and indeed Arabia as a whole) as being a feminine gendered space upon which to launch penetrative, pioneering assaults; fascination with the exotic (generally sought in the *souqs* or bazaars along the desert's edge), the sense of the sublime (with the desert representing ruins of empire on the one hand, and the location of British imperial quest on the other); all offer a contrast with the comforts and emasculations of life back home. But the identification of these tropes in modern desert literature is not necessarily to condemn the genre as a wholesale reproduction, or manifestation, of an outmoded discourse. In recognising that some modern writers – but not all and not all the time – continue to be seduced by Oriental stereotypes, this study aligns with modern critics who look to Edward Said for a useful vocabulary of East-West representation while remaining alert to many of the criticisms levelled at Said's project in *Orientalism*.

Influenced by Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida, and the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, Said's *Orientalism* is generally considered to be ground-breaking in the way in which it popularised theories of perception and representation, and the way in which it contributed to the emergence of the newly-configured discipline of postcolonialism.[55] The central tenet of *Orientalism*, that the standard tropes concerning the depiction of the East and its inhabitants are a primarily Western construct, struck a chord with many of Said's advocates who attempted to further his work through practical application to literature. Rana Kabbani, for example, argued in *Imperial Fictions* that the Orient was constructed partly through Western fiction and she convincingly traced tropes such as the 'indolent, superstitious, sensually over-indulgent and religiously fanatical' Oriental in Edward Lane's nineteenth-century translation of the *The Arabian Nights.*[56] This, Kabbani argues, is part of Orientalism's reproductive or (to use Said's term) 'latent' energy – the stereotypes reappear consistently over time, apparently unchallenged by the observations of travellers and scholars.[57]

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[54] Said, *Orientalism*, pp.2-3.

[55] John McLeod notes that Said's *Orientalism* 'is considered to be one of the most influential books of the late twentieth century': John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* [2000] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.24. See also John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

[56] Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1994), p.39.

[57] Edward William Lane, *An Account of the manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: C. Knight, 1836). As Kabbani points out, this influential book, together with Lane's translation of *The*

Advocates notwithstanding, four decades after *Orientalism* was published, Said's ideas continue to be the subject of controversy. The main criticisms were articulated at the end of the last century and centred on his ahistorical or polemical approach in which selective reading from related literature is made to fit an overall thesis. This, critics such as Bernard Lewis and Dennis Porter argue, conflates Classical scholarship with modern scholarship and illogically ignores the specificities of time and geography.[58] Then there is Said's 'monolithic', or 'homogenising' approach,[59] wherein he suggests that 'every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric', regardless of the evidence to the contrary – a problem that many felt to be patently unfair on those who demonstrated a deep immersion in their subject, and in instances where cultural self-criticism is apparent.[60] Furthermore Said's work is considered polarising in the way it relies on binaries that leave little room for those who are marginalised by the discourse.[61] Marxist scholars Aijaz Ahmed and Robert Young argued, for example, that there is a long history of political resistance that is overlooked by Said's project of othering while Sara Mills has shown how 'colonial discourse theory and post-colonial theory have troubled Edward Said's homogenising views of colonial texts'.[62] Those who advocate for a more heterogenous approach (such as Lisa Lowe and Mary Louise Pratt) note that there may be multiple strands of argument even within a single text, some that appear to support the thesis of Orientalism, and some that destabilise the notional tropes.[63] While all these criticisms have merit, this is not to deny that Said's work, together with that of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (affectionately termed the 'Holy Trinity' by Robert Young), has helped to establish a new and practical way of studying other cultures. 'Too often', wrote Said, 'literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent', a

Thousand and One Nights (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883) helped fuel general misconceptions about the East. See also Leila Ahmed, *Edward W. Lane: A Study of his Life and Works and of British Ideas of the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1978).

58 Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Dennis Porter, 'Orientalism and its Problems', in *Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp.150-161.

59 F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iverson and D. Loxley, eds., *Literature, Politics and Theory* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp.210-29.

60 Said, *Orientalism*, p.204.

61 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

62 Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.129; see also Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), and Young, *Colonial Desire*.

63 Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.29; see also Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* [1992] (London: Routledge, 2008).

criticism that could be levelled at the humanist approach to studying Orientalist texts in the 1970s and 1980s.[64] Now, it is arguably impossible to consider literature in relation to the East without reference to whether the representations being made are fair and this is surely to be welcomed.

Of importance to the current study from the above brief theoretical survey is the way in which the twin discourses of Orientalism and postcolonialism are valuable in 'decolonising the mind'.[65] In looking at the work of those who have travelled to the Arabian Desert since 1950, this thesis shows that British desert travel literature referencing Arabia is not a homogenising project in which all texts line up in defence of Said's presentation of Orientalism, nor are they all coerced into a wholly antithetical approach. In common with the tendency in critical studies today, the approach taken to the literature analysed herein respects a whole range of motivations, backgrounds, gender and other specificities based on time and encounter while remaining vigilant towards 'latent Orientalism'.[66] The old Orient continues to exert an influence on the way in which writers perceive the modern Middle East and this is often at odds with the pioneering and modernising projects of the specific cultures being encountered. It is this tension that creates the interesting dynamics in the modern desert literature under review in this study; as such the subgenre of modern Arabian desert literature, however small and largely unobserved by current criticism, plays its part not just in reflecting but in shaping the 'nature of perception' that is central to Orientalism's highly-charged aftermath.

In order to show the way in which modern desert texts belong to, rather than are entirely defined by a heritage that is Oriental in nature, it is helpful to consider one or two key antecedents and this introduction now turns to the work of T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger as two of the most often cited travellers in modern desert literature. Lawrence's Arabian travels, between 1916 to 1918, were as part of the imperial administration of the region and British ambitions during the Great War, while Thesiger's Arabian desert journeys (from 1945 to 1950) were initially launched as part of a locust-eradication project and latterly motivated by a fascination with the lives of the Bedu. Obviously the lives and work of both Lawrence and Thesiger have been extensively analysed elsewhere, so this discussion focuses only on their broad legacy as drawn upon by subsequent desert

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64 Said, *Orientalism*, p.27.

65 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986).

66 Said, *Orientalism*, p.206.

travellers.[67] It is possible to read the work of both Lawrence and Thesiger as entirely within the Oriental paradigm but they both show many points of sympathy with their subject that unseat the homogenising assumptions of Orientalism. The cultural ambivalence within their work is one of the reasons, perhaps, they continue to exert an influence on today's desert travellers, striking a chord with the equivocation that underpins the modern quest for authenticity and the heroic endeavour, and the realisation that cultural appropriation is not the place to find it. The narratives of Lawrence and Thesiger are not the only texts to be referenced by modern travellers – Bertram Thomas's achievement is the motivation for Mark Evans's recent journey across the Empty Quarter, for example – but theirs are the most often quoted; indeed, they are often bracketed together (not altogether helpfully, given their radically different purpose and approach) as the last of a kind.

The Lawrence and Thesiger legacy

In glossing the life of Thesiger in *Atlantis of the Sands* (1992), former soldier and desert expeditioner Ranulph Fiennes writes: 'at Oxford [Thesiger] read *Arabia Felix* by Bertram Thomas and *Revolt in the Desert* by T.E. Lawrence. He began to dream of the Empty Quarter'.[68] Within this biographical fragment the entire imaginative geography of Arabia with its totemic deserts is telescoped, providing a lens within a lens for the way in which the reader should approach Fiennes's own work. Nearly all modern desert travel writers employ a similar device, or shorthand, for summoning up the old Orient. Indeed, nearly thirty years after Fiennes's search for the lost city of Ubar in the deserts of Oman, Levison Wood (another ex-military traveller) writes of his own desert journey in *Arabia* (2018): 'I was cheered by the fact that plenty of explorers had been to the region and left a great raft of literature on the subject', and he goes on to refer to Ibn Battuta, Richard Burton, Gertrude Bell, T.E. Lawrence, Freya Stark and Wilfred Thesiger, among others'.[69] The problem with shorthand is it can be read differently from the way intended by the writer. If today's travellers see in Lawrence a soldier and a man of action, and in Thesiger a man

[67] See Lawrence's authorised biographer, Jeremy Wilson, *T.E. Lawrence Studies* [online], available at http://www.telstudies.org/ [accessed 12 July 2019] for an overview of studies on Lawrence; see also Asher, *Thesiger: A Biography*.

[68] Ranulph Fiennes, *Atlantis of the Sands: The Search for the Lost City of Ubar* [1992] (London: Signet, 1993), p.21. See also Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Abingdon, Routledge, 1994).

[69] See Levison Wood, *Arabia: A Journey Through the Heart of the Middle East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2018), p.35.

heroically wandering in an immutable wilderness, others see men of breath-taking arrogance writing at the height of British imperialism.

In the epilogue to his opus magnus, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* Lawrence writes that he had dreamed 'at the City School in Oxford, of hustling into form, while I lived, the new Asia' and throughout his account of the Arab Revolt he casts himself as a leader and a crusader: 'I meant to make a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundation on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts'.[70] Anthony Nutting appears to be the first to identify the Lawrence of *Seven Pillars* with a divinity complex and points out that war, sacrifice and the spirit of crusade, all part of the Christian myth, are similarly part of the book and the literal pilgrimage away from Islam's Mecca.[71] This reading is continued by Simpson and Knightley who comment that Lawrence 'saw himself as one of England's crusaders, not only in the physical sense but in the metaphysical as well – strong, just, and chaste'.[72] Certainly in *Seven Pillars* Lawrence presents himself as a preacher (p.603), a prophet (p.366) and ultimately a martyr (p.452); in the infamous Dera'a incident, in which an infidel soldier pulls up a fold of 'the flesh' over Lawrence's ribs and punctures it with his bayonet – 'the blood wavered down my side'– has overtones of the crucifixion. Phrasing such as 'offered up my own life', and, of the Arabs after the war, 'I was glad they felt grown up enough to reject me' (p.681), not only establish Lawrence as a messiah figure, who is both persecuted and rejected, but they suggest that without Lawrence the birth of the 'New East' would not have been possible – a view so obviously Eurocentric in its perspective that it has been contested by many since.[73] In the Foreword to *Seven Pillars,* Lawrence may write that it is his intention to show 'how natural the success was and how inevitable, how little dependent … on the outside assistance of the few British' (p.21), but this intention contrasts with his self-presentation throughout the text. As 'imperial agent' of the West, furthermore, the implications of a Christian Occidentalist bringing salvation to the Islamic Orient help replay contentious representations of conquest and

[70] T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* [privately printed 1926, published 1935] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp.412-13.

[71] Anthony Nutting, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Man and the Motive* (London: Clarkson N Potter, 1961), p.243.

[72] P. Knightley and C. Simpson, 'The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia', *The Sunday Times* (9 June 1968, Col 1), p.50.

[73] Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby*, pp.172-74 cites Richard Aldington (1955) and Suleiman Mousa (1966) as attempting to establish the truth of Lawrence's contribution to the Arab Revolt (see Bibliography).

cultural interaction that Said suggests have characterised relations between West and East for centuries.[74]

While the above is one reading of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars,* it is not the only reading, however, and critics since Said have sought to salvage Lawrence's reputation (and with it redeem the heterogeneity of Western Oriental scholarship). Dennis Porter, for example, in a famous riposte to *Orientalism,* interrogates the moments in the text where Lawrence appears to be troubled by, or at least show ambivalence towards the imperial project of which he is part. To be clear, Porter of course accepts that *Seven Pillars* is likely to disgruntle 'those whose sensibilities have been heightened to racial doctrines by twentieth-century history' and understands the offence caused by 'the myth that a white European male in a position of leadership is an essential ingredient' to the success of nationalist ambitions. He also recognises that *Seven Pillars* is 'apparently written from a position of privilege and authority – the privilege of race, class and gender – within the Western hegemonic world order.' Porter goes on, however, to find moments within the text (such as the introduction) that unsettle the status quo and, together with the Orientalist discourse as a whole, allow 'counter-hegemonic voices to be heard':[75]

> The complexity of the narrator's persona, his aspirations and self-doubt, his sense of estrangement from his own culture, the sympathy for and distance from the Arab culture he shared for roughly two years, are part of the story Lawrence tells. (p.157)

These ambivalences, Porter suggests, contribute to Lawrence's status as a legend, turned into such by the contemporary press, the American journalist Lydell Hart, and latterly by David Lean's Academy Award-winning film, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).[76] Lawrence himself, however, was uneasy about his status, admitting to a 'craving to be famous; and a horror of being known to like being known' (p.580);[77] perhaps more convincingly, as Geoffrey Nash writes, 'he both enjoyed and affected to disdain the "Lawrence myth"'.[78]

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[74] Said, *Orientalism,* p.241 and p.58.

[75] For the way in which Said's *Orientalism* gives 'insufficient account of resistance or contradiction within imperial culture itself' see Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory* (London: Verso, 1997), p.50.

[76] Lydell Hart, quoted in Wilson Knight, *Neglected Powers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p.315 and p.349. See also Steven C. Caton, *'Lawrence of Arabia': A Film's Anthropology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999).

[77] For a reassessment of Lawrence's legacy, see Harold Orlans, *T.E. Lawrence: Biography of a Broken Hero* (London: McFarland, 2002).

[78] Geoffrey Nash, ed., *Travellers to the Middle East from Burckhardt to Thesiger: An Anthology* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2011), p.199.

Either way, the comment demonstrates the difficulty in representing a consistent image of self within the text, let alone Orientalism or indeed the Orient itself.

Porter ends his evaluation of Lawrence by asserting that, in *Seven Pillars*, 'the desert Arab becomes in part an expression of the age-old nostalgia for the supposed lost wholeness of the primitive world, a modern noble savage, who is different not only from the half-Europeanised and decadent Turk but also from city Arabs' (p.159). Porter identifies now familiar binaries between primitive and civilised, desert and sown that create sympathy towards rather than division from the East. Despite Lawrence's ability to turn a self-critical eye on British culture and its essentialist notions of progress, his legacy is nonetheless a problematic one. Indeed the Lawrence legend, together with the Orientalist frame-tale that it evokes, is recognised among more erudite modern desert travellers as something of a poison chalice. When asked, for example, whether he was an 'Orientalist', Tim Mackintosh-Smith (in his travel narrative in the footsteps of Ibn Battuta) writes that he 'winced inwardly', recognising through parody that the word had 'undertones, dark ones; an Orientalist went around in native dress, carried a pocket theodolite and worked for the ultimate and total dominance of the West'.[79] The imbrications of the Oriental legacy, overlapping the heroic with the self-deprecating, the scholarly with the experiential, are not lost on Mackintosh-Smith who manipulates the fractures within Orientalism throughout his *Travels with a Tangerine* with postmodern bravura.

Rightly or wrongly, modern desert travellers find in Thesiger a less contentious figure. Thesiger's project in *Arabian Sands,* the Arabian travelogue by which all modern travel narratives tend to be measured, appears anodyne enough. Unlike *Seven Pillars*, Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* does not set out to capture any great acts of heroism, other than the indomitability of the human spirit in lives lived at the edge of physical endurance. Instead, it entails a description of 10,000 miles of journeying by camel and on foot across the Peninsula, beginning with an explanation of how Thesiger came to love wild places from his early life in Abyssinia and Sudan. The book's greatest merit (Thesiger claimed to be an explorer first and a writer second) is in capturing a way of life through minutely detailed descriptions of Bedu tribes and their customs and manners that Thesiger believed would not long survive into the latter half of the twentieth century and the desert incursion of oil companies. His regret regarding this monumental change of a centuries-old culture

[79] Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Travels with a Tangerine* [2001] (New York: Random House, 2004), p.118.

is one of the key notes of the text and the original preface is one of the most famous and poignant pieces of nostalgia for a pre-automotive world in travel literature. Or at least, it is a reflection of Thesiger's own inability to be reconciled with modernity which he later came to accept was no such impediment for the Bedu.

On closer scrutiny, embracing the Thesiger legend can be as problematic as referencing Lawrence. Like Bertram Thomas a decade or two earlier, 'Umbarak' (Thesiger's Bedu name), had a mission – to chart for the Western world the unknown interior of the Arabian sands. More crucially, he also had a job – as part of the locust control mission, trying to identify outbreaks of locust infestation in what we now call Oman. The fact that he had a reason to be there, gives his writing an immediate authority. He applies this authority in *Arabian Sands,* continuing the Orientalist assessment of the desert and the sown by levelling sharp criticism at what he describes as the 'gutter Arabs' of towns. In contrast he is highly respectful of the Bedu, whom he describes as a people under terminal threat from modernity and his account of their lives functions, in Thesiger's own estimation, as a 'memorial to a vanished past, a tribute to a once magnificent people'.[80] With a sense of the cultural superiority of the British, expected of someone writing before the end of empire, he describes the Bedu as childlike in their naivety and immutable in their collective character, a point that his own biographer, Michael Asher, sets out to dispute.[81] This concept, the 'fallacy' in the words of Tim Youngs 'that so-called traditional societies never change,' is one of the most enduring myths associated with the Arabian Desert.[82]

It is within this gloss that many travellers have tried to retrace Thesiger's footsteps and recreate his experience. In so doing they are neither successful in being authentic to the journeys he engaged in (because times have changed and most importantly the purpose is gone), nor are they able to engage in an authentic 'modern' experience with today's desert inhabitants as they are too consumed with tracing a lost past in the Bedu's modern practices. The embrace of the Thesiger perspective contributes to a sense of belatedness that even those who go in search of a vanished past recognise as being misplaced: 'it is irresponsible to suggest', writes Bruce Kirkby, 'that a remote culture should remain in the past, denied modern advances, only to present a sideshow for Western travellers', but at the same time he finds he cannot help himself lamenting the

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80 Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* p.9.

81 Michael Asher, *The Last of the Bedu: In Search of the Myth* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1996).

82 Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.127-28.

'spread of a generic world culture, a shocking loss of diversity, a growing sameness'.[83] The relationship between present and former travellers is problematised through passages such as this which bring to crisis, through the disconnect between expectation, experience and presentation, the inherited tropes of an Orientalist past and the postcolonial and global sensibilities of the present. Put more simply, Kirkby, in comparing himself with Thesiger 'feels bad for feeling sad' but spreads the cloak of Orientalism over the deserts of the Middle East regardless and this, he recognises, has real-world implications. Those implications are revealed through closer reading of the relationship between one generation of desert texts and the next, and a study of this 'intertextuality' informs the discussion of chapter one of this thesis.

Mapping the thesis: an outline of the chapters

When Wilfred Thesiger left Arabia in 1950 and published *Arabian Sands* in 1959 stating that other travellers 'will bring back results far more interesting than mine, but they will never know the spirit of the land nor the greatness of the Arabs',[84] he appeared to be suggesting the end of an era both in terms of an Arab way of life and of the exploration of the desert region he described. Despite Thesiger's a statement, however, many have continued to travel through the deserts of Arabia and to find the experience sufficiently rewarding to document in published accounts; in so doing they continue to participate in a tradition within anglophone literature, the origins of which stem back at least to the eighteenth century. This thesis examines the anglophone literature of the expeditioners, scientists and travellers who have been inspired to write about their experience of the Arabian desert in the period since 1950. The continuing fascination of writers with this specific region prompts the following research questions that underpin this thesis.

Firstly, my research explores the reasons modern travellers (that is, those travelling since 1950) continue to be motivated to engage with a region that has been so comprehensively covered in earlier accounts. Many of the texts under scrutiny in this study respond to the writing of earlier generations of travellers to the region, and especially to the key desert narratives of T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger. The thesis considers how this rich intertextuality informs the way in which modern writers construct their own travelling persona, either through the lens of nostalgia for presumed heroic

[83] Bruce Kirkby, *Sand Dance: By Camel Across Arabia's Great Southern Desert* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000), p.219.
[84] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.11.

endeavour, or in deliberate and ironic opposition to the same. These constructions of self are shown to differ from the narratives of their travelling forebears in the levels of self-doubt and anxiety of purpose that frequently foreground their accounts. The reasons for this apparent loss of confidence in the travelling project are examined in terms of larger discourses pertinent to travel as a whole in an age of greater mobility and wilderness accessibility.

Secondly, the thesis examines the nature of the Arab context that modern anglophone writers project through accounts of their travels in the region. Given the literary legacy, modern writers, whether consciously or not, connect with a region that through imaginative encounter exceeds the sum of its geographical parts – the process, in other words, of 'imagined geography'.[85] This study considers to what extent modern writers are able to escape the inherited tropes (described by Edward Said as 'latent Orientalism') to provide a more appropriate and nuanced view of the modern Middle East in an era of postcolonial sensibility.[86] While presentations of the Other are an intrinsic feature of the travel writing genre as a whole, this study considers how a new awareness of the perplexities and politics involved in arriving at an equitable description of cultural encounter in the region features as a more overt part of the desert narratives under scrutiny.

Thirdly, if revealing about both self and other, the texts of modern desert-going writers also provide commentary about the land left behind. While this form of cultural introspection and/or of comparison has been a consistent feature of the genre, writers since Thesiger include a greater sense of nostalgia in their work while also expressing increasing doubt about the relative merits of their own culture in contrast. Fractures within the presumed cultural hierarchy form a prominent feature of modern desert writing, replacing the former confidence of many earlier writers who were informed by the cultural arrogance of their times. This research examines, then, not just if and how modern narratives about encounter with the desert help define values that are presumed lost or under threat in the home environment, but also whether this encounter is presented as an opportunity for instruction and improvement. In so doing, the study identifies, in this era

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[85] Carl Thompson, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Carl Thompson, [2016] (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), p.xviii. Carl Thompson describes 'imagined geographies' as the relationship between travel writing and the various constructs 'which exist for us through a complex interaction of personal experience…and a tangled web of culturally-mediated prior associations, expectations and images', all of which influence the way in which a geographical region is approached.

[86] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin – Peregrine, 1978), p.206.

of the Anthropocene, a partial nostalgia but also a growing respect for wilderness in contrast with the effects of globalisation and urbanisation.

In responding to the three research areas above, this thesis determines whether writing focusing on the Arabian desert, which arguably reached its apotheosis in the work of Thesiger, offers only a barren legacy for belated Western writers, beguiled by a long history of imaginative engagement in the region. Alternatively, the thesis argues, new desert writing opens up an opportunity to examine, albeit in microcosm, many of today's critical issues relating to appropriate cultural interaction, responsible and sustainable travel and the protection of unique environments.

Each of the four main chapters of the thesis addresses the three research questions outlined above, as described in more detail in the remaining part of this section. In tracing the concept of intertextuality through an anglophone history, Graham Allen writes that 'contemporary literature seems concerned with echoing and playing with previous stories, classic texts and long-established genres such as the romance and the detective story'.[87] One might add to these examples, the classic tales of exploration. Maria Leavenworth identifies that second journeys, that is those conducted in the footsteps of a distinguished earlier traveller, form a distinct genre in modern travel writing. These journeys tend to use a travel text as both a pretext for the current journey as well as a source of inspiration informing the new journey and strands of the former text are generally quoted at length in the modern text, thereby setting up interesting dynamics between the two.[88] This thesis – the four main chapters of which focus, respectively, on presentations of self, the Other, gender and nature – identifies a similar phenomenon at work in modern desert literature too and chapter one of this study identifies those narratives, written since 1950, that follow a footstep path. The deserts of Arabia offer a particularly fertile landscape for this kind of invested travel because the space they occupy, as we have seen, is more than just physical. Journeying into the deserts of Arabia, modern travellers engage with a past that is 'encoded in narrative form'.[89] In other words, the region far exceeds the sum of the individual journeys of exploration and adventure that helped map the region for Western interests. The intertextuality involved in these footstep endeavours therefore creates an interesting opportunity to consider the extent to which new generations of desert travellers

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87 Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.5.

88 Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, *The Second Journey* [2009] (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2010).

89 Jacinta Matos, 'Old Journeys Revisited: Aspects of Postwar English Travel Writing', in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp.215-229 (p.215).

continue to plod through the well-trodden territory of the Orient or whether they cut new imaginative ground in their presentation of Arab encounter. Most of all, the texts these footstep travellers write, in setting the past against the present, and expectation against experience, help delineate the country they left behind. Often this referentiality exposes a sense of regret, or to use Ali Behdad's phrase 'belatedness', that is highly revealing of modern preoccupations – for example, with the loss of authenticity in the travel experience or a sense of foreboding about the encroachments of globalisation. These strands are explored in depth in the discussion.

As this study will show, implicit in some criticism of the footstep genre is the sense that there can be nothing interesting in a second account because everything has been already covered in the original – that there can be nothing further of value to learn of the destination despite the elapsed time. To suggest that there is nothing intrinsically interesting about second journeys, however, is partially to suggest that the region footstep travellers have returned to has been thoroughly covered in the original journey. This in turn suggests that in the intervening years between first and second journey, the destination and those who live there have remained static and resistant to change. The immutability of the desert and its inhabitants is a frequently recurring trope throughout the history of literary engagement in Middle East exploration. Both desert and inhabitants remained fixed, it is suggested by travel writers from Burton and Doughty to Lawrence and Thesiger, to an ancient and prescribed delineation that stems back to biblical times and remained whole and complete until both succumbed to the impingement of the modern world. Thesiger purported to chart the demise of the Bedu way of life in the Arabian desert, laying the curse of futility on all those endeavouring to repeat his journey: 'If anyone goes there now looking for the life I led [among the Bedu] they will not find it'.[90] He omits to say that the traveller will of course continue to find the desert and the Bedu and the life the one lives within the other, evolving and adapting, as has ever been the case, to the circumstances and contexts of their modern lives. This concept of immutability informs the subject of chapter two of this study which looks at the way some modern travel writers have continued to treat the Bedu as a fossilised culture 'with the air of preserving for us in the text lifeways that are about to disappear', while others take a more welcome and sympathetic approach to the needs of those they describe.[91]

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[90] Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* p.11.

[91] Youngs, *Cambridge Introduction,* p.184. Said contended that 'Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient' (Said, *Orientalism*, p.96) but detractors suggest in using the term 'traditional – the very word

Paul Fussell identifies two types of travel writing – one about adventures and the other about a nostalgic engagement with a vanishing way of life.[92] In desert literature, it is possible to identify a similar distinction but expanded to a third category – namely the urban experience. Chapter two explores the desert in contrast with the sown – the desert's supposed age-old binary – and detects that not all modern desert journeys conform to the need to find things as they were; some travellers, including Thesiger's biographer, Michael Asher, are interested in the destination as a living entity and their motivation for travel is less about recapturing the past than of exploring the present. This gives an opportunity, through texts that deliberately expose the mechanised nature of the modern desert journey, or which explore urban cities within the desert context, to engage with presentations of Arab modernities in contemporary, interdisciplinary studies by Arab scholars.[93] The most convincing recent accounts of travel in the Arabian desert, particularly the work of Tim Mackintosh-Smith, do not necessarily reject the past; they incorporate it into the present in much the same way as the Arab city selects elements of heritage to shape the character of the modern. This blurring of past and present aids in the shifting of unhelpful, outmoded binaries and – in the same spirit of engagement that marked earlier journeys to the region – opens up opportunities for dialogue and discourse in the space in between.

A whole critical discourse is devoted to in-betweenness, inspired by Said and elaborated upon by Bhabha and Spivak in the emergent field of subaltern studies. Chapter three of this study turns the attention to one strand of what amounts to a postcolonial discussion, namely the way in which women are marginalised in desert travel literature, both as the subject of such travels and as the object of attention in male travels. Said recognised in Flaubert's Egyptian courtesan, a 'widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her'.[94] As Said goes on to note, this is a model of Orientalism itself and indeed Arabia has often been projected as a seductive, gendered space in relation to the Western, white, and most especially male gaze. Such, at least, is the dominant narrative of travel in the region, but again it is not the only narrative and

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has notions of inferiority' when applied to nomadic communities, he does the same. See Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), p.74.

92 Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.17.

93 Full references are given within the chapter, but the work of Yasser Elsheshtawy, Jaafar Aksikas and Tarik Sabry are an example of the kind of critical material referred to here, representing the academic fields of architecture, cultural studies and media respectively.

94 Said, *Orientalism*, p.6.

chapter three of this thesis, in common with a general modern critical tendency to redeem the voice of women in travel literature, seeks out examples of female travel in desert accounts. This is undertaken partly to contest Oriental stereotypes and partly to redress the omission of female-authored travel accounts that remain under-represented in critical surveys. The work of modern desert traveller (and resident) Marguerite van Geldermalsen is presented as an example of hitherto overlooked female desert writing, helping thereby to broaden the field. The point of the discussion in this chapter, however, is not simply to resurrect or promote female voice in this area but to engage in contemporary discussion about the extent to which the desert travel writing of women can be seen as a liminal activity that offers a contrast to what Holland and Huggan calls the 'propensity for self-congratulation,' particularly of the middleclass, white and primarily male traveller.[95]

For help in understanding the nature of the in-between role that women may play in this context (as privileged, for example, to step into realms that are not accessible to male travellers such as the harem, Bedu tent or marriage celebration in today's urban cities), the discussion draws on postcolonial theory. Anne McClintock is one of a series of influential modern critics who took issue with Said's omission of women from the discussion in *Orientalism* and who emphasised that gender matters in postcolonial discourse.[96] As Sara Mills points out, men and women do not necessarily experience colonialism in the same way – some were empowered by their role in relation to the lands through which they travel, but most were also disempowered in relation to men.[97] Chapter three brings this discussion to bear on the work of recent female writers that can broadly be categorised as 'desert context literature' and finds reasons why the modern political, social and cultural context of Middle Eastern travel has continued to disadvantage (but not completely deter) female travel in the region.

In common with Orientalist tropes, the deserts of Arabia have often been gendered as feminine – either as 'pristine', 'virgin' space, or as 'seductive', 'alluring' and 'dangerous', awaiting the 'penetration' of male exploration. The traditional representation of desert exploration assumes other familiar binaries, such as wild, negative, empty space or *terra nullius* (albeit a term applied more usually to Australian

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95 Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* [1998] (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.122.

96 McClintock, Anne, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"', in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory,* ed. by F. Barker, P. Hulme and M. Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp.253-66.

97 Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

desert) that requires the positive energy of science to define, map and tame. The notion of an empty landscape providing a *tabla rasa* upon which to project Western preoccupations is the central tenet of this thesis and in chapter four the study considers one particular element of that concept, namely the human spirit pitted against the wild, tracing in a number of modern travel texts the extent to which the self in exile theme remains as a neo-Romantic impulse in modern desert literature. A depopulated landscape that appears both ominous and anonymous, but also siren-like in its seductiveness is obviously not a trope that is limited to the desert context; John McLeod, for example, elaborates Rudyard Kipling's jungle as emptied out of indigenous Indians and he makes the point that 'this depiction of the landscape is clearly mediated by the limited perception of the British and shapes a particular and selective envisioning of space'.[98] With the help of ecocritical theory, this chapter examines the envisioning of the desert space through science, and probes the way in which a number of modern science writers cross the boundary of their traditional discipline to extemporise on the beauty or sublimity of the desert landscape.[99] This appears radical and almost transgressive but, as Mary Campbell writes of early travel literature: 'the travel book is a kind of witness: it is generically aimed at the truth'.[100] Science and ethnographic information, in other words, has always had a role in informing and giving pleasure to the reader.

Notions of the 'truth' have troubled writers since the earliest travel narratives – even before Marco Polo earned his reputation for being economical with it. Seeing first hand has since Classical times been linked with acquiring knowledge, but it has also been linked with embellishment as successive generations of travellers have journeyed in search of the constructed realities of their travelling forebears. This was particularly the case with Eastern-bound travellers who carried with them an entire Oriental baggage. Disappointed by what they found, they often resorted to imagination to supply the missing dimensions and exposing them in this practice became a pastime of successive travellers. The need to verify assumed a particular character in Arabian desert literature where the desert proper remained a place of conjecture. While a travel writer in the *Eclectic Review* of 1824 lamented that 'no one can now pretend to have seen the world who has not made

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[98] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* [2000] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.72.

[99] Bibliographical details are given in the chapter but for an overview of ecocritical scholarship see Kerridge and Sammell, *Writing the Environment* and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* [2010] (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015).

[100] Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp.2-3.

one of a party of pleasure up the Nile or taken a ride on camel-back across the Syrian desert', the reality was that desert exploration remained the experience of very few.[101] As such, desert travel narratives as we have seen became obsessively annotated in a bid to illustrate not just the authority of the author but also the authenticity of the experience. Some of this obsession with authenticity has become the legacy of modern desert writers who find authenticity invested in the tales of daring expedition and seek, by 'getting off the beaten track', to share that authenticity by association.[102] Focusing on authenticity and what that might mean in an age when desert exploration is mostly confined to specialist oil prospecting and fully supported by modern technology (motorised transport, satellite communications, aerial search and rescue), the concluding chapter brings the discussion on authenticity in the work of desert travellers into a twenty-first-century context. It looks at the way selected recent writers continue to position themselves as travellers while their activities are becoming ever more accessible and replicated by tourists.

In finding that the space between traveller and tourist is, as they would describe it, disappointingly narrow, some desert travellers make ironic use of the term 'tourist' and include it in their titles. Tom Chesshyre's *A Tourist in the Arab Spring*, Tony Wheeler's *Bad Lands: A Tourist on the Axis of Evil* and *Misadventure in the Middle East* by Henry Hemming are all examples of the way in which some travellers look for ever-more extreme ways of distinguishing their journey – part of a phenomenon that Claudia Bell and John Lyall (and latterly Graham Huggan) refer to as the 'accelerated sublime'.[103] This study turns to other critical discussions on modernity to understand this phenomenon in a broader context, and finds in the work, for example, of Marc Augé, concepts of the 'supermodern' that explain how the desert can appear to have contracted even at the moment at which it is technically expanding. The chapter, and indeed the thesis, concludes with a discussion on the way in which globalisation is contributing to this process, causing the imaginative geography of the Arabian desert, and the landscape of Orientalism contoured within it, to recede into the distance as Arjun Appadurai's new

[101] R. Bakewell, 'Travels in Switzerland', *Eclectic Review*, N.S.21 (1824), 306-327 (pp.306-307).
[102] James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Buzard states that tourism offers a homogenous, shared experience that is impersonal, fixed to specific itineraries and superficial (p.91).
[103] Graham Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits: Travel/Writing in an Age of Globalization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p.6

topography of ‘ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes’ begin to take shape.[104]

[104] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

1. In Literary Footsteps: The Prevalence of 'Second Journeys'

The introduction to this thesis defined the geographical and historical scope of the present study and traced the literary inheritance that provides the context for all the writers discussed herein. In particular, it identified some of the tropes traditionally employed in writing about the region and revealed the specific shadow cast by T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger over subsequent generations of desert explorers. This chapter focuses on those modern desert writers who are most overtly aware of the very specific tradition in which they write. Collectively termed herein as 'footstep travellers', these modern travellers deliberately choose to tread in the path of an earlier explorer and in so doing set up interesting dynamics in their work between expectation and experience. In looking closely at the intertextuality of the work of these footstep travellers, the study responds to the first of the research questions outlined in the introduction: namely, it explores the reasons why modern travellers continue to write about a region that has been saturated with earlier accounts, and determines that while the footstep form may lead to some redundancy in terms of the journey's narrative (in that it attempts to replicate the route and manner of an earlier journey), it contributes nonetheless to helpful insights about what it means to be a traveller, in a desert environment or otherwise, in the modern era.

While broadly diverse in their approach, almost all recent travel writers to the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula share one common characteristic: they refer in some measure, whether as a foreword to their travel account or through a more involved, intertextual referencing, to the canon of celebrated explorers (particularly T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger) who preceded them. In this, they share the company of many of their literary forebears who have made it a point to acknowledge the desert explorations of the previous generation before expounding on their own. Often the referencing is intended as a genuine homage to the achievements of earlier desert travellers; at other times, it is intended to foreground the merits of the present journey. In the past half century, an exaggerated form of this kind of referencing has emerged wherein an entire modern journey is built around the itinerary of a former traveller allowing for the original account to act as both a 'pretext for and a pre-text of a second journey'.[1] The motivations for undertaking one of these footstep journeys (the term 'footstep' often occurs in the title

[1] Jacinta Matos, 'Old Journeys Revisited: Aspects of Postwar English Travel Writing', in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp.215-229 (p.215).

of the expedition narrative) are various and worthy of study on account of what they reveal about the modern quest. It is no coincidence, for example, that the footstep phenomenon has proliferated at a time when some contend there is little or 'no meaningful distinction between the tourist and the traveller'.[2] As modern desert travellers, in common with travellers in many other contexts, struggle with issues of authenticity, the connection with a former journey helps give a rationale for undertaking the modern journey while also lending it the gloss of respectability that once used to attach to expeditions of an exploratory nature.

Of course, it could be argued that searching for authenticity through imitation is something of a self-defeating exercise and some critics have indeed pointed this out. Described by Peter Hulme, for example, as forming an 'ambulant gloss' of the original text, footstep accounts use the original journey not just for guidance and inspiration but to give form and structure to the modern endeavour and equally to the resulting account.[3] Inevitably, then, there is a sense of predictability inherent in the very nature of the subgenre that invites criticism of some of these second texts as 'thin and dreary offerings', at best trawling over stale content and at worst hagiographical in their treatment of the original author.[4]

While this may sometimes be justified criticism in terms of their literary merit, footstep accounts nonetheless offer many interesting insights into intertextuality, the close relationship between reader, writer and traveller, and the expectations raised by the original journey in contrast to the experience of the second journey. The desire, furthermore, to 'imagine a form of travel literature forever original in all essentials' is, as James Buzard suggests, a specious quest wherein an escape from the 'prison of prior texts' is neither wholly sustainable nor wholly desirable.[5] Indeed, Jay Clayton points out that intertextuality can be highly productive in that it allows the flow of ideas to be recognised not simply as a matter of influence exerted on the present by the past but, in the

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2 Graham Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits: Travel/Writing in an Age of Globalization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2009), Preface, p.5.

3 Peter Hulme, 'In the Wake of Columbus: Frederick Ober's Ambulant Gloss', *Literature & History*, 3rd Series 6, no. 2 (1997), 18-36.

4 Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.185. Youngs does not dismiss all such second texts; indeed, he states that 'there are some very honourable exceptions, including Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory'* (pp.184-185).

5 James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.170.

interpretation of the reader, an influence extending forward. The idea of a more 'flexible relation among texts', is built upon by Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, who writes:[6]

> Instead of a steady line of descent through the history of travel writing, maintaining canons and reinforcing modern distinctions between high and low art, between past reality and contemporary experience, intertextuality stresses the mosaic quality of the narrative: parallel, overlapping, complementing or conflicting strands of inspiration or discussion.[7]

The 'mosaic quality' referred to here allows for a fragmented approach to time in which ideas can be applied without the straitjacket of temporal logic. Read in this light, footstep accounts can be seen as fruitful ways of bringing fresh insights to bear on the elements of the original journey. In the context of the Middle East, with its richly invested landscapes of religious and Oriental connotation, they invite the reader to reconsider an inherited set of tropes traditionally associated with the location, while also probing the original motivations and claims of the first journey authors. While it may be stretching the point to suggest that any of the modern footstep writers considered in this chapter offer a postcolonial counter-narrative, their observations on the impact of globalisation and modernisation on the lives of the Bedu, the inclusion in the narrative of Bedu companions as equal explorers rather than incidental servants, and the reflections on the nature of statehood and ownership of land where previously borders were defined along tribal lines, inevitably set up interesting points of contrast with the original texts and perspectives of the Arabian desert therein. As Adrian Hayes recognises in the epilogue to his own footstep journey, while Wilfred Thesiger 'fondly remembers the good parts of the "traditional lives" of the Bedu', there is of course a darker side 'that is often forgotten …: that of brutal infighting, death and cruelty'.[8] Observations such as these invite a critical rereading of the original text and thereby contribute in turn to the 'mosaic quality' of narrative represented by modern desert texts, questioning whether journeys propelled by nostalgia alone are appropriate in a postcolonial age. At a time when, as Chris Rojek argues, 'nostalgia industries continuously recycle products which signify simultaneity between the past and the present',[9] it takes courage on the part of the footstep traveller to spell out

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6 Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, eds. *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.50.

7 Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, *The Second Journey: Travelling in Literary Footsteps* [2009] (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2010), p.50.

8 Adrian Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger* (Dubai: Motivate, 2012), p.265.

9 Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (London: MacMillan, 1993), p.4.

what ought to be obvious – that the people they encounter are not there simply for the benefit of 'the tourist gaze'.[10]

This chapter looks closely at footsteps accounts of present-day Western desert travellers to Arabia. It examines the various tropes that are common to this recently recognised subgenre of modern travel literature, as particularly identified by Jacinta Matos, Heather Henderson, Alison Russell and Maria Lindgren Leavenworth,[11] and argues that despite the general critical pessimism about the value of these footstep journeys, some examples play a useful role in serving to rescue 'from oblivion' the literary 'monuments of the past', while also highlighting, through the lens of elapsed time, the way in which the original texts could or should be read.[12] The chapter goes further in suggesting that far from being a redundant or anachronistic form of travel writing (in that it is by its nature backward looking), many footstep travels can be considered expressly modern, at least in the way in which they connect with a wider discourse on the difficulties of representing encountered others; the way in which opportunities are afforded for a fairer representation of the Arabian 'Other', and the way in which they employ methods of self-irony to probe the value of their endeavour. Indeed, all of the desert footstep travellers highlighted in this chapter are acutely aware of their diminished status in relation to the elite set of whom T.E. Lawrence termed the 'real Arabian veterans',[13] and if not exactly representing themselves as 'clowns and as cowards', they do at least acknowledge the limitations of their enactments in contrast to the explorers whom they seek to emulate.[14] Whether this amounts to acts of glorification of the past or simply an ironic undermining of the chosen pretext of the footstep journey is further problematized during the course of this chapter.

Part of the motivation of desert travel has traditionally been to veer off the beaten track. A shared anxiety among modern desert travellers, in common with many modern travellers in general, is the realisation during their respective journeys that their quest is founded on the unlikelihood of finding an untrodden path in a world which has largely

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[10] John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* [1990] (Sage Publications: London, 2011).

[11] Matos, 'Old Journeys Revisited'; Heather Henderson, 'The Travel Writer and the Text: My Giant Goes with Me Wherever I Go', in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp.230-248; Alison Russell, *Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2000) and Leavenworth, *Second Journey*.

[12] Leavenworth, *Second Journey*, p.189.

[13] T.E. Lawrence, in Bertram Thomas, *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), p.xv.

[14] Nicholas Robinette, *Realism, Form and the Postcolonial Novel* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2014), p.48.

been mapped and explored. This is an intensified concern for footstep travellers who generally undertake the journey to demonstrate that genuine exploration is still possible despite the fact that the text of the original traveller has already left waypoints along the route. Their quest for authenticity is therefore undercut by the awareness that they may be living out a self-deluding fantasy. Their postulation in this way as 'post-tourist', in the sense in which Maxine Feifer defined the term, is explored herein.[15]

The identification of footstep travel accounts as a distinct literary phenomenon is a relatively recent one and Leavenworth, one of the few critics to identify the form and give it critical prominence, defines this type of travel thus: 'second journeys are carried out with the express aim of duplicating an earlier traveller's itinerary and as far as possible re-live past experiences'.[16] Leavenworth's emphasis on itinerary and re-enactment focuses attention on the traveller's relationship with the past and she regards the phenomenon positively as one of the ways in which travel writing reinvents itself over time. She refines her definition of these journeys as ones in which an original travelogue provides the map for the second journey. Although she makes no explicit reference to Western desert travel accounts in Arabia, much of her theory of second journeys has many points of commonality in its application; this chapter builds upon Leavenworth's work, therefore, by identifying similar tropes in the context of Arabian travel while pausing to consider the uniquely location-specific features of this subgenre. One such unique specificity is that due to the inaccessibility of Arabian desert locations, and the restrictions of modern political realities (such as border crossings and visa restrictions), it is seldom feasible or desirable for modern travellers to follow identical itineraries to those of their chosen predecessor. In the course of the current discussion, therefore, the term 'footstep travel' is used to denote the endeavour of following a primary text to give shape to a modern journey but takes a looser interpretation with regard to the retracing of an exact itinerary. For this reason, although it has inspired the discussion, Leavenworth's term 'second journey' is mostly avoided, except occasionally as a way of distinguishing a modern journey from the original journey by which it was motivated.

For a footstep journey to work well, it has to be predicated on the right kind of *pre*-text. Carl Thompson notes that travel writers are 'keenly aware' that they follow in the footsteps of 'true explorers, heroic figures who reported real discoveries and made

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[15] Maxine Feifer, *Going Places: Tourism in History from Imperial Rome to the Present* (New York: Stein and Day, 1986).

[16] Leavenworth, *Second Journey,* pp.11-12.

genuine contributions to knowledge'.[17] Footstep writers travelling in Arabia are not just 'keenly aware' but they have chosen their mark, very often, with an eye on the potential to be earned through association. It is no accident, for example, that as yet there are no footstep journeys that trace the paths of lesser known writers in Arabia such as H.H. McWilliams, who travelled from Tel Duweir in the Levant to England in 1933 and recorded his journey in *The Diabolical* (1934), or of lesser known journeys, such as Norman Lewis's travels by car captured in *Sand and Sea in Arabia* (1938). For a footstep journey to have maximum credibility, it usually has to follow the path of a 'looming giant,'[18] – both in literary as well as historical terms, or it has to re-establish the calibre of the forgotten. Above all, the journey has to be recorded in a text.[19]

The right kind of *pre*-text is easily identified in what might be called, in a somewhat irreverent nod to Said, Bhabha and Spivak,[20] as an '*un*holy trinity' of desert narratives that have inspired a half century of renewed interest in Arabian desert encounter by Western travellers, namely, Bertram Thomas's *Arabia Felix* (1932), T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) and Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959).[21] The emphasis of this chapter, however, is not on these texts themselves but on the travel accounts of four travellers – Charles Blackmore, Bruce Kirkby, Adrian Hayes and Mark Evans – who deliberately set their journeys in the context of these twentieth-century explorers and whose narratives interact dynamically with the texts that gave rise to their modern journeys. Their work is selected to demonstrate that while aspects of footstep travel can seem predictable and tedious because of the imitative nature of form (in following the itinerary of the original journey), their content exemplifies a productive engagement with many of the concerns that inform modern desert travel literature as a whole. The explicit nature, furthermore, of this genre's 'intertextuality' (to use the term in one of its original meanings as first articulated by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, and

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[17] Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.92.

[18] T.E. Lawrence in the Foreword to Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.xv.

[19] Captain Shakespear's monumental journey in 1914 from Kuwait to Riyadh, of which he left no written record, is all but forgotten, despite Shakespear's heroic death in battle. The account of his journey by Douglas Curruthers is similarly overlooked possibly for the same reason. Douglas Curruthers, 'Captain Shakespear's Last Journey', *Geographical Journal*, 59, no.5 (1922), 321-344.

[20] The allusion here is to Robert J.C. Young's reference to these founding postcolonial critics as the 'Holy Trinity' in *Colonial Desire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), p.163. The reference is irreverent in the sense that their work has long since been viewed for the individual merits of each. The collective work of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, however, have helped in encouraging antithetical readings of the kind of canonical texts represented by the work of Thomas, Lawrence and Thesiger.

[21] Their work is covered more explicitly in the Introduction to this thesis which examines some of the reasons for their impact on the next generation of desert travellers.

still useful in determining the kind of mediation of meaning involved in reading within a hyper-referential sequence of texts) is in itself of interest, helping the reader to 'read back', or reinterpret white, male, Western texts in the light of new or modern postcolonial perspectives.[22]

This discussion cuts new ground in determining the prevalence of the second journey concept among modern accounts of Arabian desert travel but it resists the impulse to treat those footstep accounts as a single, homogenous phenomenon. On the contrary, the discussion identifies that the form evolves over time from a confident undertaking that shares some of the pioneering qualities of the original journey, through a period of self-doubt in the footstep project itself and the commercial gimmickry that it often entails, to emerge as an opportunity for a more inclusive enterprise through what might be called the 'indigenisation' of the footstep journey. As such, the desert footstep accounts act as a parallel journey of a different kind, charting in microcosm many of the inherent complexities and anxieties traced by postcolonial travel literature as a whole. The chapter is shaped, therefore, in chronological terms, analysing the work of each of the modern footstep travellers in turn, in the order in which their work was published.

Before turning to these accounts in detail, the discussion first considers the tradition of intertextuality, both of a religious and a secular nature, within which the modern footstep narratives have emerged. It identifies within the circular referencing, a competitive kind of posturing that, while it may not be unique to Western accounts of Arabian desert travel, is at least highly pronounced and considers what this reveals about the modern literary quest for authenticity.

A tradition of intertextuality

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, by journeying into the Arabian desert modern travellers engage with a past that is 'encoded in narrative form'.[23] One form of encoding is specifically Christian in nature and involves using the Bible and other religious books as a way of mapping the geographies of the Middle East in terms of the histories represented therein. These can be traced to the very earliest tradition of Western travel writing when Englishman, William Wey, 'almost a medieval *Baedeker*' according to

[22] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University, 1980). See also Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.3.

[23] Matos, 'Old Journeys Revisited', p.215.

Peter Whitfield, made two trips to Jerusalem in 1458 and 1462.[24] Using the Bible as the pretext for his journey, the resulting narrative can be described as a practical guidebook for pilgrims.[25] This tradition of using a holy text to inspire and inform a journey into the desert continues to the present day, for example in the work of James Cowan. Cowan's journey into the Egyptian wilderness in the footsteps of Saint Anthony is charted in *Desert Father* (2006), a narrative that translates the Middle East of the present into the land of the past for the purpose of theosophical introspection. Commenting on the 'discipline of silence' and 'doctrine of emptiness' he encounters in a monastery during his journey, Cowan projects these two qualities onto the landscape as he considers Anthony's withdrawal into the desert and the opportunity that the wilderness affords in terms of a recalibration of the 'individual's relationship to secular society'.[26] The dynamic set up between the two texts, ancient scripture and modern travelogue, can be seen as a literary landscaping of the past within the present, allowing for channels of inspiration, in this case spiritual, to resonate through the centuries and enrich the sense of revelation. The resonance is reflected metaphorically in movement as Cowan follows along the 'road to salvation' (p.55), literally and literarily crossing the desert in Anthony's footsteps.

If biblical texts form a natural inspiration for religious footstep travel in the region, the texts of Western explorers provide the opportunity for a secular counterpart and it is upon these secular accounts that the discussion focusses. The Arabian desert, with its topographical features of wilderness, extremity and fastness, provides a natural site of experiment wherein human endurance is tested under extreme conditions. As each desert explorer charts the limits of not just his (and occasionally her) endeavour but that of human endurance itself, it is inevitable that they should set their account of that enterprise within the context of past achievers. This habitual referencing in the search for superlatives – to be the longest-suffering (like Doughty), to be the most enduring (like Lawrence), to be the first (like Bertram Thomas), or best of all, to be the last (like Thesiger) so that no desert traveller thereafter can upstage the achievement – leads to one of the defining characteristics of Arabian desert literature as a whole, namely its keenly competitive nature. While each eminent desert explorer adopts a gloss of modesty, it is usually unsuccessful in disguising what may be called the 'competitive edge'. In the

[24] Peter Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), p.251.

[25] William Wey, *The Itineraries of William Wey* [1857], translated by Francis Davey (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010), and see Francis Davey, *Richard of Lincoln: A Medieval Doctor Travels to Jerusalem* (UK: Azure Publications, 2013).

[26] James Cowan, *Desert Father: A Journey in the Wilderness with Saint Anthony* (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2006), p.57.

foreword to *Arabia Felix,* for example, Bertram Thomas's largely forgotten *opus magnus* written after his momentous but equally largely forgotten journey by camel across the Empty Quarter, T.E. Lawrence writes, 'Thomas shocked me when he asked me for a foreword to his great journey-book ... because he had recourse to me'.[27] Not only is 'great journey-book' a calculatedly belittling term that contrasts with more usual references to an exploration account, there could also be little shock value in Thomas's 'recourse to me' as Lawrence is quick to position himself within a long lineage of great Arabian travellers:

> You see, in my day there were real Arabian veterans. Upon each return from the East I would repair to Doughty, a looming giant, white with eighty years, headed and bearded like some renaissance Isaiah. Doughty seemed a past world, in himself: and after him I would visit Wilfrid Blunt. (p.xv)

Lawrence goes on to write of Hogarth and Gertrude Bell, who 'by twenty years of patient study, had won some reputation, too.' His choice of the words 'some' and 'too', suggestive of limitation and afterthought respectively, helps diminish Lawrence's female rival despite her legacy, in terms of 'British imperial administration', being perhaps the greater.[28] Lawrence makes the point that in the past 'the seeing [of] Arabia was an end in itself. They just wrote a wander-book and the great peninsula made their prose significant.' He contrasts this with his own day where travellers 'must frame excuses for travelling. One will fix latitudes, the silly things, another collect plants or insects' (p.xvi). Lawrence deliberately elevates his own journey by placing himself in the company of the literary elite of desert literature and diminishes Bertram Thomas whose achievement in being the first European to cross the largest sand desert in the world is overlooked in favour of a possible jibe at Thomas's keen botanical and entomological interests.[29] Thomas may not have read it this way, but the competitiveness of desert endeavour at this time is evidenced by the fact that Thomas's 'plans were conceived of in darkness' to avoid them being thwarted by the authorities, or worse eclipsed by his contemporary rival, Harry St. John Philby. In a telegraph dated 7 March 1931, Philby wrote on hearing the

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[27] T.E. Lawrence, in Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, Foreword. Bertram Thomas was the first Western explorer to cross the entirety of the Rub Al-Khali (from south to north) with Bedouin guide, Sheikh Saleh Bin Kalut Al-Rashidi Al-Kathiri (the first recorded occurrence of this feat by a non-Westerner). Omani traveller, Mohamed Zadjali, accomplished the same in 2016, as co-expeditioner with Mark Evans. Author's Interview with Mohamed Al-Zadjali, 26 April 2016. See Appendix E.

[28] James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* (London: I B Tauris, 2014), p.9.

[29] Thomas's appendices record his collections of flora and fauna; he endearingly notes that the hyenas will be glad to see him leave.

news of Thomas's success, 'Heartiest congrats', two words that according to modern-day explorer, Mark Evans, who crossed the same desert in Thomas's footsteps, 'must have been painful to write'; Evans goes on to note the 'bitter disappointment' felt by Philby, who for years had been 'hatching his own plans' to cross the Empty Quarter.[30]

'Bitter disappointment' is a useful term when considering any travel writing to the region as each explorer recognises his own deficiency in relation to the journeys of these illustrious forebears, or the lands they cross and the people they meet fail to measure up to expectation. For modern writers, this sense of belatedness is exaggerated because their journeys are conducted post-Thesiger. In the introduction to *Arabian Sands,* Thesiger writes a eulogy for what he perceives as a dying way of life and in so doing, he literarily put a 'full stop' on desert travel:

> I went to Southern Arabia only just in time. Others will go there to study geology and archaeology, the birds and plants and animals, even to study the Arabs themselves, but they will move about in cars and will keep in touch with the outside world by wireless. They will bring back results far more interesting than mine, but they will never know the spirit of the land nor the greatness of the Arabs. If anyone goes there now looking for the life I led they will not find it.[31]

Given the competitive nature of the genre, these statements act as something of a textual tease; indeed, an overwhelming sense of belatedness is visited upon all future travelogues by those words: 'If anyone goes there now looking for the life I led they will not find it.' This is a cruel legacy to leave to future travellers but it is also an inspired insurance policy that locks the value of the original project in a period of time that no one left alive can vouch for. Thesiger's journeys therefore mark a watershed in British exploration as indicated by many distinguished reviewers of his autobiographical volumes, *The Life of My Choice* and *My Life and Travels: An Anthology.* Richard Holmes, for example, writes that Thesiger 'belongs to an endangered species; he is one of the last, great gentlemen explorer-adventurers of our time' – a time before sponsorship and the needs of television and social media influence the modern journey.[32]

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[30] Mark Evans, *Crossing the Empty Quarter in the Footsteps of Bertram Thomas* (UK: Gilgamesh Publishing, 2016), p.193.

[31] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.11.

[32] Richard Holmes, cited in Alexander Maitland, *Wilfred Thesiger: My Life and Travels, an Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). See also Christopher Morton and Philip N. Grover (eds.) *Wilfred Thesiger in Africa: A Unique Collection of Essays & Personal Photographs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), and Wilfred Thesiger, *The Life of My Choice* [1987] (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1988).

Modern Arabian desert travellers have attempted to rise to Thesiger's challenge through deploying different strategies, one of which is to circumvent the issue of comparative merit through humour and self-irony. James (now Jan) Morris, in *Sultan in Oman* (1957), for example, appears to plant his journey alongside 'the greater explorations of the Burtons, the Doughtys, the Philbys and the Thesigers', but the pluralisation of these figures allows an element of bathos in the comparison that invites the reader not to take Morris, nor his final estimation of the value of the journey, too seriously: '[it opened] a corner of Arabia to the scrutiny of the world, it set a travellers' precedent, and it had its effect upon the course of Arabian history'.[33] These claims would have been difficult to substantiate in terms of Sultan Taimur's accomplishment in initiating the journey: for Morris, a lowly expatriate reporter in his retinue, they are deliberately hyperbolic. Other modern writers take an opposite approach: by not just conceding to the fame of 'the Burtons, the Doughtys, the Philbys and the Thesigers', but by prostrating in front of former achievements, the endeavours of some modern acolytes, as we shall see, are usefully benchmarked.

The 'competitive edge' in the relationship between original explorer and those who follow informs not just the choice of hero selected for emulation, it sets up a dynamic in the modern journey that impinges on the 'cult of nostalgia'.[34] Contained within the vague sense of longing for past heroism is a wistfulness regarding the hero figure himself. As social theorists such as John MacInnes have identified, masculinity has been brought to crisis by modernity and as such it is unsurprising to find some male travellers looking back to a time when former characteristics such as 'heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility' were manly virtues rather than vices.[35] By casting themselves in heroic roles, these modern travellers are in some senses cloaked in masculine robes, or are 'remasculated' at least for the short period of the journey. Within that notion, each of the four footstep travellers discussed below take up their own competitive positions – to be the most faithful to the original (Charles Blackmore), to be the most honest in estimation of the outcome (Bruce Kirkby), to be the strongest leader (Adrian Hayes) and to be the one with the most enduring legacy (Mark Evans). By looking at each of their narratives in turn, the discussion adds to Leavensworth's category of second journeys by identifying a distinct subgenre of footstep texts within Arabian

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33 James (now Jan) Morris, *Sultan in Oman* [1957] (London: Eland, 2008), p.1.

34 See Rojek, *Ways of Escape* and Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits.*

35 John MacInnes, *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), p.47.

desert travel. Further, it attempts to go beyond their categorisation as itinerary-following, re-enacters of the past, by treating their texts not as a homogeneous subset, but as one that involves development over the course of the thirty years in which the four texts are written. This development can be traced from Blackmore's act of hero emulation, through the somewhat commercially driven offerings of Kirkby and Hayes that attempt to capitalise on the marketing value of the project, to the most recent incarnation of a footstep journey by Evans, foregrounded in a desire to be more inclusive and educative. All the texts allow for more visibility of the guides who enable their respective travels across the remote deserts of central Arabia and in this sense the footstep enterprise can be seen as mirroring the process of indigenisation (referred to in the region as Omanisation, Emiratisation, Qatarisation and so forth) whereby the expatriate is gradually replaced within leadership positions in society by the country's own citizens.[36]

Learning from the past – Blackmore in the footsteps of Lawrence

In a book the title of which explicitly references the footstep nature of his journey, Charles Blackmore weaves a reverence for a hero of the past into the fabric of the current adventure as part of the texture of enrichment invested in the journey:

> My thoughts are of the 700 miles we have ridden in the steps of Lawrence of Arabia, and the reward of an adventure shared with the Bedouin, the profits of their company, the sharing of a simple and traditional life. These are the investments of memory for the future.[37]

Using words such as 'reward', 'profit' and 'investment' in his estimation of the 700 miles he has made in tracing Lawrence's footsteps, the past for Blackmore is not just enveloped in the present through thought, the present is also combined with the future through anticipation. The encounter with the Bedu, and the value placed on their 'simple and traditional life' weighed against unspoken comparisons of 'life back home', is represented as integral to the footstep experience. This is not a journey, then, that is merely imitative of the past, in the tracing of former itineraries, it is one in which the present-day experience is allowed to resonate in the future and provide sustenance after the return home, making an interesting case study of the resulting text.

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[36] For a definition of Omanisation, see: K. C. Das and Nilambari Gokhale, 'Omanization Policy and International Migration in Oman' [online], Middle East Institute (2010), available at: https://www.mei.edu/publications/omanization-policy-and-international-migration-oman [accessed 13 July 2019].

[37] Charles Blackmore, *In the Footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Harrap Limited, 1986), p.157.

Blackmore's camel-back journey (in February 1985) involved leading a team of four soldiers in the company of their Bedu guides across the deserts of modern-day Jordan in T.E. Lawrence's footsteps. The resulting travelogue is a good example of a desert journey that is both inspired and informed by an original text. It also represents, in all probability, the first of the footstep subgenre in modern Arabian desert travel literature.[38] Throughout Blackmore's account, Lawrence's text intrudes upon his own, and Blackmore reminds the team of the purpose of their footstep journey in almost nightly readings of *Seven Pillars*. Preparatory and contextual readings, according to James Buzard, not only 'help to establish future travellers' expectations', they help to test and strengthen remembered expectations and experiences 'recharging the reader's sense of having accomplished something meaningful by travelling'.[39] In this sense Blackmore's close reading of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars* is part of a long heritage of what Buzard has described as a 'complementary connection between travelling and reading'. The relationship between travelling and reading helps to establish an Arabian desert context for Blackmore's travels that taps into an entire literary tradition of expedition in the region; in so doing, it lends authority to Blackmore's travels in a way that would have been hard to achieve in a random journey by camel across late twentieth-century Jordan.

If reference to *Seven Pillars* adds literary authority to the footstep journey, the choice of Lawrence, as soldier and ascetic, capitalises on the hardships involved. Beginning and ending in Wadi Rum, the place most closely associated today with Lawrence, Blackmore's journey is conducted commemoratively (as is often the case with footstep journeys, whether as a marketing hook or as valid review associated with centenary, or other significant dates),[40] to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the *death* of Lawrence; as such it resonates as much with the legend of Lawrence as with his 'real-life' endeavours.[41] The Blackmore team are encouraged by thoughts of their hero, and find inspiration during the hardships of their own journey in frequent references to Lawrence's military exploits which give them a 'new sense of purpose' (p.59). These exploits famously included attacks on the Hijaz Railway; for Blackmore, reaching the

[38] 'Modern' here means post-1950. Blackmore's journey is pre-dated by that of Douglas Glen who attempted to trace Lawrence's footsteps by car in 1938. See Douglas Glen, *In the Steps of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1941).

[39] Buzard, *The Beaten Track,* pp.160-61.

[40] Mark Evans commenced his commemorative journey on 10th December, eighty-five years to the day after Bertram Thomas (Evans, *Crossing the Empty Quarter*), and Bruce Kirkby marked the fiftieth anniversary of Thesiger's travels in *Sand Dance: By Camel Across Arabia's Great Southern Desert* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000).

[41] The Introduction to this study charts the Lawrence legend.

location of an abandoned railway carriage supposedly targeted by Lawrence became the mission of their footstep journey. When they failed to find it, Blackmore turns to Lawrence's book to escape the disappointment:

> I study closely the picture of him in native dress, *thinking myself into him*, and wondering at the exact nature of the man: the complicated intellect, the charisma which attracted people, the romantic and the visionary, the chivalrous knight in the desert, and the extraordinary vulnerability of the post-war Lawrence, the subsequent architect of his own enigma and the pursuing legend which inwardly destroyed him. (p.58, emphasis added)

The power of the legend, and the magnetism of the charismatic figure at the heart of his own journey features almost as an inverse haunting as Blackmore 'thinks himself into' Lawrence, trying to inhabit 'the exact nature of the man'. In fact, a sense of 'haunting' pervades the text. The first journey, its narrator and the encoded past represented in the form of the original text of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (a copy of which is treated with talismanic reverence during the footstep journey), manifests in quotation and there is a séance-like quality, furthermore, to the regular in-situ readings of the treasured volume. These readings around the campfire at night are used to conjure up benign encouragements from the past for the edification of the present company. When one of the party intuits Lawrence's ghost at Azraq Fort, in the room once occupied by Lawrence, the haunting is complete. Blackmore writes after that incident: 'Our feelings and thoughts about Lawrence grow day by day,' (p.101) and if there is a sense of intimate engagement of one soldier with another in Blackmore's account, there is an equal sense of intimacy between Blackmore as reader and Lawrence as writer. The desert 'harshness and, above all, the life we are sharing with the Bedu have enriched our understanding', writes Blackmore of his re-reading of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 'and given colour, sight and sound to the faded black and white picture' of Arab life described therein (p.101). Blackmore's enterprise, therefore, can be read less as passive re-enactment and more as active reinvigoration of the past, blowing breath – 'colours, sight and sound' – into the act of imagining a deceased hero.

The depth of connection sought by reader with writer is illustrated notably in Blackmore's account when he encounters Bedu who give him the 'unexpected opportunity to retrace the Lawrence legend' (p.60), not through meeting anyone who physically met Lawrence but through a hoped-for meeting with the son of Auda, with

whom Lawrence rode into battle.[42] The excitement generated by even such a tenuous link is interesting because it shows the extent to which Blackmore's journey is about more than the desire, to use Sara Wheeler's term, to 'pay homage' to a fellow traveller: it is about identifying a history of the heroic endeavour itself.[43] In writing about Captain Scott (albeit in a polar desert context), Beau Riffenburgh delineates the characteristics of heroic endeavour that can usefully be applied to Lawrence.[44] There is the provocation for adventure supplied by a military subject plucked from obscurity (Lawrence is keen to emphasise his non-commissioned status and in 1927 changed his name by Deed Poll to Shaw); there is the wilderness threshold (in Lawrence's case the Arabian desert) and the necessity of being a leader (a status repeatedly claimed in Lawrence's relationship with the Arabs);[45] there are the trials evidenced through years of often unsuccessful planning (Lawrence suspects he was not a natural choice for the Arab Campaign when the authorities were casting about for someone to represent British interests),[46] and there are challenges of adjustment on arrival (in Lawrence's case, he found it difficult to acclimatise).[47] Other defining features of the Riffenburgh hero identifiable in Lawrence include close-knit brotherhood, extreme journeying, doomed endeavour, inspiration sent home in the form of letters and travelogue, and the role played by the media in the creation of his myth. Blackmore's text helps cast his team's enterprise in coincidentally heroic terms. They are obscure military figures in the British army; they travel across desert wilderness, the harshness of which becomes a defining part of their journey; they have many trials in launching their expedition, including the financial expectations of the Bedu, which remain unresolved at the start of the journey.[48] A sense of brotherhood extends between the members of the team and their guides, and the 'icons of myth', garnered from Blackmore's expedition, are captured in the press in a post-journey debate regarding the

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[42] Modern Bedu in the region delight in creating mythical links to 'El Aurens' for the gratification of gullible travellers, as noted in Jenny Walker, *Jordan* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2012), p.211.

[43] Sara Wheeler, *Terra Incognita* [1996] (New York: Modern Library, 1996), p.148.

[44] Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer* [1993] (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), p.7.

[45] Lawrence writes: 'my personal duty was command, and the commander, like the master architect, was responsible for all.' Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p.197.

[46] On being placed under the command of Colonel Holdich, Lawrence writes: 'since he clearly did not need me, I interpreted this ... as a method of keeping me away from the Arab affair.' Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p.63.

[47] Shortly after arrival in Arabia, Lawrence writes that, in contrast to his desk job in Cairo, the desert experience was severe 'since time had not been given me gradually to accustom myself to the pestilent beating of the Arabian sun, and the long monotony of camel pacing'. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, p.86.

[48] The fixation on the trials of planning are a familiar trope of modern footstep journeys as if these trials are more of a test than the journey itself. Kirkby obsesses over the struggle to attain 'exceedingly difficult diplomatic permissions' (Kirkby, *Sand Dance*, p218), and Hayes spends three whole chapters describing thwarted planning and preparations (Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger*).

expedition's credibility.[49] Only doomed endeavour is lacking from a tale of modern-day heroism – a factor that has not hindered the book's reception, at least according to the dust jacket, as a modern 'classic travel book'. The footstep construction, then, has allowed Blackmore to transpose the supposed heroism of the original into the subtext of his own journey, making more of the present endeavour than may have been possible without the Lawrence motif.

Blackmore's mission is underpinned by a desire to recapture not just the spirit of hero Lawrence but also something of the heroic context in which Lawrence operated. That context has a particular lineage in Arabian desert literature that can be observed in the retrospective gaze upon 'ruins of empire'. Contemplation on the sites of former grand civilizations, such as those at Petra, Medain Salah, Yarub Dam or Abu Simbel, and the way in which they evoked thoughts of human frailty ('Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!') is a familiar trope of early desert writing, closely connected with the aesthetic of the Burkean Sublime.[50] Early Romantic accounts deliberately dwell on ruins in set piece reflections on former empires to the extent that, as Romantic-era traveller John Galt observed, travellers began to 'attach more value to the past than it deserves, and to regard the present with far less esteem than it merits'.[51] The enjoyment of exquisite emotions occasioned by rambling around old ruins lay, as Jonathan Wordsworth identified, in contemplations of immortality and the paradoxical way in which art 'defies the erosion of time'.[52] The emphasis, however, is generally on the *fall* of empire and the way the present compares unfavourably with the greatness of the past. As John Smith notes in 1804, for example, 'Greece, Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, Arabia, recall a thousand pleasing recollections, which can no longer be associated with them in their present state of barbarism, slavery and degradation,' and the obsessive comparisons continue to characterise Arabian desert literature throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century.[53]

It is within this context that Blackmore and his team search about the deserts of Wadi Rum in today's Jordan, looking for old carriages and sons of Auda, not so much in

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[49] 'Britons relive desert legend of Lawrence', *The Times*, Tuesday, March 19, 1985.

[50] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias* [1817] , *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1977), p.103: 'Round the decay/Of colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away'.

[51] John Galt, *Letters from the Levant* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1813), p.305.

[52] Jonathan Wordsworth, Michael C.Jaye and Robert Woof, *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.131.

[53] John Smith, *A System of Modern Geography* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1811, 2 Vols.), Vol. 2, pp.738-39.

a search for Lawrence but in a search, unconsciously or otherwise, for the ruins of empire – an empire in which Blackmore defines Lawrence as 'the chivalrous knight in the desert' (p.58), with all that implies of his contrast with the Bedouin other. Previous travellers, from Clarke to Doughty, wrote their travelogues from the perspective of imperial confidence with Britain at the height of her influence abroad. Wilfrid Scawen and Lady Anne Blunt, Freya Stark, St John Philby and Bertram Thomas, were all part of the so-called imperial project in Arabia. Lawrence was not an explorer sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society – he was a soldier and a diplomat whose mission it was to nurture Arab allegiance in the fight against the old Ottoman Empire. His endeavours helped pave the way for the consolidation of British interests in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1918 which, with the establishment of Israel, signalled the beginning of the end, in many respects, of Britain's imperial influence in the region and the onset of many decades of unrest.[54] When Robin Maugham, a soldier of the Second World War, comes to write *Nomad* (1947) in which Lawrence and *Seven Pillars* are frequently referenced, the note of nostalgia for an empire slipping away is already present: 'I had been thrilled by the *Seven Pillars*. But the peoples and events seemed of another world, heroic and refined, which had few points of contact with the bit of Levant we had known.' Maugham goes on to write that 'Lawrence seemed too god-like, too remote from those few things of the East an ordinary soldier could see, too unattainable'.[55] Lawrence and his legend, for Maugham, has become wrapped in the nostalgia for a supposed golden age before the Suez crisis signalled the first cracks in the empire. As James Canton points out in his work on the 20th-century travellers to Arabia, *From Cairo to Baghdad*: 'by the time that the dust of Suez had settled, Britain's position in Arabia had become irreparably fractured … now it was down to a journalist to … tell of the time when Britain started to lose its imperial footing in Arabia.[56]

For Charles Blackmore, riding a camel in Lawrence's footsteps, with his team of fellow army officers, it is inevitable then that he should be tracing not just a biography of Lawrence the desert explorer, not just the history of a desert military campaign, but the imperial heritage of the nation to which they belong. Something of the arrogance of the imperial heritage is nuanced in Blackmore's conflicting interactions with the Bedu: he

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[54] See James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East, 1914-1948* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011) and *Setting the Desert on Fire: T.E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

[55] Maugham, Robin, *Nomad* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1947), pp.29-30.

[56] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, p.81.

describes them as lazy (p.36), yet is surprised and impressed by their grasp of history (p.49); he states they look 'noble' (p.19), yet he doubts their motives and insists on his own compass bearings (p.72); citing the virtues of 'English mental strength, endurance and adaptability to change situations' he reflects that it is these qualities that made Lawrence 'so respected' by the Bedu (p.36). But if Blackmore's account amounted to a simple recycling of discredited imperial tropes it would be easy to dismiss it as a nostalgic throwback to old colonial values that have been 'wholeheartedly rejected'.[57] Blackmore's account, however, is as full of fracture and uncertainty as the British imperial project in Arabia, post-Suez, that it mirrors, and one fault line occurs within the very choice of Lawrence as the inspiration of his own journey.

The problem for footstep travellers when they tie their search for national glories to literary heroes is that they are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of those figures. 'Lawrence had been here on this exact spot,' Blackmore writes at Aba El Lassan, the site of an important battle against the Turks that Lawrence was involved in, 'yet the bare rock carries no record, no epitaph and only those in search of the past would be aware of it.' He adds wryly that with no evidence 'it may not have happened at all' (p.147). A niggling doubt creeps into the text but rather than come to the obvious conclusion that the battle was a fabrication on Lawrence's part, Blackmore rationalises the doubts away: 'who am I to sit there in 1985 casting opinion on an incident in 1917 … in any case my recollections of our journey in one year will be distorted by time' (p.148). While Blackmore was willing to accept the distortions of time, his travelling companion, Jamie Bowden, was less sympathetic. Commenting on their return on an event in Tafila where Lawrence was awarded a DSO for his part in a battle, Bowden stated: 'Having seen the terrain, and having lived and ridden in it just as he would have done, I am very dubious about some of Lawrence's claims. Some of his exploits were just impossible'. Addressing the resulting furore surrounding this revelation, Bowden wrote an open letter to *The Times* to state that it was not the team's intention to spoil the Lawrence legacy by 'quibbles over historical accuracy', nor by 'totally defaming a British hero'.[58] Some modern historians, such as Scott Anderson, contend that Lawrence was just 'mischievous' with the facts; others find a life's work in trying to disintegrate fact from fiction, using the contradictions of the Lawrence myth to spur 'descents into minutiae' and leading to 'arcane squabbles

[57] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* [2000] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.30.
[58] 'Britons relive desert legend of Lawrence', *The Times,* Tuesday, March 19, 1985.

between those seeking to tarnish his reputation and those seeking to defend it'.[59] It may not matter to Anderson whether Lawrence 'truly made a particular desert crossing in forty-nine hours, as he claimed, or [it] might … have taken a day longer', but as the Bowden incident shows doubts about credibility appear to hurt more than Lawrence's posthumous reputation: at some level they touch on the uncomfortable possibility that the imperial presence in Arabia had been less significant too and similarly subject to mythmaking through exaggeration and embellishment.

Accuracy is a significant theme in footstep narratives although there is of course no accepted yardstick by which it can be measured or ascertained. Most footstep journeys are at pains to point out those aspects of the original journey that can be substantiated (through observation) and those that cannot, but this seldom results in discrediting the original – as if to do so would similarly undermine the value of the second journey. When confronted about the truth of his own adventures, Lawrence states in a letter sometime after the writing of *Seven Pillars* (the crucial first draft of which he allegedly lost on a train to Reading raising questions about the likely inaccuracies of the second draft, given the difficulty of re-remembering that level of detail) that 'history isn't made up of the truth anyhow, so why worry'.[60] In recognising 'that history was malleable, that truth was what people were willing to believe',[61] Anderson argues that Lawrence was ahead of his time and indeed the literary traditions of life-writing studies and biographical studies are full of examples of the fictionalisation of the past.[62] When asked about the credibility of Lawrence nearly thirty years after the expedition, however, Bowden makes the important point that 'it is important to be honest about [describing] what you see, as false accounts can have a negative impact on those that are being described,' – a subject covered through a quarter-century of postcolonial criticism.[63] Unravelling fact from fiction, however, is complicated because at some level heritage replaces history, and heritage is tied up with a communal sense of collective or national self-esteem.[64] Footstep travellers help create that heritage by selecting those travellers whose experience they believe is worth recreating and capturing for a new generation. Any criticism of the validity of the first

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[59] Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East* [2013] (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), p.3.

[60] T.E. Lawrence quoted in A.W. Lawrence ed., *T.E. Lawrence by his Friends* [1937] (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p.175.

[61] Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia,* p.3.

[62] Bart J. Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory* (London: Verso, 1997).

[63] Author's Interview with Jamie Bowden, 18 March 2014. See Appendix A.

[64] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1997), p.216.

journey undermines the authority of the second journey and to some extent the selection process upon which heritage accrues. Lawrence in particular, as national treasure, belongs to something bigger than history: 'even today', writes Oliver Smith in a recent article, 'the legend of a romantic figure – dressed in Arab robes, sweeping across hostile landscapes and capturing holy cities – has endured, thanks to David Lean's epic film, *Lawrence of Arabia*'.[65] When Blackmore eventually comes across the Hijaz Railway, one of his party hums the theme tune, adding another accretion to the layers of the legend.

If footstep accounts were limited to the revival of a romanticised past, they would probably be of equally limited interest. As we have seen, however, the frisson of encounter is laced with doubt – about authenticity and credibility, about the value of the modern project in comparison with the original – and this doubt casts a productive pall over our reading of both the original and the second journey and the context in which the texts of both interact. Towards the end of his account, Blackmore reflects that it is only on encountering the desert and the Bedu that he has been able to gain an understanding of Lawrence's self-glorification and alternating modesty, of his masochism and 'intellectual path of self-discovery' (p.101). In this recognition is the understanding of a shared quest and ultimately *Seven Pillars* functions more usefully for the footstep travellers as a pretext for their own journey of discovery than a satisfactory pre-text. For the reader, this layering of one history within another is potentially endlessly revived the further the reader is distanced from either journey by time, adding a third dimension to the narrative and enriching its interest.

Threatening the value of a footstep project, however, is the sense of travelling in the region too late and indeed belatedness appears intrinsic to the form. The article in *The Times* that appeared on Blackmore's return describes the team arriving at Heathrow airport 'still attired in headdress and *galabeyas,* louse-ridden and unwashed for a month, having eked out sparse water supplies and chewed desert plants for salt'.[66] In a first journey, this would have been the stuff of myth-making but in a second journey it appears somewhat staged. Indeed, Blackmore's journey marks a watershed in desert travel.

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[65] Oliver Smith, 'In Search of Lawrence's Arabia', *Lonely Planet Magazine* (May 2010), 76-86 (p.80); this article won Smith the AITO Young Travel Writer of the Year Award in 2011 and was reprinted in 2017 suggesting the Lawrence legend lives on.

[66] 'Britons relive desert legend of Lawrence', *The Times,* Tuesday, March 19, 1985. Cross-dressing has a long history in Oriental travel; see John Rodenbeck**,** 'Dressing Native', in *Unfolding the Orient,* ed. by Paul and Janet Starkey (Reading, Ithaca Press, 2001), pp.65-100. See also C.W. Thompson, *French Romantic Travel Writing: Chateaubriand to Nerval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.166-67: while acknowledging that 'exotic cross-dressing' implies a degree of imperial condescension, Thompson applauds the attempt 'at least to get closer to alien worlds', p.167.

Subsequent expeditioners are less able to fashion a heroic persona for themselves, leading to 'feelings of disorientation, anxiety and loneliness'.[67] As later travellers begin to question the precepts of the original journey, inevitably the nascent anxieties extend to their own, and this, as discussed below, can lead to productive, post-imperial doubts.

Writing about the present – Kirkby and Hayes in the footsteps of Thesiger

When modern-day adventurers Michael Swan and Roger Mear retraced Scott's footsteps across Antarctica they were partly drawn by the notion of unfinished business. Scott famously never accomplished his aim and the sense in which Swan and Mear attempt to close the circle on that endeavour on his behalf has been analysed by a number of critics, including Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost.[68] Claiming to be motivated by the 'simple bravery of men against the elements', their real reasons for following Scott appear rather more complex.[69] In an age when 'those who seek adventure can no longer set out under the banner of science', they were drawn to an earlier era when the value of exploration enjoyed unquestioned legitimacy.[70] Today's sophisticated navigational aids, easy access to wilderness through modern transportation, a school of ecology that promotes wilderness preservation as opposed to conservation, the branching of science into specialisms that generally require patient observation focused on a single location, a modern obsession with health and safety (and rescue at the cost of other people's lives) – all these technological, environmental and sociological developments have circumscribed the modern journey in remote landscapes.[71] By pegging an adventure to celebrated exploration, however, modern travellers endeavour to invest their modern journeys with borrowed legitimacy.

It is possible to detect a shift in motive from Blackmore and his team (and for that matter, Mear and Swan) who exhibit a genuine and deep-rooted interest in the hero-figure of their journey, and the motives of their successors a generation later. The latter include Bruce Kirkby, author of *Sand Dance* (2000), and Adrian Hayes, an ex-officer of the British Army who describes his journey in *Footsteps of Thesiger* (2012). While both

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67 Leavenworth, *Second Journey*, p.71.

68 Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost, *Books and Travel: Inspiration, Quests and Transformation* (Bristol, Channel View Publications, 2012), p.142.

69 Roger Mear and Robert Swan, *A Walk to the Pole: To the Heart of Antarctica in the Footsteps of Scott* (New York: Random House, 1987), p.xii.

70 Mear and Swan, *Walk to the Pole*, p.20.

71 See, for example, Paul Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* [1967, 1991] (London: University of Georgia Press, 2002). Shepherd discusses the tension between genuine wilderness and managed natural space focusing on human control of the environment.

ostensibly travel in homage to Wilfred Thesiger,[72] they are ultimately more interested in the quest for adventure itself: indeed, Hayes admits to being 'addicted to a life of adventure, exploration and travel', and treats the destination as something of an afterthought.[73] Kirkby similarly measures up the desert wilderness as a commodity with a commercial value, expressed as literary output: 'we all liked the fact that deserts were not a popular destination in the world of adventuring … [but] remained foreign landscapes'.[74] His choice of the word 'foreign' sets up the psychological context in which his team will approach the desert as a contrast to the tamed landscapes of home and an otherwise random arena for human challenge. A sense of cashing in on the Thesiger legend is apparent throughout the resulting book as Kirkby relies on the connection to foreground a 'mythical age of exploration and romantic imperialism' (p.36). The allusion by a native Canadian to 'romantic imperialism' is problematic as Oman (the part of Arabia crossed by Kirkby) had 'in a past era' its own significant empire that stretched across the Gulf and along the shores of East Africa with only brief periods under Portuguese rule and latterly British protection.[75] The use of the term suggests a lack of interest in the historical specificity of the desert region Kirkby travels through and reveals a more commercially-driven desire to reference, in B.J. Moore-Gilbert's words, 'the myth of the gorgeous East'.[76] Indeed Kirkby and his friends appear to know little about either 'Arabia's Great Southern Desert' (the subtitle of his book), or of Thesiger (despite meeting him for what amounts to a blessing before their journey begins). This site-specific ignorance is a fact that Kirkby acknowledges, or even celebrates, as he declares that he and his friends, the two Clarke brothers, are 'grossly underqualified for the expedition' (p.25); this strategic self-deprecation may be intended to deflate any exaggerated expectations on behalf of the reader that may lead to unfavourable comparisons with Thesiger, but it is also suggestive of a lack of preparedness.

Adrian Hayes, in contrast, admits to researching Thesiger 'much like actors or actresses who read up on their characters when representing real-life people in films' (p.26); the preparation forms part of his identity as a 'de facto professional adventurer', casting about the Middle East for the next paid assignment: 'living in the region with a

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[72] Thesiger's legacy is discussed in the Introduction to this study.
[73] Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger,* p.20
[74] Kirkby, *Sand Dance,* p.11.
[75] Richard Hall, *Empires of the Monsoon: A History of the Indian Ocean and its Invaders* [1996] (London: Harper Collins, 1998).
[76] B. J. Moore-Gilbert, '"Gorgeous East" Versus "Land of Regrets"', in *Orientalism: A Reader,* ed. by A.L. Macfie (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp.273-76, p.276.

good knowledge of the area … it seemed a no-brainer to not consider something on my doorstep' (p.31). Thesiger's travels provide for Hayes no more than an excuse for the next professional exploit; the 'concept' involves 'myself and one or two locals only, rather than … fellow westerners' and without the support of GPS, guides, or mechanised transport and relying only on local knowledge, 'just as Thesiger had experienced'. The phrasing risks turning the relationship with Thesiger into a gimmick and objectifying the 'one or two locals only'. Kirkby, similarly, despite stating that he wanted to avoid succumbing to the 'prevalent game of firsts' (p.11), wanted his journey to be noteworthy in order to capture sponsorship, identifying that from this perspective living with the Bedu is 'crucial' (p.12). For Hayes and Kirkby, the appropriation of the Arabian desert and its inhabitants as 'glibly homogenised' Orientalist tropes employed to lend credibility to their journeys, does not, at least at the planning stage, appear to concern either traveller.[77]

As adventure texts, both Kirkby's account and Hayes's account function predictably enough. Both outline the challenges of trying to launch the journeys, with the obligatory complaint about the lack of interest and help by the authorities, the perfidiousness of the camel owners, the arduousness of the journey once underway and the picaresque anecdotes about 'the locals' encountered on route. These elements were present in Blackmore's account of his journey too but now a new sense of anxiety about the purpose and merit of the endeavour creeps into the accounts. In 1985, while probing aspects of authenticity surrounding the original journey, Blackmore does not question the value of his own. A decade and a half later, in 1999, this question is repeatedly presenting itself. Kirkby, for example, writes of the lack of pride in their endeavour: 'despite the apparent success of the expedition … I struggled with what our expedition had meant.' Kirkby recognises that he and his team had been so 'blinded by expectations' that they failed to 'embrace the experience we actually found' (p.218). There is a poignant photograph of Kirkby and team standing in front of Abu Dhabi's skyline before meeting with Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, President of UAE. The travellers are mounted on camel back – conspicuously so, given this is the country's wealthy, modern capital. It was here in the capital city that the travellers found the presumed old world of Bedu hospitality and charismatic sheikhs that they had sought in vain in the desert, but as this experience ran counter to their expectations of either Arabian desert or Gulf city, they failed to see it. Not only has the reading back through Thesiger's text proved an illusory

[77] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.53.

way of capturing the past, then, but the endeavour itself has obscured the present, limiting the value of the modern journey. The 'past sight', in other words has dominated the 'present site'.[78]

Involved in the focus on the past is generally an expression of regret or disappointment that the best is over. If this 'belatedness' was given nascent expression in Blackmore's text, it dominates Kirkby's account and indeed is a highly prevalent feature of Oriental travel texts in general. These often display, as Ali Behdad notes, an 'obsessive urge to discover an "authentic" Other'.[79] In today's desert footstep accounts it suggests retreat as if the authentic other resides in the past rather than, as Tim Youngs observes, in today's 'less interesting period with [its] fewer and smaller accomplishments'.[80] In a desert context this is very often expressed inversely and most desert footstep travellers lament at some point in their narrative that the peninsula (with its roads, trucks, pylons, oil derricks and urban sprawl) is not the 'Orient' of received tropes. Before Kirkby even stepped foot in Arabia he was launched on his way by Thesiger's own mournful disappointment: 'As I packed my briefcase, [Thesiger] shook his head. "You will be in Riyadh tomorrow … the world has changed and it is dreadfully sad"' (p.43). When Kirkby and his team finally reach the peninsula they try to stick faithfully to the path that Thesiger took in the hope that it will hint at the lost world he described but there is no way back, neither literally nor metaphorically, and it is significant that Kirkby is eventually talked out of the endeavour of historical re-enactment altogether. As his party approaches Liwa, towards the end of the journey (the more physically challenging end), he is persuaded by the Bedu guides, who do not share the commemorative value of his project, to take a short cut. This is a defining moment for Kirkby who writes: 'our vision had remained elusive. I realised it may have disappeared forever, passed to a bygone era' and he concedes that 'perhaps the problem lay in our expectations' (p.179). Kirkby, in observing changes to the lives of the Bedu – which, to be fair, he notes as a positive development – nonetheless calibrates those advancements as 'not ... without a cost': the cost is calculated in specifically Western terms as the 'spread of a generic world culture, a shocking loss of diversity, a growing sameness' (p.219). The 'shocking loss of diversity' borders on panic and makes it clear that the Arabian desert experience is more than just an ethnographic exercise; in such an exercise, the Bedu of Kirkby's adventure could have,

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[78] Henderson, 'The Travel Writer', p.231.

[79] Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), p.13.

[80] Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction,* p.89

and perhaps should have been rendered interesting by virtue of the ways in which they conflicted with received preconceptions (of their endurance, patience, hardiness) but this opportunity to reflect on specific difference is lost in the emphasis on an elusive 'bygone era'. Interestingly, however, the point at which Kirkby acknowledges that the 'problem' does not lie in a less traditional Bedu but in the eye that perceives them, is also the point at which the author becomes more interesting to the reader. The self-reflection opens up another channel of enquiry to the reader, namely that of the character of the writer, and this helps to remove Kirkby from the past of Thesiger and makes the account more modern.

For Kirkby, and indeed most desert travel writers, the desert mostly represents a zone of private challenge, an otherness to the tamed experience of home; the resulting narrative holds the travelling individual to account, demonstrating how well he or she measured up in the quest. Any erosion in the severity of the challenge impacts on the measurement of the journey's worth and the author's achievement within it. Blackmore, Kirkby and Hayes all rue the kind hospitality lavished on them during their journeys because, as Blackmore laments: 'we treasure our insular, isolated life in the desert. Frequent contacts threaten to erode it to the point where James even objects if an old vehicle track is seen in the sand'. There is no obligation upon these writers to acknowledge their disappointment in the intrusion of modern life and its comforts in their desert journeys but they choose to draw attention to it. Charles Blackmore laments the Mars bar that Jamie Bowden produces from a shop two thirds of the way through their journey and writes: 'what of the Toyota pick-ups? ... Should I turn a blind eye to them in order to maintain … impressions of a desert unchanged by encroaching technology?'[81] Bruce Kirkby writes with similar anxiety of various people turning up uninvited by four-wheel drive to cook them an ad hoc supper and dispense soft drinks, stating that 'the trucks we found following us at every turn diminished the sense of adventure that we had come seeking'.[82] Adrian Hayes resents the presence of the media and asks the news crews to leave them alone, writing: 'Despite appreciation for the media support, we were all becoming disillusioned at the intrusion and interference to the journey'.[83] For footstep travellers, modern impingement on the journey is problematic on several levels. Firstly it breaks in upon the sense of enactment, reminding the traveller that recapturing history is

[81] Blackmore, *Footsteps of Lawrence*, p.20.
[82] Kirkby, *Sand Dance*, p.120.
[83] Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger*, p.137. For an expression of a similar dilemma see Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* [1980] (London: Picador, 1998).

impossible; secondly, it spoils the illusion of adventure, inherent in the original journey, as extreme physical endeavour is tempered by the sense of help being near at hand, and thirdly, it challenges the notion of authentic experience, encapsulated in a journey that seeks to get off the beaten track. But the net result of all this lamentation about the intrusion of the present is that the reader is made to feel a new kind of authenticity being expressed, one in which only those who have been to the modern deserts of Arabia would know that Mars bars, fizzy drinks and satellite media are as part of the reality of these destinations as they are 'back home'. This helps close the gap, then, not just between author and reader, but also between the land of the travelled and the land of the traveller.

It may seem counterintuitive that second travellers use first journeys to create *authentic* experience but, as Dean MacCannell suggests, this is closely connected with the ways in which modern travellers distinguish themselves from tourists. MacCannell identifies 'front' regions that equate with 'the production that is projected to tourists' and 'back' regions which are accessed through interaction with native populations and through redundant forms of travel.[84] All these footstep travellers journey by camel and they share a common surprise in the inability of the modern beast to cope with the extended journeys of a now almost defunct nomadic lifestyle. Disappointment in the lethargy and lack of fitness of their camels exposes holes in the back region: 'to have done the journey on a camel when I could have done it in a car', wrote Thesiger, 'would have turned the venture into a stunt'.[85] Thesiger rode on camels because there was no other way to get about. In contrast, Kirkby and company were deemed ridiculous by the Bedu for even attempting the journey on camel and supply trucks kept turning up to their chagrin to ensure their (and the camels') safety. The journey thus becomes something of an extreme sport rather than a genuine wilderness expedition with the camel providing the means with which to 'get off the beaten track'. This is a common trope in modern travel literature and is suggestive of a need to reach, as James Buzard terms it, 'the authentic "cultures of place" – the genius loci ... lurking in secret precincts "off the beaten track" where it could be discovered only by the sensitive "traveller", not the vulgar tourist'.[86] Thesiger lived and travelled with the Bedu with apparently little thought about authenticity because there was nothing to authenticate. In contrast, Kirkby and Hayes look to repeat the authentic Bedu experience because there is little that marks their

[84] Dean MacCannell *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p.105.
[85] Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* p.278.
[86] Buzard, *The Beaten Track,* p.6.

endeavours from the adventurous tourist expedition, except that their journeys involve more time, money and effort than most tourist exploits.

One way in which Kirkby and Hayes attempt to distinguish their experiences as travellers rather than tourists is through the management of their expedition team. Earlier travellers, including Thomas and Thesiger, attempt no intervention in either the habits of their guides nor the specific direction of their journey; they earn the respect of the Bedu precisely because of their willingness to undergo personal hardship in order to observe nomadic life and be counted, at least for the duration of the journey, as one of the tribe. Kirkby and Hayes in contrast both assume, in something of a retrograde glance at an imperial past, that the interaction with Bedu works best through white Western male oversight of subservient local guides. In *Footsteps of Thesiger*, for example, Hayes imperiously cautions 'the boys' (the Bedu guides), apparently in Arabic, about the hazards of fasting during the early part of the journey in case it impedes progress. For this he rightly earns their rebuke: 'Yes Adrian, we know, we not stupid. We be OK' (p.93). The broken English is not 'nation language', as defined by Edward Brathwaite, in which the language has been transformed productively by its users; this is bastardised language, selected to demonstrate cultural authority over the Bedu guides.[87] Whether accurately recalled or not, this piece of dialogue functions to reassert the author's dominance – at least over the text, if not over 'his' team. If Hayes talked to the guides in Arabic, then why, it may be wondered, did he choose to report their answer in a substandard form of English. The translation helps to silence the Bedu and their challenge of his command. This signifies a much larger act of marginalisation,[88] especially of people descended from a largely oral tradition, that Emma LaRocque argues (in relation to first nation peoples of Canada) is institutionalised in English literature.[89] Ultimately, the passage reads as an unresolved usurpation of authority from which Hayes, in the direction of his journey, never fully recovers. Kirkby is similarly given the illusion of leadership of his expedition by his Bedu guide whereas in fact all the important decisions (about route, when to leave and how far to go) are made on his behalf. Both Kirkby and Hayes describe various attempts to wrest control of their plans but the reality of their journeys is of modern commercial enterprise: they finance their respective trips and their guides take over the arrangements. As such, there is little to distinguish their expeditions from a tourist trek in

87 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London, New Beacon Books, 1984).
88 This subject is returned to in detail in the next chapter.
89 Emma LaRocque, Jeanne Perrault and Sylvia Vance, eds., *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), Preface, p.xx.

Wadi Rum or a guided trip to Sharqiya Sands in Oman where the payment of money similarly gives the illusion of decision-making.[90]

But even if footstep travellers *are* engaged in glorified tourism, even if they find their own journeys unconvincingly authentic, this does not mean that the resulting accounts are without value. In a globalised context, where critics such as Jean Baudrillard and Marc Augé posit a world in which there is a crisis of meaning brought about by 'more and more signs, but less and less meaning',[91] the reader can identify with the existential angst of Blackmore, for example, when he writes 'I am trying to find something in this desert ... only I am not sure what it is'.[92] The search for 'something in this desert' is calibrated differently over time. For Thesiger, in *The Life of My Choice,* the inherent value of desert journey is expressed primarily in terms of the individual human spirit: 'I was exhilarated by the sense of space, the silence, and the crisp cleanness of the sand. I felt in harmony with the past, travelling as men had travelled for untold generations across the deserts, dependent for their survival on the endurance of their camels and their own inherited skills'.[93] On reaching Abu Dhabi and being met by the late Sheikh Zayed, who questions why he took such a lengthy route to reach his destination, Thesiger reputedly replies: 'I was not travelling to get here, Your Highness, I was just travelling'.[94] Travel for its own sake is at the heart of footstep travel too. Destination and journey are bound up in the original itinerary.

While Leavenworth suggests that for this reason the second traveller 'disappears from the text', appearing only as sighs of disappointment, I would contend that on the contrary, this helps makes the footstep traveller more visible.[95] Furthermore, second travellers, almost despite themselves, burst into the text at crucial moments of connection with the wilderness: Blackmore, for example, writes: 'we are silent, dwarfed by nature and, I feel, timeless amongst it all' (p.32). Elsewhere, he reflects with similar awe on the virtues of his chief guide: 'He is a desert nomad ... as I watch him it seems to me as though he has pushed everything I know far away' (p.19). The desert and its inhabitants may not fully live up to expectations, and none of the footstep travellers are particularly triumphant on arrival at their destination, but like Thesiger they come to celebrate that

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[90] See, for example, Jenny Walker and Paul Clammer, *Jordan* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2015), p.10.

[91] Tarik Sabry, *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: on Media, the Modern and the Everyday* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2010), p.98.

[92] Blackmore, *Footsteps of Lawrence,* p.122.

[93] Thesiger, *Life of My Choice*; quoted in Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger,* p.24.

[94] Recollected by Ian Fairservice, Chairman of the UAE publishing house, Motivate, who helped facilitate Thesiger's journeys, quoted in Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger,* p.29.

[95] Leavenworth, *Second Journey*, p.45.

the journeying is all. As Hayes states in the epilogue to his travel account: 'stripped of all luxury and material goods ... one takes a very different perspective on the world'; he recognises during the stark desert journey the things that are 'truly important in life. That is family, friends and health. Relationships, communication and life' (p.264). The appreciation of travelling for the sake of travelling, and the benefit of a renewed reappraisal of life's priorities finds resonance in the rhythm of crossing great tracts of either featureless plain or the incessant plodding through dunes. They may not enjoy the experience (Kirkby finds the desert 'foreign' and cannot understand its reputed allure) but each of the footstep travellers find great personal reward in what Hayes describes as the 'peace, tranquillity, serenity' of being alone with their thoughts (p.159). Thesiger famously wrote in the Prologue to *Arabian Sands* that 'no man can live this life and emerge unchanged' and the sense of this psychological metamorphosis finds an objective correlative in the wearing of Bedu clothing and the assuming of an Arabic name which all the first and second travellers considered in this chapter willingly succumb to. As Kirkby writes:

> I thought about how I was Saleh now. The names Sheikh Salem had given us only three weeks earlier now seemed intrinsically tied to each of us, representing our existence here – a life so different from that we knew at home as to be almost irreconcilable. (p.115)

The desert seems to offer a way for these travellers to let go of their modern realities and adopt alter egos; the monotony and hardship of the journey encourages internal reflection and heightens their sense of observation, both inwardly as well as outwardly. The desert journey remains, in other words, the ultimate ascetic experience where time is suspended and there is a paring back of the soul to necessities.[96] In its hardship, the journey legitimises escape from a worse predicament, namely, as James Duncan puts it, 'the social and psychological pressures of modernity'.[97] Blackmore reflects on how the desert satisfies his inner quest with two poignant rhetorical questions: 'Why do I need to see this journey into the desert as an escape? Why am I incapable of facing up to the reality of my own time?' (p.142). This study attempts to find answers to those two questions in the subsequent chapters.

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[96] See Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* [1990] (London: Tauris Parke, 2010), pp.210-11 for a discussion on the masochistic relish of hardship in desert travel.

[97] James Duncan, 'Sites of Representation: Place, Time and the Discourse of the Other', in James Duncan and Derek Gregory, *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.46. Remote places offer, according to Duncan, a retreat 'into a more "natural" place and time'.

Where some, like Leavenworth, find that the second traveller is often reduced to a postscript of the original journey, this discussion has contended that the second traveller, in sharing inner thoughts about the nature of his journey and the anxiety represented in a perceived lack of authority in the enterprise, is fully 'present' and takes the reader along the same journey of quest. Only the quest has changed: the goal is no longer epistemological in the way that former desert travellers recorded Bedouin customs and manners, but is theoretical in the way it searches for clarity of purpose in an era when modernity threatens to fracture meaning, question identity and contest notions of masculinity, and where globalisation makes travel itself the subject of critical dilemma. Out of this unsettled purpose, as the discussion next explores, new meaning is brought to the genre by the most recent footstep travellers who use the form as an instrument of indigenisation.

Opportunities for the future – Evans in the footsteps of Thomas

'The metal blade of the shovel', Mark Evans writes with mock gravity at the beginning of his journey's account, 'hit what might have been a human bone, and I had an increasingly uneasy feeling that we shouldn't be doing this' (p.9). In a refreshingly novel start to a footstep narrative, in which the author is to be found rooting around a graveyard in Bristol looking for the last resting place of Bertram Thomas, guided in his somewhat macabre endeavour by the proceedings of the local historical society, Evans simultaneously and perhaps unconsciously hits upon a seam of modern critical theory that considers the palimpsestic space and the 'interplay between personal and communal narratives of identity and belonging'.[98] The tombstone he eventually unearths appears out of the undergrowth almost as a parody of itself, 'covered in lichens and moss' and divested of the lead that had once made the lettering legible. From its outset, then, this desert account appears to invite a different kind of reading of a second journey, one in which new inscriptions are being made, as we shall see, in the space of erasure brought about by time.

The interplay between personal and communal narratives is a good way to describe both Evans's journey and the text that follows. A former polar explorer, Evans

[98] Anna Ball, *Palestinian Literature and Film in Postcolonial Feminist Perspective* [2012] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p.149. Ball applies this term to the context of Palestinian poetry, writing of the 'diasporic landscape as a palimpsest of spaces, times and experiences that come to be layered upon one another', but the concept remains broadly relevant here too. For a discussion on palimpsest, see S. Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

is credited in Oman with making the desert accessible as an educational experience for young Arab students who have become dissociated from their desert roots and his most recent journey, retracing the route of Bertram Thomas (the first, although little remembered, Western explorer to cross the Empty Quarter) stands out as a 'first' in its own right for its inclusive nature.[99] Where other footstep travellers have emphasised their own heroic qualities, Evans's attention is on reviving an interest in heritage among the Omani companions that accompany him and among the extended Omani team whom he involves in all parts of the preparation, execution and post-event evaluation of the journey. Evans's perspective is firmly on the present and the future, therefore, rather than on a nostalgic engagement with the past and as such the footstep nature of the journey is reduced to form, rather than content – a way of giving shape and publicity to a modern endeavour that is more about education and outreach rather than personal glorification. The resulting accounts, which take several forms including digital tweets and public lectures, includes the expedition narrative entitled *Crossing the Empty Quarter in the Footsteps of Bertram Thomas* (2016) and takes the footstep genre (despite the somewhat unpromising title) into new territory. Where in earlier footstep accounts (such as that of Hayes) the subgenre threatens to collapse under the weight of its own intertextuality, tedious in its 'saturation of cultural stereotypes',[100] Evans's account, by deliberately unseating the author's own supremacy in the journey and highlighting instead the Arab and expatriate facilitators and companions who make the journey possible, manages to 'Make it New' and in so doing restores depth to a project that may appear to have only surface value.[101]

Recognising that 'this journey would be as much about people as about place' (p.40), Evans's choice to follow Bertram Thomas is apposite because of all the desert explorers in Arabia, Thomas is the one who exhibits more interest in tribal rather than desert encounter; indeed the landscape is largely ignored in his descriptions except in rare moments of wonderment that interrupt the catalogue of itemisation. Observational, erudite, anecdotal without being judgemental, and with a subdued sense of authorial voice, Thomas, at least according to Tiddrick, is 'the least flamboyant of Arabian explorers'.[102] There is nothing conveyed of the writer's excitement in approaching the

[99] Evans was awarded the OBE (2015) and the RGS Geographical Award for encouraging young people to explore the Middle East (2019).
[100] Allen, *Intertextuality*, p.183.
[101] See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
[102] Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby,* p.197.

challenge of his journey and even less of his eventual accomplishment. Instead the account acts as a quasi-anthropological work on the 'scattered and semi-barbarous nomad societies', undertaken by an amateur scientist, albeit with an impressive knowledge of tribal dialects.[103] His approach to the Bedu is similar to his approach to the animals and plants of the desert which he traps, measures, pickles and labels – the Bedu are the subject of his scrutiny, not his empathy. He even travels with a pair of callipers to measure tribal heads – 'it was no easy task to find willing subjects', he writes, 'there is always in the minds of rude people the fear of magic or worse, while the religious among them hate to be pawed by infidel hands'.[104] While clearly a man defined by the cultural limitations of his time, Thomas at least was actively involved with the Bedu (unlike many modern travellers whose interactions with the Bedu are perfunctory at best), and appreciative of their many skills in withstanding a hostile environment.

Mark Evans's desert journey is similarly delineated in terms of modern political realities: he does not cross a *terra nullius* – a 'nobody's land' – he explicitly travels through the Dhofar region of southern Oman, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and the Khor Al-Adaid of southern Qatar. Furthermore, the journey is planned partially as a celebration of a modern political reality, coinciding with the forty-fifth anniversary of Sultan Qaboos Al-Said's reign – a reign widely credited with ushering in a renaissance of learning, enterprise and development in Oman. Evans celebrates the modern realities, recognising that re-enactment is neither a feasible nor a desirable part of the footstep journey: 'you can't replicate what Bertram Thomas did – the environment has changed. You can replicate the food, the camels, but you have to deal with the here and now – there's a huge border to cross that wasn't there before, for example'.[105] In *Crossing the Empty Quarter*, then, there is refreshingly no attempt to disguise the twenty-first-century attributes of the journey, creating a more useful archive for those reading the account in years hence.

At many levels, Evans's footstep journey deliberately steps beyond the present, and courts instead the legacy of the enterprise. Authenticity, Evans argues, is not that important, or at least only to a degree: 'Twenty-five per cent is about learning lessons from the past, fifty per cent of the journey is about the present but twenty-five per cent of

[103] Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.xxiv.
[104] Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.25.
[105] Author's Interview with Mark Evans, 20 October 2014.

our journey is also about creating opportunities for the future.'[106] He goes on to explain that His Excellency Sayyid Badr Bin Hamed Al-Busaidi, one of the journey's official Omani champions, endorsed the journey as an opportunity, through media outreach in schools, to use the Bertram Thomas journey as a way of reconnecting young Arab people with their heritage through education, hard work and endeavour. In *Crossing the Empty Quarter*, Evans describes a life that has changed radically since Thomas's journey and this is why the focus of this footstep account is not so much on two or three white expeditioners (Evans, his photographers and fixers) as on camel handler Amur Al-Wahibi and Outward Bound colleague Mohamed Al-Zadjali, who are the 'first Omanis for 85 years to cross the Empty Quarter' (p.33). It is their journey that sends an inspirational message to Arab youth and it is this story that is told in the local media in daily updates and on Twitter. Evans writes: 'It was important to me ... we harness the power of technology and social media ... to communicate values, and create positive role models for young people in Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, at the same time as reconnecting them to their culture and heritage' (p.34). As such, Evans taps into the memory streams not of his own culture, in which the desert functions as empty and hostile, but into that of the Omanis whom he travels with, noting that the wells such as Bir Faisal and Bir Hadi – just 'dots on maps' (p.48) to Evans – represented 'life-saving locations' for the Bedu. As such he is reminded that 'a map of Oman will show ... main roads, but the real stories' together with Bedouin history, are located where there are no roads (p.39). This is the Arabian desert, then, being redrawn both for the Western reader but also for the young local Arab, following the journey on a mobile application. The aim to communicate and connect is achieved at some cost to Evans who spends the time he would rather give to sitting around the camp fire at night resting, blogging about his journey through the Thuraya IP satellite terminal. This piece of technology becomes a vital and acknowledged part of the journey's paraphernalia; it is not treated as hitherto in footstep accounts as a guilty secret, hidden away for emergency and a source of dilemma compromising the supposed authenticity of the journey; on the contrary it is directly related to the journey's stated goals and as such facilitates its hoped for legacy.

The focus on legacy redefines the role of the original traveller, Bertram Thomas, in Evans's journey. Thomas is neither extolled as a hero figure (such as Lawrence in Blackmore's journey) nor relegated to convenient pretext (as Thesiger in Hayes's

[106] Author's Interview with Mark Evans, 19 March 2016. See Appendix B. Three of the subheadings in this chapter allude to this quotation.

journey); instead Thomas becomes a role model, a lesson in humility, for the current team. Their own achievement is measured constantly with that of both Thomas and of Sheikh Saleh Bin Kalut Al-Rashidi Al-Kathiri, his guide. As with Blackmore's evocation of Lawrence, these figures haunt the modern journey, manifesting in talismanic objects such as the *khanjar* (ceremonial dagger) worn by Thomas's guide on the original journey; this object acquires totemic potency as it is worn by the guide's grandson who joins Evans for part of the modern journey.[107] If mostly benign, the presence of the original travellers is also partly spectral, threatening to foreground the journey's limitations through the belittlement of the current endeavour: 'without doubt', writes Evans, 'we are truly humbled by what those remarkable people did, and a key aim of this journey is to celebrate what they achieved' (p.137). It is fitting, however, that a narrative that begins, as we have seen, with the exhumation of Thomas's ghost at the graveyard where the explorer is buried, lays the ghost to rest again at the end of the journey, stepping beyond Thomas to embrace the significance of the present-day accomplishment:

> Whilst one of our aims was to put these two forgotten explorers and one historic journey back into the spotlight (by the time we returned to Muscat we had 5,000 followers on Facebook, and media coverage elsewhere reached out to an estimated 165 million people from than 170 nations), the most important aim of all was to reconnect local young people to their heritage. (p.194)

Unlike Blackmore's conjuring up of the past, this passage shows that Evans manages to avoid Thomas casting a long shadow over the expedition by utilising strategies that focus on a territory, namely the present, that Thomas cannot cross.

The key to the passage above is that it is about not one but *two* forgotten explorers. Evans is determined to bring Thomas's fellow traveller out of the shadows, in the same way that he continually draws his own Omani companions into the narrative:

> Whilst Thomas was undoubtedly a forgotten explorer, Bin Kalut was even more so. No global lecture tours and medals for him, yet Thomas had depended on him totally for support, guidance and safe passage across the Empty Quarter. The teamwork and trust between Oman and United Kingdom was something we wanted to replicate on our journey. (p.34)

By giving credit where due, Evans manages to indiginise both his own and Thomas's journey. In so doing, he finds a way not just of bridging the past, present and future, but also in crossing the cultural divide in a journey that emphasises intercultural dialogue. If

[107] This piece of memorabilia Evans, *Crossing the Empty Quarter*, p.93 - illustration).

this claim seems rather far-fetched, it is worth noting that the Sultan of Oman, the King of Saudi Arabia, the Prince of Wales – who writes the book's Foreword – and Sheikh Joann Al-Thani of Qatar are all cited in the book's Acknowledgements for their personal endorsement of the journey. Even the briefest of scans through the photographs in Evans's book, furthermore, shows the extent to which tribal leaders, dressed in their ceremonial finery, found value in the journey, pouring out to greet the travellers and lavishing their hospitality upon them. At one such gathering, the elders spoke encouragingly of a journey that replicated their own nomadic range in the time before borders; they saw Evans's journey as a nostalgic one, not for the implied imperialism of insignificant head-measuring Westerners with their incomprehensible thirst for unforced journeys, but for the pan-Arabism lost in the political realities of nationhood arising out of twentieth-century circumstances.[108] In crossing physical borders, then, Evans's journey prompts a wistful recollection among the tribal elders of 'a time when political borders in Arabia were much less sharply defined' (p.168); the journey as such seems to exist in a state of suspended animation, caught between the realities of past and present and the vague possibilities of a utopian future. It is a fragile zone, however, and just one year after the journey's completion, a deterioration in relations between Gulf neighbours would have rendered the journey impossible. For the duration of Evans's journey, then, the sense of one imagined community, defined by a desert at its core, is a potent one that blows out to the edges and beyond: 'Over the past few weeks, people from more than 150 countries have logged onto the website, and more than 4,500 people have been following our progress across the Empty Quarter on Facebook each day – all thanks to us being able to access the internet from the centre of the largest sand desert on earth' (p.171). This represents an achievement unmatched by the original journey which was communicated by telegram and caused only momentary interest among a limited audience of the British educated elite.

In one of the biggest understatements in travel literature, Bertram Thomas ends the account of his epic journey thus: 'Half an hour later we entered the walls of the fort. The Rub Al-Khali had been crossed'.[109] For Thomas, the Empty Quarter, with its continually smoothed sands, provided a blank canvas upon which to project extreme human endeavour, mostly white and male in complexion. For Evans the canvas is already

[108] I recorded the comments noted here during one such gathering in Shisr (Southern Oman), on Day 8 of Evans's journey towards the Saudi Arabian border on 17 December 2018.
[109] Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.299.

much more diversely marked, not only with the exploits of Thomas and Bin Kalut, but also by the recollections of Evans's own Arab companions and the memories of the elders they meet. Fittingly, the canvas is further textured by the graffiti of ancient peoples that predate even tribal memory. In a journey that is expressly not about 'firsts' but about 'communication, and connection' (p.79), it is appropriate that one of the significant finds of Evans's journey is a rare piece of Pre-Islamic script, etched into the rocks in the roof of a cave in southern Oman; a photograph of the writing is released on social media and before the team leave the vicinity, the image of the inscription has found its way to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in France where it is scrutinised by a French scholar. Evans informs local explorer, Musallam Jedad, who discovered the inscriptions six years earlier, about their provenance and the latter poses for a photograph beside them. Interestingly, the inscriptions resist translation as 'there's no vertical line between words'.[110] It might also resist translation, in a less literal sense, because there is no horizontal line (of 'deep, horizontal comradeship') between Jedad and the people of the alien script as it predates the origins of the Arab nation to which this local explorer belongs.[111] The desert as such is an archive of mysteries that modern human beings are no longer privileged to read.

As Evans sits on the cold sand one morning, he observes the hieroglyphics of animal tracks that imprint the sand, and speculates about the 'intricate stories of desert creatures ... and their various states of mind' (p.142) and turns to Jay Giffiths's *Wild: an Elemental Journey* in order to try to make sense of their inscriptions:

> In the desert, you are in fact sitting in the middle of a text, with lines, history, reference and narratives that remain until the wind wipes the slate clean, erases the pencil marks on the page, and then the tribes of tiny scribes of beetle and bird begin to write again.[112]

The act of writing and erasing captured in this passage, is also recorded, as Evans informs us, in Thomas's text where he writes that 'no wild beast or insect pass but needs must leave its history in the sands, and the record lasts until a rising wind bears a find sand along to obliterate it' (p.143). In this sense nature participates not just in the writing, erasure and rewriting of natural history but also, as one footprint replaces another as acted

[110] Professor Christian Robin, quoted in Evans, *Crossing the Empty Quarter*, p.65.
[111] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] (London: Verso, 1991).
[112] Jay Griffiths, *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp.290-91.

upon by the wind, in the palimpsestic sense in which a desert footstep journey is foregrounded within intertextuality.

Evans's journey is not confined to the narrow confines of the footstep genre but participates in much larger critical discourses summoned up by that concept. As modern critics, David Marshall et al, define in their exploration of intertextuality, inscriptions are made through a 'collaborative, digital storytelling that combines images, narration, and sound [in order to] provide a method that emphasises the polyvocality and multi-temporality that the term palimpsest implies'.[113] As we have seen, Evans's work is collaborative in that it acknowledges his fellow travellers as equal partners in the enterprise; it is digital in that the account of the journey is broadcast around the world in nightly tweets, and it acts as storytelling, appropriate to the oral tradition of the desert, in the way it tells nightly versions of the modern journey (through diary excerpts) while the team participate in regular readings of Thomas's *Arabia Felix* (1930). This multi-temporality shifts the reader's focus from the 1930s context of Thomas to the context of the modern day journey and is further underpinned in the book's many images, such as in the reproduction of Thomas's map, for example, where the copy of the original map is photographed pegged out on a mat on the sand by the team's modern Garmin GPS unit. The multi-visual nature of the project is further captured in its collage of reprographic historical documents that include old photographs of Thomas, newspaper clippings, invoices and sextant records. These, together with information boxes, some of which are supplied by subject experts, the large chunks of Thomas's original text, and the dovetailing of these with Evans's own diary excerpts and digital tweets, all contribute to the polyvocal nature of the work and emphasise the way in which Thomas's legacy is being reinscribed by the modern venture, replacing the lead in the letters of his tomb's forgotten headrest.

It is in this sense that I would argue that Evans's work is expressly modern. His account is not the 'value-free, decorative, de-historicised quotation of past forms' that may be levelled as a criticism of the work of Kirkby and Hayes wherein Thesiger's text is provided as something of a clichéd way of reading the modern journey.[114] *Crossing the Empty Quarter*, in contrast, makes something new through the novel arrangement of

[113] David J. Marshall, Lynn A. Staeheli, Dima Smaira Konstantin Kastrissianakis, 'Narrating Palimpsestic Spaces' in *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49, no.5 (2017), 1163-1180.

[114] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* [1989, 2002] (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.90; Hutcheon uses the quoted phrase to describe what she identifies as prevailing critical attitudes towards postmodern parody.

familiar parts, through a process of giving visibility and voice to the indigenous people with whom Evans shares a journey and who were part of the original journey he seeks to retrace. This gives his footstep account a modern value that takes it beyond mere narrative device as it chimes with local and regional attempts to re-indiginise their culture after a prolonged period of Western cultural domination.

There is an interesting comparison between Evans's account and that of James (now Jan) Morris (whose work is considered more closely in the following chapter). Morris also undertook a second journey, albeit running a few minutes behind the first journey, following in the retinue of cars that trailed the Sultan Taimur's progress across Oman's desert interior in the 1950s. In one of the few soul-searching parts of the resulting travelogue, *Sultan in Oman*, Morris drops the usual entertaining and ironic flippancy to reflect on the role of the expatriate in the future of the country:

> Some deep rooted imperial instinct within me kept me rigidly apart and divided from [the Omanis] ... I remained – what? The administrator? The educator? The policeman? The exploiter? There was a patronising element in this instinct … a subtle, lingering conviction that we had some indefinite rights or privileges denied to others ... I saw myself standing there, looking towards the Arabian shore, as a chip in the huge antique mosaic of imperialism.[115]

Half a century on from these insightful self-reflections, the kind of travel Morris describes has become problematised by postcolonial anxieties and while this chapter has sought to defend specific footstep travels as one way in which the past can be productively revisited through the hindsight of modern sensibility, there remains the risk that this mode of expression in general helps to perpetuate the very things – 'the patronising element', the essence of privilege – that critical theory and the projects of postcolonial writers have tried to eschew. Footstep travel, after all, is fundamentally about reconstructing and reviving white male travel from the past in which indigenous people have been led, as we have seen, without appetite into places they have no particular desire to be in order to fulfil the economic imperatives (including book sales) of their white patrons. As such, it could be argued that while the winds of change have long since passed through the region in political terms, imperialism still impacts at a cultural level, helping to reinvest old stereotypes and intercultural relationships with outmoded value.

Evans is not immune from some of the observations above but his attempt to recast the footstep journey into something more democratic is encouraging for the future

[115] Morris, *Sultan in Oman,* p.152.

direction of the genre. Where Morris was a visitor to Oman, Evans is a long-term resident in the country and region at large. Morris tagged along to observe his hosts; Evans planned his journey with his Omani colleagues around the needs of his adoptive country as identified by local sheikhs. It is primarily for this reason that Evans's journey succeeds, backed by regional governments, where many similar proposals to cross the Empty Quarter have met with difficulties and continuous postponement and are yet to occur.[116] For the subgenre of footstep travel to remain modern and relevant, then, it has to become less about the white, Western, male hegemony and more about engaging with the local population in narratives that are relevant to an Arab heritage, or at least a shared heritage. Without adopting that polyphonic approach, it is likely that the Arabian desert footstep genre will descend into meaningless pastiche – into the kind of journeying that you can buy in Wadi Rum, complete with a Lawrence headdress and a camel led by the nose.

[116] The proposed journey of Harriet Griffey in the footsteps of James (now Jan) Morris, commemorating sixty years since Taimur's journey in 2014 to 2015 is one such example of a journey failing to materialise.

2. Desert and Sown: The Narration of Progress and Modernity

While the previous chapter established that the work of footstep travellers is often illuminating about the nature of 'self' in the modern narrative, particularly as defined in relation to the protagonists of prior desert texts, the present chapter turns, with the aid of postcolonial theory and anthropology, to those modern writers whose main aim is to reveal the 'other' in their Arabian desert encounters in a different way from their predecessors. In so doing, this chapter addresses the second of the research questions outlined in the introduction, namely the extent to which modern writers are able to look beyond the stereotypes associated with the region to provide a more equitable account of Arab modernities. Accounts of both the traditional inhabitants of the desert and the urban environments that have arisen out of that landscape are interrogated for what they reveal about the relationship between the writer and the observed. Works focusing on encounter with the Bedouin, on mechanised desert travel and on the urban experience, are highlighted to show that although outmoded binaries continue to exist in some desert literature, many modern writers are at pains to reach a deeper, postcolonial understanding of the specificities of the regions through which they travel.

At the beginning of *The Last of the Bedu*, Michael Asher's extensive travel narrative published in 1996 in which he described thousands of miles of his own desert journeys, Asher quotes from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, hinting at the age-old tension, dating back to the story of Cain and Abel, between the desert and the sown:

> The Arabian Desert, until about 1940, had remained practically unaffected by other cultures, and particularly Western culture. In the future one may anticipate change … The desert, nevertheless, will remain the desert, although it will become less isolated, more comfortable, and possibly more productive. The question that remains to be answered, however, is whether or not the Arab individuality will become merged into an urban anonymity.[1]

Within this description the familiar characteristic of the desert's supposed immutability is posited; the terrain can lose most of its defining characteristics as a zone of isolation, hardship and apparent barrenness and yet, it is supposed, it 'will remain the desert'. The people who dwell within the desert, by contrast, are considered vulnerable to the vicissitudes of presumed human progress. The choice of quotation by Asher is an

[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, cited in Michael Asher, *The Last of the Bedu: In Search of the Myth* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1996), Foreword.

interesting one on several levels not least because, in referencing an encyclopaedia, the need to believe in the desert's immutability is underscored by its presentation in a book of apparent facts. Of relevance to the present discussion in a chapter that focuses on the human story within the desert wilderness, however, is the implied lament of 'Arab individuality' being subsumed by the altogether more pejorative concept of 'urban anonymity' as the supposed result of 'Western culture'. This hints at familiar binaries of nature and the nurtured, wild and tame, savage and civilised, rural and urban – East and West – and suggests that there is something to regret about the one becoming globalised, or 'merged' into the other.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter which analysed presentations of self in modern desert literature that focuses on Arabia, there is generally a set-piece on the disappointment that is occasioned by the notion of the blurring of these supposed opposites, expressed either as a eulogy for traditional modes of being within the desert, or as a complete expurgation of the modern within the account. But not all desert literature is unremittingly anti-modern. Some recent travellers in Arabia have deliberately contested the familiar tropes of the Oriental literary inheritance by drawing attention to the modern Middle East; their work, this chapter argues in an analysis of presentations of the Other, challenges over-simplified, relativistic binaries that obscure more than they reveal and reaches towards a better understanding of the region today.

The discussion focuses on the work of five modern desert travellers published since 1950, namely, James (now Jan) Morris, Barbara Toy, Jonathan Raban, Michael Asher and Tim Mackintosh-Smith, each of whom emphasises the contemporary nature of their enterprise. Their work challenges established tropes by showing that the Arabia they journey within may be desert, but it is peopled, mapped, mechanised and the context of some of the world's great modern cities. While each of the texts discussed herein have limitations in terms of the extent to which they are able to eschew a vision of the old Orient, the discussion argues that they nonetheless contribute to a counter-discourse that explores various Arab modernities, whether found in the desert, in the city or in the 'imaginative geography' in between. In order to give some sense of how much of a *counter*-discourse these narratives provide, the discussion first addresses more common representations of the human story within modern desert travel narratives, paying specific attention to the Bedu as a group of people whose lives have traditionally provided a 'happy hunting ground' for Western speculation. If, as Mark Cocker writes, 'abroad is always a metaphysical blank sheet on which the traveller could write or rewrite the story,

as he or she would wish it to be', this chapter contends that the Arabian desert and those who dwell in it continue to act as similarly invested entities.[2] As such, the discussion shows through analysis of travel writing criticism, and with reference to anthropology, that the attempt to disentangle established binaries is often a self-deluding exercise, but one which at least deserves credit for the attempt.

Desert but not deserted – the modern Bedu

In Arabian desert literature the phrase 'desert and the sown' inevitably brings to mind the work of the pioneering travel writer, Gertrude Bell, who, in a title of the same name, described desert travels that focus on people rather than place.[3] The phrase 'desert and sown', however, predates Bell: indeed, according to archaeologist Cherie J. Lenzen, it is now so widely assumed to be true it is as good as 'a concept'.[4] In Lenzen's definition, the desert is 'the place of the nomad, who lives outside the city and is not limited by its constructs. The area of the sown is that of the city-dweller'. According to this definition, the notion of 'inside' and 'outside' is established in almost Venn diagram terms, indicating the set of all things civilised represented by the city, and all things other, represented by the desert. The Bedu are not placed inside the desert but 'outside the city', suggestive of the liminality of their role in the literary imagination – free, unanchored but also excluded, occupying only the interstices of Arab modernity and heritage. Despite the term's ability to conjure more than just the two opposite notions of wild and tame but also the border zone in between, the distinction is not universally embraced. Ethnographers such as Donald Powell Cole and Soraya Altorki, for example, seek to draw the two parts of the term into a dynamic that is continually evolving: 'Ours is an anti-essentialist view of ... deserts and desert development. Where many see a vast divide between desert and sown, we see a long history of interaction that has recently accelerated rapidly in magnitude'.[5] Theirs is not a view often shared in desert travel literature, however, where the distinction is kept artificially alive in order to preserve the imaginative possibilities invested in the term. Furthermore, the distinction is often extrapolated to encompass a

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2 Mark Cocker, *Loneliness and Time: The Story of British Travel Writing* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p.18

3 Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown: Travels in Palestine and Syria* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1907) and see Rosemary O'Brian, *The Desert and the Sown: The Syrian Adventures of the Female Lawrence of Arabia* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001).

4 Cherie J. Lenzen, 'The Desert and the Sown: An Introduction to the Archaeological and Historiographic Challenge', *Mediterranean Archaeology,* 16 (2003), 5-12.

5 Donald Powell Cole and Soraya Altorki, *Bedouin, Settlers, and Holiday-makers: Egypt's Changing Northwest Coast* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998), p.39.

wider contingent, carrying with it the danger, in Anshuman Mondal's words, of conflating 'the Bedouins with Arabs as a whole, [by] drawing upon the residual prejudices of the agricultural *fellah* toward the nomadic Bedouin'.[6]

Most desert travel writers make a point of avoiding all mention of the *fellaheen* [farmers, the urbanised] and, in as much as they refer to an urban experience at all, these references are generally couched in laments about the corrupting nature of the desert's industrial fringe upon the life of supposed freedom enjoyed by the Bedu. Charles Blackmore, for example, observes what he describes as the tainting effect of the urban on the Bedu way of life:

> Mohammed gracefully declines [a Miranda, popular fizzy drink] – it is as though he feels as I do, and will not indulge in anything which he considers 'un-Bedouin'. For this I admire him though I am saddened by the changes which will inevitably be forced upon him ... He squats by his camel with the dignity and humility of the desert nomad – facing him are the town Arabs of a new era who are fascinated to see camels in the dirty streets of El Mureigha.[7]

Not only are the 'Arabs of a new era' (whatever that era may be) edited out of, or apologised for, in accounts such as this, but so too are the urban and industrial realities of desert travel and the mechanisms that make modern travel possible within the desert. This leads to the somewhat bizarre spectacle in the above passage of modern Western travellers leading reluctant camels across sands that are traversed more naturally these days by Bedu in pickup trucks, and shrinking from the sight of a Mars bar and a fizzy drink offered by local sheikhs bemused by the unnecessary austerity of their endeavours.[8] In such avoidance of the modern in desert narratives, there is an inevitable reference, either conscious or unconscious, to Wilfred Thesiger, the literary behemoth looming over all desert quests of the second half of the twentieth century. Although he reconciled himself to urbanisation and modernisation in the 1991 preface to *Arabian Sands,* and even praised Abu Dhabi as an 'impressive city', Thesiger is largely remembered by later travellers as the one who 'craved for the past, resented the present and dreaded the future,' and his

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6 Anshuman A. Mondal, *Nationalism and Post-Colonial Identity: Culture and Ideology in India and Egypt* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p.171.

7 Charles Blackmore, *In the Footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Harrap Limited, 1986), p.142. Adrian Hayes, similarly, writes two-and-a-half decades later of disappointment in encountering a gas plant after crossing the Liwa dunes. When his companions suggest the plant represents jobs, Hayes replies: 'They didn't see a wilderness spoilt like me; they saw progress and development.' Adrian Hayes, *Footsteps of Thesiger* (Dubai: Motivate, 2012), p.209.

8 Blackmore, *Footsteps of Lawrence*, p.20.

work, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, sets the tone of nostalgia and belatedness for the next half-century.[9]

Historians and commentators of modern travel literature, such as Carl Thompson and Peter Whitfield, note a similarly elegiac tone in modern travel writing as a whole and identify a number of texts that cast a backward glance at the late eighteenth and nineteenth century and the literary preoccupations of the day.[10] In particular, they point to a revival of the Romantic celebration of primitivism or, to use Thompson's definition of the term, the 'valorisation of the primitive'.[11] This was a notion partly popularised by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo.* In a statement that was controversial even in its own day, Freud wrote that primitivism, as evidenced in totemism, is a 'necessary phase of human development through which every race has passed'.[12] Despite being widely discredited by anthropologists throughout the twentieth century, from Albert L. Kroeber writing in the 1920s to Richard Schechner in the 1990s, the idea of cultural evolution in which the apparently 'primitive' are seen as static repositories of human ideals, has proved an enduringly persistent one and it is an idea that finds its desert apotheosis in the work of Thesiger.[13] As Whitfield observes, 'Thesiger carried the primitivist spirit to new heights. He seems a twentieth-century throwback to the explorer adventurers of a century before like Burton, eager to ... dissolve their identities, in the encounter with desert and mountain and savage people'.[14] The anthropologist Marianna Torgovnick helpfully explains how the study of the primitive accomplishes this dissolution of identity by offering access to 'an exotic world which is also a familiar world' and she shows how this results in misleading perceptions that she calls tropes: 'Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces – libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free'. They are also, according to these tropes, inferior, and it is this sense of hierarchy

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9 Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.34.

10 See Carl Thompson, 'Travel Writing from 1914 to the Present', in *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp.56-61; see also Peter Whitfield, 'Post-War English Travel Writing', in *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), pp.263-70.

11 Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.57.

12 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* [1913] (London: W.W. Norton, 1989), Chap. 1, footnote 2.

13 See, for example, Richard Schechner, 'Ritual and Performance', in *Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture, and Social Life*, ed. by Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.613-647 (pp. 635-36).

14 Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History*, p.269.

that, according to Torgovnick, informs the primitivist discourse that is 'fundamental to the Western sense of self and Other'.[15]

The work of Burton, Thesiger and many of those who have travelled in their footsteps, demonstrates that a principal result of the neo-primitivist account, whether the intended objective or not, is to anchor Arabia in a time warp. Within what McClintock describes as this 'anachronistic space', the stereotypical image of the Orient is consolidated.[16] But it would be unfair to ascribe the essentialist notion of the Bedu to *all* modern desert travellers. The work of Michael Asher is a case in point. Asher is best known for his biography of Thesiger, the idea of which was received with ill-grace by the older traveller who declared the project to be a 'complete waste of time' as Thesiger believed he had already written the definitive account of the Bedu.[17] Despite an eventual mutual respect between the two travellers, discrepancies in perspective remained, with Asher remaining concerned about Thesiger's romantic tendency to portray the Bedu 'in a purely aesthetic light – as one not trapped within their life forever'.[18] The indulgence of glamorising lives of hardship for the sake of an aesthetic ideal has been well documented by both critics and admirers of Thesiger alike; Peter Brent in *Far Arabia*, for example, questions whether 'poverty and hardship, danger and the constant possibility of sudden death is a price people should pay for the code of honour, the freedom, the peculiar courage they give rise to' and he goes on to ask whether 'it is a price any of us would pay?'[19] The Omani scholar Hilal Al-Hajri thinks not, and reminds the non-resident reader of a point many commentators often overlook, that travellers, including Thesiger, pick and choose the best time to play at being Bedu – because they can:

> Thesiger and other romantic travellers to Arabia, unlike the natives, stayed there temporarily and had a choice of leaving. They chose, deliberately, to travel in the region in the winter, avoiding the unbearable heat and difficult conditions of the summer, which the natives had to live under.[20]

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15 Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* [1990] (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.8.

16 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.30.

17 Thesiger supported the biography written by life-time companion, Alexander Maitland, *Wilfred Thesiger: The Life of the Great Explorer* (London: Harper Press, 2006).

18 Michael Asher, *Thesiger* (New York: Viking, 1994), pp.376-387.

19 Peter Brent, *Far Arabia: Explorers of the Myth* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p.228.

20 Hilal Al-Hajri, *British Travel-writing on Oman: Orientalism Reappraised* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2006), p239. Thesiger noted the contrast between desert travel and life in Britain: 'I like keeping the two worlds utterly distinct': Alexander Maitland, 'Wilfred Thesiger: Traveller from an Antique Land', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 328 (1980), p.256.

There is a perversity, suggested in Al-Hajri's comments, of feeling fondly towards a life of hardship, with its 'unbearable heat', that a traveller can choose to adopt for as long or as little as he or she has appetite for while the Bedu, at least until the benefits of oil brought release, remained virtual prisoners of their environment.[21] As anthropologists such as Dawn Chatty show, 'freedom', the defining feature of the Bedu way of life in travel literature, is largely an illusion as necessity (to find water, to find grazing for camels, to escape raiding tribes, to escape the ferocity of summer temperatures) usually dictates its own imperatives that are rarely perceived by travellers who undertake their journeys at more benign times of the year.[22]

Describing the Bedu as 'pragmatists rather than romantics', Asher reminds the reader that the Bedu themselves are bemused by Western fascination with a way of life they mostly have no desire to perpetuate.[23] Observations on their ready embrace of motorised travel and government-sponsored settlement, for example, abound in his own desert text, *The Last of the Bedu*, and is further noted by Chatty, in her anthropological study of Bedouin mobility, *From Camel to Truck*.[24] In fact, the only anachronistic part of the modern Bedouin experience is the Western perception of it: recording the comments of his Arab fixer, the expeditioner Charles Blackmore writes: 'You know ... the Bedouin do not do these journeys [by camel] any more. Our country is changed and only a few remain in the desert.' The guide adds, in a satisfying reversal of gaze not without hint of rebuke: 'I think perhaps you have come fifty years too late'.[25] Asher's work shows how, exhorted by their own governments to catch up culturally with the rest of the region, the Bedu have become acculturated to the urban experience (albeit with different degrees of assimilation depending on their location in the region), surrounded by schools, hospitals and government housing, enjoying a varied diet and talking about the inanity of blood feud.[26] Instead of a 'once proud people now condemned to the humdrum of modern life',

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[21] 'The Omani national oil company started drilling ... in 1958. The first [Bedu] family acquired a truck in 1974 and within five years nearly every family owned a least one vehicle', Alan Keohane, *Bedouin Nomads of the Desert* [1994] (London: Kyle Books, 2011), p.171.

[22] See Robin Bidwell, *Travellers in Arabia* (London: Hamlyn, 1976), p.93. In contrast, Doughty 'never tried ... to see the Bedouins ... as leading an ideal life of freedom' but 'showed the harshness of their lot ... [and] their occasional respites'.

[23] Asher, *Last of the Bedu*, p.22.

[24] Dawn Chatty, *From Camel to Truck: the Bedouin in the Modern World* [1986] (Oxford: White Horse Press, 2013), p.8.

[25] Blackmore, *Footsteps of Lawrence*, p.16.

[26] Asher remarks that Arabs consider the Bedu as 'stranded in a "backward" state, from which the rest of mankind had long since progressed'; he argues this leads governments to condemn the nomadic life as an anachronism from which its victims must be rescued, and made to settle as farmers.' Asher, *Last of the Bedu*, p.143 and pp.18-19. See also SueEllen Campbell who writes similarly that, with no respect for borders or visas, nomads are 'hard to govern' (p.234). SueEllen Campbell et al, ed. *The Face of the*

he finds instead less of an 'acquiescence of the Bedu in their own modernisation and settlement' and more of a culture in a healthy state of transformation. Where Thesiger 'and the Orientalists' had regarded nomadic settlement as a 'betrayal' of cultural ideals, then, Asher is left wondering 'who or what had been betrayed';[27] similarly, where Thesiger described the Bedu as living a 'doomed' existence, Asher identifies the opposite – a vital, adaptive culture, flexible enough to survive and thrive in new circumstances.[28] Far from being immutable, then, he shows the Bedu to be masters of their own reinvention: 'In shifting to cultivation and motor-cars they were merely doing what they had always done, using the same penchant for adaptation they had employed for 4,000 years' (p.283). As such, Asher makes the point that the elusive Bedu of traditional Western literature, 'clinging to the remote desert, shunning all contact with the outside world' has probably never existed and the corrosive influence of Western civilisation similarly is nothing more than an illusion brought about by the projection of the desire of travellers to see in the nomadic lifestyle a freedom from their own sense of restriction and containment.[29]

At the same time as Asher writes applaudingly of the Bedu's ability to adapt, he cannot resist expressing an entirely contradictory disappointment that the quest for the Bedu of Western imagination has proved elusive. Indeed the full title of his book – *Last of the Bedu: In Search of the Myth* – foregrounds the tension between modern reality and Western construct that permeates his account.[30] But if Bedu culture is not in itself stranded in the desert fastness, then it may be wondered why Western writers cling to what Homi Bhabha in his work on hybrid identities calls 'the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of otherness'.[31] The answer probably lies less in the specificities of Bedu life and more in the life left behind. In writing about the revival of romanticism in English travel literature between the two world wars critics, including Helen Carr and Paul

Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science, and Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2011), pp.233-40.

27 Asher, *Last of the Bedu*, p.21.

28 Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p.329. While Thesiger equates modern with Western here, he resists the hierarchy of the Orientalist discourse in expressing: 'Among no other people have I ever felt the same sense of cultural inferiority'.

29 See Jörg Janzen, *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: tradition and development in Dhofar* (Boulder, Colorado: Westeview, 1986), and Donald Cole, *Nomads of The Nomads: The Al-Murrah of the Empty Quarter (Chicago: Aldine, 1975)*. The Bedu, allegedly, always travel with a planting stick in case growing conditions prove favourable (Asher, *Last of the Bedu*, p.45).

30 Asher regrets, in one of several expressions of belatedness, his abiding memory of the 'last of the Nabataeans' will be of watching the Petra Bedu 'sitting glued to a TV set watching a soap opera that presented a pale imitation of a life they had left only a decade before, but to which they would never return' (Asher, *Last of the Bedu*, p.73).

31 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.66.

Fussell, identify a literature that 'often appeared to be more about escaping from England than anything else,' and this is exactly the tendency that Jonathan Raban notes in Doughty, Lawrence and Thesiger:[32]

> [In the Bedu] they professed to find all the simplicity, the powers of personal endurance, the stoic independence, which they feared the Englishman was losing. They loved him for his poverty, his spiritual leanness, his ignorance of the 'soft' life from which they themselves were on the run.[33]

In this respect the appropriation of Bedu culture is offering, as James Buzard comments on travel writing in general, 'an imaginative freedom not as a rule available in modern social life'.[34] This is of course the subject of Said's *Orientalism* but while one might excuse an earlier generation of travellers for being complicit in the imagining of the Arab Orient as one of the West's 'deepest and most recurring images of the Other', it is somewhat dispiriting to see the old familiar binaries reappear even in an era of postcolonial sensibility.[35] Writing at the very end of the twentieth century, Asher still feels the need to state that the Bedu are not some 'rare and exotic species which should be preserved in its natural habitat' (p.43) for the benefit of the Western imagination, and indeed social theorists seem to suggest that the neo-primitive urge continues to motivate travel in the twenty-first century as well. The psychologist Jessica Jacobs, for example, identifies a new wave of interest in the valorisation of the primitive in a Middle East context (in her study on sex tourism in the Sinai) – if not in travel literature, at least in the behaviour of tourists – and she attributes this to a desire for belonging in an ever-more urbanised, globalised and anonymised world.[36] She cites T. Oakes as similarly seeing in exotic travel a symptom of the desire to belong or to find 'home', while Pollock writes that modernity appears to 'uproot, deracinate [and] detraditionalise' society.[37] In this condition, it is contended, only 'a migration in time and space backwards to the

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[32] Helen Carr, 'Modernism and travel (1880-1940)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* [2002], ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.70-86 (p.83).

[33] Jonathan Raban, *Arabia through the Looking Glass* [1979] (Glasgow: Fontana, 1980), p.15.

[34] James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.81.

[35] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin – Peregrine, 1978), p.1

[36] Jessica Jacobs, *Sex, tourism and the postcolonial encounter: Landscape of longing in Egypt* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

[37] T. Oakes, 'Tourism and the Modern Subject: Placing the Encounter between Tourist and Other', in *Seductions of Place,* ed. by C. Cartier and A. Lew (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp.36-55. Oakes is cited in Jacobs, *Sex, tourism and the postcolonial encounter*, p.45.

premodern pasts' can deliver a sense of social fulfilment.[38] If this is a credible theory, then it is a perpetually self-defeating one: with their gaze turned towards the past, many modern travellers and tourists miss the experience of the present and the opportunity that brings to make meaningful cross-cultural connections in an increasingly globalised but anonymous space.

Some Arab commentators are understandably wearied by the role the Middle East is still being obliged to play in the imaginative geography of the West. Hilal Al-Hajri, for example, claims that the obsession with 'absolute binaries such as "West" and "East", "European" and "Other", "coloniser" and "colonised", "us" and "them"' (and we might add 'desert and sown'), has obscured the specificities of individual contexts.[39] This has overshadowed the tangible gains in political, economic and social development made in the last half century of *nahda*, or Arab renaissance. Indeed the daily English-language newspapers of the Gulf States portray a life widely at odds with the popular Western delineation.[40] As Tarik El Aris shows, Omanis, Emiratis, Saudis and Kuwaitis across the region are immensely proud of the radical changes that have occurred since the 1970s and the economic and social revolutions brought about through the extraction of oil that commenced in the 1950s.[41] One might therefore question the integrity, even as it is possible to understand the purpose, of foreign writers harking back to a pre-oil era that nationals in the region are often trying hard to forget. Alan Keohane, in his sensitive study of the Bedu today, warns where this can lead:

> improved communications ... are creating a global stereotype, where the richness of diverse cultures is simplified into catchphrases and soundbites. Today most of us know Arabs only as the villains in movies and novels, or the hooded faces on news bulletins. We know nothing of the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims who enrich the world through their creative talents [… or] we assume that their achievements are the result of their having adopted our own culture.[42]

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[38] Griselda Pollock, 'Territories of Desire: Reconsiderations of an African Childhood Dedicated to a Woman Whose Name was not Really "Julia"', in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. by G. Robertson et al (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.61-88 (p.66).

[39] Al-Hajri, *British Travel-writing*, p.18. 'Renaissance' is a term used in Oman to express the rapid development since 1970 facilitated through oil revenue and sound leadership.

[40] Widely-read English-language newspapers in the region include *The National, Gulf News, Gulf Today, Khaleej Times* (UAE), *Muscat Daily* and *Oman Observer* (Oman), *Arab News* and *Saudi Gazette* (Saudi Arabia), *Gulf Daily News* and *Bahrain Tribune* (Bahrain).

[41] See Tarek El-Aris, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

[42] Keohane, *Bedouin Nomads*, Preface, p.7.

The ‘vast majority of Arabs and Muslims who enrich the world through their creative talents’ are, in other words, left disenfranchised and this has real-world implications.

It is heartening, then, to find that not all writers are complicit in contributing to the ‘global stereotype’ and the discussion now turns to those desert travellers since 1950 whose work, in going against the grain, deserves a closer reading. Their accounts (albeit still largely Western, white, wealthy and mostly male) contribute to a counter-discourse that runs contrary to the familiar tropes of the genre and occupies a critical space that contests established binaries by focusing on what Homi Bhabha called, in the *Location of Culture*, ‘border lives’. While not a self-consciously coherent set of travellers, the writers providing this alternative narrative share a similar vocabulary but for the sake of this discussion they are identified through two distinct tropes – the ‘desert mechanised’ (wherein the desert is consciously described as accessible by motorised transportation and a locus of industry) and the ‘desert urbanised’ (where writers focus their attention on urban encounter). Instead of analysing the ‘desert *and* sown’ in these texts, the discussion takes a more ‘post-Orientalist’ approach by gauging to what extent the selected writers present the ‘desert *as* sown’. At its most productive, in the work for example of Tim Mackintosh-Smith, this desert travel literature can destabilise the idea of the urban partitioned off from ‘Nature capital N’, redeeming the space as part of a free-flow connection between the two – the ‘minds of nations’, perhaps, kept human by the rural heart.[43]

The desert mechanised – car travels in today’s Arabia

On getting stuck in the sands in Oman, Michael Asher and Gerry, his Indian driver, are rescued by a local Bedu man who, in common with many of his tribesmen, proves to be an expert sand driver. The Bedu is quick to extol the virtue of the car, in a time-honoured tradition that used to be reserved for camels: ‘Cars are wonderful. There is nothing like a car!’ (1996, p.173). As we have seen, this is not a perspective often shared by Western travel writers who either lament the presence of motorcars or try to airbrush them out of their narratives. In so doing, they mirror a tradition set by Thesiger who famously abhorred all machinery:

> All my life I had hated machines. I could remember how bitterly at school I had resented reading the news that someone had flown across the Atlantic or

[43] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp.94-95: Spivak traces a similar ‘parallel structural contrast – between nature and trade, universality and the nation’ in José Martí’s work.

> travelled through the Sahara in a car. I had realized even then that the speed and ease of mechanical transport must rob the world of all diversity.[44]

Although he came to revise his views of the changing Arab world, Thesiger's dislike of technology persisted, despite his embrace of it through necessity. He began his encounter with the Arabian desert, for example, on aerial reconnaissance as part of a locust control project and his travels to and within the region were greatly facilitated by air and by automobile. All modern desert travel in fact relies upon mechanised transport to deliver the travellers, and even their camels, to the edge of the desert, and then to support them with water, supplies, medical assistance and communications in the journey thereafter. As recent explorers of the region such as Mark Evans and Mohamed Al-Zadjali have noted, it is currently impossible to travel across vast portions of the Arabian Peninsula without such support as many of the wells that formed the traditional network of oases that sustained long-distance desert travel have long since silted up and knowledge of their whereabouts lost.[45] Motorised transport, as anthropologist Dawn Chatty observes in *Camel to Truck*, her 1986 study of nomadic pastoralism in Arabia, has been fully embraced by the Bedu as they 'continue to adapt and change to make the best of the opportunities that surround them'.[46] Chatty explains that the ships of the desert are now 'a Toyota, Datsun, Nissan or General Motors pick-up' and modern Bedu herd their livestock with the assistance of these vehicles while also engaging in new economic activities (such as truck driving) connecting the desert with settled areas. The prevalence of new forms of transportation has thereby been both the cause of dependency on greater connection with settled areas, for example through the need to refuel, and the facilitator of a different kind of travel across the region that represents a democratisation of the space that was once exclusively reserved for those hardy enough to endure desert conditions.[47]

With the motor vehicle playing a pivotal role in modern Bedu life, as well as in the character and successful completion of modern desert journeys, it may be expected that it would feature more prominently in modern travel writing too but this has not been the case. Tim Youngs identifies mechanised transport as one of three factors that have been 'especially dominant in the shaping of travel writing since 1900'. He goes on to state

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44 Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* p.278.

45 Author's Interview with Mark Evans, 19 March 2016 and Author's Interview with Mohamed Al-Zadjali, 26 April 2016 who notes that 'most of the wells are dry, deep or salty'. See Appendices B and E.

46 Chatty, *From Camel to Truck*, p.8.

47 See geographer Jörg Janzen, *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: Tradition and Development in Dhofar* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986) who offers a holistic view of the Bedu (and Jabalis) and settled communities.

that 'the Petrol Age', as Wyndham Lewis called it 'in his travelogue of North Africa, has changed people's sense of speed, their engagement with the landscape and their relationship with one another', and shows how automobile narratives, which appeared from the beginning of the twentieth century, featured cars in a favourable light as bringing greater access to nature than journeys by train.[48] Youngs quotes Anne Morrow Lindbergh whose ambivalent regard for air travel to remote destinations mirrors a similar attitude towards the motor vehicle in desert literature: 'A few years earlier, from the point of view of aircraft alone, it would have been impossible to reach these places; a few years later, and there will be no such isolation'.[49] Lindbergh, writing in 1935, pinpoints the privileged pleasure of being able to penetrate wilderness areas previously inaccessible to travellers, combined with the anxiety of being too late, as mechanised transport (from the steamship onwards) destroys the very sense of isolation that it is employed to explore. This is the kind of anxiety that Ali Behdad describes as 'belatedness', a symptom of the postcolonial era that, as we have seen, can be detected running through much of Arabian desert travel literature and which manifests in a 'nostalgia for a time when "real" adventures in unknown lands were possible'.[50] It is perhaps a legacy of this sense of belatedness that the motor vehicle, in many modern desert accounts, is often hidden from view as its very presence in the narrative compromises the wilderness experience and interrupts the phenomenon described by John Urry and Jonas Larsen as the 'romantic gaze'.[51] Esme Coulbert, in her study of the history of motorised travel in Britain, shows how, similarly, this is a common trope in the accounts of motoring in England in the early twentieth century and she identifies J.J. Hissey as one of several writers to describe the motor car as an 'intruder upon the harmony of unspoilt Nature'.[52] Within the context of the desert, the pilgrim explorer is expected to enter on foot, preferably unshod, and with head covered; his (in what is generally a male endeavour) support vehicles are described as transgressive or guilty necessities of the modern journey that are by and large kept hidden

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[48] Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.68.

[49] Lindbergh writes her account 'before it is too late', cited in Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction*, p.70.

[50] Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), p.35.

[51] John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* [1990] (Sage Publications: London, 2011). Blackmore writes, for example: 'I stand holding the rein of Hashan [his camel] and take in the scene. A bright red and yellow juggernaut passes over a fly-over above the old railway half a mile away that I had not seen. The illusion dissolves.' Blackmore, *Footsteps of Lawrence,* p.50.

[52] J.J. Hissey, *Untravelled England* (London: Macmillan, 1906). p.32. See Esme A. Coulbert, *Perspectives on the road: narratives of motoring in Britain* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2013).

from the reader. In most of these desert accounts, the mapping of the sacred space is seldom made clear but at some point, roughly after arrival in-country is over, when the trips to and from the various ministries for permits are transacted, and where the assembly of supplies is complete, the secular world is left behind: beyond that point, the car is no longer welcome as a reference point in the narrative as it limits the opportunity for the author to commune with nature without the impingement of an intermediary.

Not all modern travellers in Arabia, however, share this general squeamishness of the genre towards mechanised travel. The pioneering mechanical engineer and travel writer R.A. Bagnold famously extolled the virtues of the motorcar in *Libyan Sands*, published in 1935, and the work of James (now Jan) Morris, who travelled across Oman in the motorised retinue of the Sultan in 1955, and Barbara Toy, who crossed the deserts of Arabia in her own Land Rover in the 1960s, builds on this enthusiasm.[53] Their journeys are distinguished from earlier desert accounts by a celebration not of the search for wilderness that has typically characterised Western desert encounter, but of the communal nature of crossing the desert that is as old as the incense routes that originally necessitated Arabian desert travel. In contrast to the work of Thesiger, who contended that there could be nothing of value in a journey by motorcar, their travel accounts do not seek to romanticise the modern encounter with the desert by disguising their dependence on technology.[54] Where Coulbert describes motoring in post-war England as something private and bespoke, both Morris and Toy resist the individualistic experience of travel and their celebration of the greater access to the region that motorised travel permits is interpreted here as a democratisation of the desert space and a participation in the carnival of travel.[55] Indeed, they both partake in something much nearer a quintessentially Arab experience that, while still retaining elements that mark them as pre-postcolonial, make their accounts surprisingly modern. Their work lays the foundation for a more recent resurgence of automobile narratives about the region, such as Henry Hemming's *Misadventure in the Middle East* in a truck called Yasmine, and Lois Pryce's ride through 'the Real Iran' on the back of a motorbike in *Revolutionary Ride*.[56]

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53 Ralph A. Bagnold, *Libyan Sands: Travels in a Dead World* [1935] (London: Eland Publishing, 2010), p.226.

54 Thesiger wrote: 'I would not myself have wished to cross the Empty Quarter in a car. Luckily this was impossible when I did my journeys'. Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* pp.278-279.

55 Coulbert, *Perspectives on the road,* p.57.

56 Henry Hemming, *Misadventure in the Middle East: Travels as Tramp, Artist and Spy* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007) and Lois Pryce, *Revolutionary Ride: On the Road in Search of the Real Iran* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2017).

The Australian-born Barbara Toy puts a vehicle centre-stage in a series of books that describe her desert travels at the wheel of her beloved Land-Rover in the 1950s. Pollyanna was the name she gave to one such vehicle – a Land-Rover of which the author was sufficiently fond to buy it back from its retirement at several times the cost of the original purchase.[57] In one of the accounts featuring her Land-Rover journeys, *Travelling the Incense Route* (published posthumously in 2009), the reader gains a strong sense of the vehicle's sentimental value beyond its sum of mechanical parts and it is introduced in the prologue as a protagonist in the drama described thereafter: 'my Land-Rover midships below, stood on bags of rice and around it other passengers, Arabs and Indians, leant against its sides with a proprietary air which was endearing'.[58] The vehicle is anthropomorphised throughout the book to the point where car and traveller become 'a composite object of person-cum-Land-Rover' (p.32) and the author's inner journey is projected onto its frame:

> The retreat continued and by the time we finally limped into Mukalla the vehicle was in need of extensive and expensive repairs: which proves that damage and accidents to vehicles occur when their drivers are either tired, in pain, depressed – or all three. (p.33)

Towards the end of her journey Toy sees herself reflected in the mirror of the car 'with all the travel-stained mementoes around me, a pair of tiny Greek slippers hanging from the mirror, the policeman's truncheon, St. Christopher and the printed 23rd Psalm pasted on the dashboard; the things that make up so much of my life'(p.135). In this sense she comes nearer to the Bedu experience of the age in which she writes, where, according to Chatty, Asher and other travellers, cars are a valued part, not just of the modern journey, but of the family wealth and enhanced sense of mobility; their decoration, bedecked in sheepskins and often decorated with dangling objects to deflect the envious evil eye, is totemic of a tribal life on the move.

The sense of tribal life on the move is also captured by James (now Jan) Morris in *Sultan in Oman* (1957). The subject of the narrative is a journey by motorcade with Sultan bin Taimur and his huge entourage across the newly reconquered territories of

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[57] Fiona Tarrant, 'Queen of the Desert' [online], *Oxford Mail* (1998), available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20140201102033/http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/archive/1998/09/29/6638325.Queen_of_the_desert/?ref=arc [accessed 13 July 2019].

[58] Toy, *Travelling the Incense Route: From Arabia to the Levant in the Footsteps of the Magi,* p.1. The tendency to anthropomorphise the car is an inherited trope; Bagnold writes: 'each driver should be his own vet to diagnose and cure any car ailment', Ralph A. Bagnold, *Libyan Sands: Travels in a Dead World* [1935] (London: Eland Publishing, 2010), p.29.

Oman: 'This journey had never been made before, least of all by motor vehicle. No such crossing had been made of the Jaddat Al-Harasis; nobody had driven from Dhufar to Muscat; [and] the mountains of Oman were almost unexplored'.[59] Morris makes a case for the competitive positioning of this journey precisely because this is unchartered territory – 'no motor vehicle had ever travelled across' the region (p.44) – and the sense of excitement in the motorised nature of the journey is palpable throughout:

> The trucks leapt away like dogs from the leash, manoeuvring for position. Exhaust smoke billowed about the palace. We were off! At breakneck speed our convoy drove out of the yard. The slaves struck up a loud unison *fatha*, invoking blessings on our mission. The household retainers lining the several courtyards bowed low and very humbly, and some of the men prostrated themselves. (p.36)

Morris's description of the journey, which is conducted at a fast pace over rough tracks, captures more than just a sense of the mechanical wizardry involved in the enterprise: it also captures the 'loud unison *fatha*', the invocation of blessing on this pageant, typical of the descriptions of mediaeval pilgrimages. Similarly the vehicles are wrought from almost Chaucerian details and contained within the pageant, draped over by 'two splendid desert sheikhs, crowded together over the gearbox, with their rifles protruding from the window' (p.37). Comic riffs such as these undercut the stereotypes and act as a literary correlative of the sandwiching together (rather than the setting up of opposites) not just of disparate regions of Oman (the Sultan's aim in conducting the journey with his entourage), but also the old with the new, the traditional with the economically developed, the nomadic (represented by the journey) and the settled (represented by the destination). The form is chosen with care to match the modern conspicuousness of a journey through a country that is described throughout the narrative as 'among the most backward places on earth – a truck had never yet been seen, nor had a telephone rung, nor even had a machine gun chattered' (p.12). Within this antiquated landscape, the 'neat, plump, autocratic little Sultan, compass open on his lap, led the royal convoy up the wadi' (p.158) as if he is driving a path towards the future.

The compass is an interesting detail as it symbolises not just an orientation towards a particular geographical direction but also a distinction in political orientation:

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[59] James (now Jan) Morris, *Sultan in Oman* [1957] (London: Eland, 2008), p13; this is worth comparing with Edward Henderson *Arabian Destiny: The Complete Autobiography* (Dubai: Motivate, 1999), p.46: 'The journey in those days was of considerable interest as there were then very few vehicles ... [and] there were no roads'.

this is not a democratic convoy, heading out in a multitude of independent directions, but a single-line of road-making subjects that have fallen in behind the map-maker. The drivers are frequently blinded by the plumes of dust ahead, kicked up by the car in front, and when asked if they knew where the convoy was headed, the drivers responded in the negative, apparently happy to trust in Allah and in the wisdom of the man at the helm. In one sense akin to a Bedu caravan, with its distinctive tribal allegiance and faith in the sheikh, this convoy in contrast has a homogenising perspective: this is a unification drive, both literally and metaphorically, across tribal territory with nation-building its aim. In common with many Western travel writers, urban Arabs often sentimentalise the life of the Bedu but anthropologist Mohamed Awad contends that there remains a common consensus that Bedu communities are non-commensurate with Western notions of progress and their semi-nomadic lifestyle interrupts practical policies, relating to education, medical facilities and land reform, that are part of modern nation building.[60] As Chatty points out, it is a common belief among Arab governments that 'nationhood in the Arab world cannot be achieved on a stable and permanent basis unless the tribal segment becomes fully integrated with the rest of the nation'.[61] This is reflected in Morris's account as the tribal entities must either fall in line with the convoy whose destination is the capital city, Muscat, or be left behind. The dissenting tribes are therefore marginalised twice – once as being onlookers of a journey of which they are not part, and once again in the metaphorical journey towards notional progress. As such they are both 'of, and not of' in the way that migrants have come to be viewed in postcolonial theory, occupying a border zone of the nation's modernising imperative, hovering between desert and city. This calls to mind Cherie Lenzen's definition (referred to in the introduction to this chapter) of the Bedu being 'outside the city', occupying the in-between space that is yet to become, at least under the positive interventions of another generation of travel criticism, the place of creative reimagining suggested by Homi Bhabha's 'locations of culture'. For now, they are 'in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion', and as such are part of a political as well as an aesthetic contradiction.[62]

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[60] M. Awad, 'Settlement of Nomads and Semi-Nomadic Groups in the Middle East', *Ekistics*, 7, no.42 (1959), 338-43.
[61] Chatty, *From Camel to Truck*, p.20.
[62] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.1.

In *Travelling the Incense Route*, mapping the journey through Yemen and Saudi Arabia alongside the pilgrim trucks heading for Mecca is similarly negotiated if not politically then at least culturally. Toy tries to fathom the amount of petrol she needs in a region where distance is expressed in unfamiliar terms:

> Finding the exact mileage of a journey is almost impossible. No Arab knows distances, other than by the time it takes to go from one place to another, and this applies to lorry drivers as well. 'It is so many hours from here to there. But there are dunes – you might have to go a whole day out of your way to miss them. But kilometres?' They will put their right hand under their left elbow. 'It is surely that far!' (p.54)

The complaint about locals and timekeeping is a common one in travel narratives and a more modern writer would perhaps have been at pains to avoid the sweeping generalisation, but Toy is quick to redefine the concept of mileage in local terms and in so doing helps the reader to question which is a better way of mapping the space. Hilal Al-Hajri makes a similar point of comparison about time, stating that while the Western concept of time and punctuality 'were probably absent' in the region in the 1950s and 1960s, this does not mean that Arabs lacked *any* sense of time.[63] He reminds us that Moslems are in fact fastidious time-keepers in their observance of prayer at five specific times each day and in the annual *eids*, including *hajj*, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, that celebrates the largest human travel experience on earth.[64]

Desert travel in Arabia has of course for centuries been associated with pilgrimage and spiritual journey, involving travel by convoy that is common to this day. In this sense, desert travel in Arabia as experienced by Arabs is, and generally always has been, a communal human experience, not a lonely encounter with wilderness. In contrast to the earnest plod into isolation described by Doughty, Thomas and Thesiger, this is the essence of desert journey, in all its colourful, vibrant complexity, that both Morris and Toy describe, albeit with camels replaced by trucks. In Toy's work, the full title of which is *Travelling the Incense Route: from Arabia to the Levant in the Footsteps of the Magi,* a strong sense of personal pilgrimage pervades the narrative: 'Religion isn't being in a church or a mosque, nor is God – you carry them around with you' (p.181), says Toy in

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63 Al-Hajri, *British Travel-writing*, p.266.

64 For a description of Arabic time (in which the new day begins at sunset and which is still in use in mosques and remote parts of peninsula), see James Budd, *Half Past Ten in the Afternoon: An Englishman's Journey from Aneiza to Makkah* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2014), pp.9-10.

conversation with a Syrian Christian who replies: 'You talk like a b… [sic] Moslem … But I am glad that I met you' (p.181). This is a religious text, then, but not one of dogma.

Many elements of Toy's motorised journey reflect the sense of journeying across cultures, not just across landscapes. The route may have been followed on four wheels rather than four legs but it follows the old incense trail, which once rivalled the Silk Trail in importance. Toy recognises that many of the age-old customs that once marked the route are still in practice, including the need to give bribes for accurate information about her route ahead. This unpleasant necessity is partially reconciled by the satisfaction of becoming part of a continuity of caravan dating back centuries: 'And didn't the precious incense cost six hundred percent its original price by the time it arrived in Damascus because of the bribes and dues taken all along the line? I was no precious cargo, but customs die hard' (p.48). It is significant here that Toy resists the temptation to brandish misconceived racial stereotypes inherited from Orientalism, choosing to conceptualise the experience in terms of economic exchange instead. But she also goes further than this. In casting herself as cargo, precious or no, she becomes an object within an alien transaction, rather than a subject with a specific cultural perspective. In so doing, she avoids the necessity of making a judgement or apologising for the practice she encounters. Rather she recognises she is carried along by a different value structure. There is no attempt to find common ground here or to act as an apologist for practices she finds disconcerting: Toy's ability to reimagine the encounter in other terms contributes, instead, to an exchange that lies 'beyond Orientalism', or of 'letting be'. This approaches the kind of cultural solidarity envisaged by Hans-Georg Gadamer and famously expressed in the phrase 'unity in diversity'.[65] This fragment demonstrates how desert travel writers are not all irredeemably bound up in the business of othering but can and do reflect other cultures from a 'nonrepressive and nonmanipulative perspective', albeit at a microcosmic level.[66]

Toy contemplates the measuring of what Westerners generally consider discrete values (cost, distance, time) in local terms and suggests that often people 'will tell you what they think you wish to hear' (p.54), lending an elasticity to concepts that are much more rigid in a Western tradition. The politics of vague pricing, mapping and timing in a region where precision of detail, of asset-listing, of location and of season, can have all kinds of socio-economic outcomes, as Edward Said's *Orientalism* made abundantly clear,

[65] Hans-Georg Gadamer, quoted in Fred Dallmyr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays in Cross-Cultural Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.xv.
[66] Edward Said, cited by Dallmyr, *Beyond Orientalism*, p.xvii.

not least in terms of the commercialisation of the desert. Al-Hajri makes the point that there was some political merit in being suspicious of the motives of Western desert travellers, as acknowledged by some of the writers themselves;[67] Thesiger, writes for example, on being refused permission to explore the interior of Oman in 1955 that 'if they allowed me to travel there at will I should be followed by other Christians in cars, looking for oil and intending to seize their land'.[68] If, as Said suggests, and other travel historians such as Carl Thompson endorse, travel literature 'at one level works simply to whet the appetites of traders and investors in Europe, suggesting numerous possibilities for profit and self-advancement in distant territories', this is an equation that both Morris and Toy also recognise a decade or more before Said's *Orientalism* was published.[69] The commercial potential of the new route the Sultan cuts across the desert, for example, and which Morris communicates to a wider audience as chief reporter of the journey, is described in detail in *Sultan in Oman*. The visit to the nascent oil industry in Fahud forms a major highlight of the convoy's journey and acts in itself as a catalyst for future access to a remote and formerly disputed territory:

> Our journey opened some windows into this remote and arcane place, but at the same time it admitted some momentous draughts: it was concerned essentially with oil, that irresistible agency of change, and its very accomplishment meant that the territory we were crossing for the first time was changed for ever. (p.1)

It is not just oil, therefore, but the journey, and the report of the journey, that acts as 'irresistible agency of change' and Morris is explicitly aware of her role within that dynamic – well ahead of her time.

Morris spends a considerable portion of her account describing the mechanisation of the desert for the purpose of oil production. She does so in interestingly sterile terms, describing it as a clean industry where crude oil 'passes silently along a myriad pipes, cocks and mechanisms, aboard ships and through refineries, into tanks and out of them' (p.58) until it reaches the petrol station. The only dirt attaching to the process, Morris states, is the part connected with its sale. This is the desert emptied out of people, replaced by an alien landscape that nonetheless fascinates in its 'hygienic mystique' (p.58). This is not a perspective shared by many other authors. Toy, for example, writes of the dirty amalgam that accrues to the industry, its products and its users, with highways 'strewn

[67] Al-Hajri, *British Travel-writing,* p.251.
[68] Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* p.279.
[69] Thompson, *Travel Writing,* p.138.

with Coca-Cola bottles and caps, burst tyres, broken plastic bottles and discarded sandals. Pools of oil stained the ground and broken axles told of gross over-loading' (p.112). Similarly, a generation later, Asher comments on a landscape that was 'vacant, naked, meaningless, bereft of the people who had survived upon its scant resources for generations'; the desert's human inhabitation had been replaced with an alien landscape of unsightly machinery:

> At Marmul, I saw half a hundred steel pumps, like horse-flies, bleeding crude oil from the desert, acrid gas-flares trailing smoke from their chimneys like flags. Once, where these oil-rigs now stood, the Bedu had stayed alive by squeezing the dew out of rags left on bushes overnight. But that was in another country, long ago.[70]

The 'another country, long ago' raises the question, however, of 'which country, when?' Perhaps predictably (given the author's dilemma as we have seen about whether to be nostalgic for a way of life lost or encouraged by the Bedu's ability to adapt and change), the Bedu use of the desert appears in Asher's description of Marmul as the antithesis to modern oil production. But if the Bedu are no longer present within the landscape, it is largely because the revenue from this industry has given opportunities (for example through free schooling) to migrate towards a different kind of life, as anthropologists such as Neil Richardson and Marcia Dorr, in their comprehensive work on Omani craft heritage, have shown.[71] Similarly Edward Henderson, who travelled to Oman as part of the oil business, writes encouragingly of 'the fruits of oil', even while recognising it comes at a social and environmental cost: 'I suppose just by working for an oil company I have in any case done my little bit to "spoil" acres of beautiful desert and the old life [but] I am not one to put the brakes on'.[72] Any lament about modernity, then, is more telling of the writer than of the written and indeed parallels can be found in English motoring literature where 'ideals concerning the countryside are predictably constructed against impressions of the metropolis which alienated contemporary industry in favour of a pre-industrialised rural idyll', even though the wealth from the one fuels the motion of the other.[73] Asher can be seen, at least in this passage, to be projecting onto the desert the

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[70] Asher, *Last of the Bedu*, p.174.
[71] Neil Richardson and Marcia Dorr, *The Craft Heritage of Oman* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2003), Vol II, p.518.
[72] Henderson, *Arabian Destiny*, p.115 and p.262.
[73] Coulbert, *Perspectives on the road*, p.80.

cultural norms of his own culture rather than recognising in the outcome of oil production the chance of a life no longer lived in rags and watered by dew.

The desert urbanised – city life in desert texts

Two desert texts that attempt to engage more positively with Arab modernities, namely Jonathan Raban's *Arabia Through the Looking Glass* (1979) and a much later work, Tim Mackintosh-Smith's *Travels with a Tangerine* (2004), appear to be solely focused on the urban experience at the expense of virtually any reference to the desert context. It may be wondered why, therefore, they appear at all in a thesis that is about desert literature; my contention here is that both texts, which focus on travels that necessarily cross deserts to reach cities, arrive at definitions of modernity that are bound up with the surrounding 'negative space', albeit for different ends that are explored below. The desert is therefore defined, in Saidian terms, by its urban otherness and the two texts have a role to play in understanding the totality of the desert experience. The dates of the texts are significant. Raban's work was published a year after Said's *Orientalism*; as such, it captures the sense of bipolarisation (East versus West, past versus present) that was prevalent in cultural theory at that time. In the account of his Arabian travels, Raban's deliberate omission of the desert context, being all things other than urban, contributes to the delineation of the cities he visits. Given that Arab commentators criticise this binary approach as 'bypass[ing] *other* possible modernities, which arise from a series of events, movements, and performances in between the city and the village, the street and the text, and the literary and the political,' one can argue that, far from the radically new vision of Arabia he set out to produce, Raban's perspective remains rigidly Western – a railing against Western stereotypes but using the same tropes to do so.[74] Mackintosh-Smith's *Travels*, by contrast, is influenced by two decades of postcolonial theory. In work that seeks to dissolve some of the binaries, particularly of past and present, he is able to present a more holistic view of urban life in desert lands and in turn a more nuanced notion of contemporary Arab culture. The discussion is informed with reference to Arab social theorists whose work helps in deciphering the semiotics of the modern built environment.

Raban's Peripheral Desert

In writing *Arabia Through the Looking Glass* as a primarily urban account, Jonathan Raban was provoked by the misrepresentation he perceived in backward-glancing

[74] El-Aris, *Trials of Arab Modernity*, p.81.

literature. Raban describes this conscious rejection of what he called the 'whole desert experience of Arabia' and goes in search instead of the progressively urban, the multi-national investment corporations, the dynamic infrastructure growth of a truer 'second world':

> The way in which the British have been inclined to think of Arabia as an unpopulated land of sand dunes, camels and people living in tents is so far from the actual history of Arabia which is a place of spectacular cities. I wanted to get into that second world, to a large extent the truer one.[75]

In challenging the prolongation of old stereotypes in modern depictions of the people of the region, Raban suggests that the focus on the old Orient is not only anachronistic and dishonest, discrediting the collective endeavours of the modern nations of the Middle East, but it is also deeply unimaginative. Raban thereby attempts to distinguish himself from other traveller writers by offering what he suggests is a more authentic experience.

Interestingly, if his account is to be believed, it is a stereotype of a different kind that apparently inspired Raban's own travels. He slips behind the gaze of a prostitute to observe a potential Arab client in Earls Court, London, in the early 1970s and perceives a whole new injustice of perception about to unfold. Raban imagines that the girl sees not a man of humble origins but instead an Arab of supposed great wealth:

> Looking at him, all she saw was a figure of contemporary legend, a creature of rumour and newspaper headlines. Her head must have been awash with them. Arabs had bought the Dorchester; Arabs owned half of Holborn; Arabs tipped business girls with Cadillacs and solid gold watches. (p.10)

In some senses, Raban is projecting onto the prostitute his own process of dehumanising the people who have become his neighbours, aware of a sense of alienation occasioned by their distinct cultural difference – by the 'strange, beak-shaped foil masks of Gulf women and the improbably white dishdashas of husbands who walked exactly four paces ahead of their wives.' He finds their culture threatening and 'uniquely inaccessible' (p.12) and wonders how it happened that in a summer (the summer of the oil price hikes of 1973) 'one day Arabs were a remote people who were either camping out in tents with camels and providing fodder for adventurous photographers, or a brutish horde threatening the sovereignty of the state of Israel; the next, they were neighbours' (p.11). Acting to avoid what Reina Lewis in a later decade called 'simple binary analyses of culpability and

[75] Interview (12 June 2007), in Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, p.246.

innocence', Raban puts aside his misgivings in an attempt to unravel the semiotics of a foil mask and a gold watch. Put simply he journeys to Arabia. There he searches in the big cities for a modern Arab identity – or at least a male Arab identity. While he may come no closer to an 'understanding of how we are variously interpellated into the types of complex positionings that can lead to racism in the name of feminism' (and indeed women barely feature in his account other than as the objects of male gaze), he does at least engage in conversations with real people whose voices he endeavours to include in his account.[76]

Like all great quests, Raban's endeavour is a specious one. The image of Arabia as dystopian metropolis is no more real than the Arabia of Doughty, Lawrence and Thesiger but Raban's 1979 account in *Arabia through the Looking Glass* at least provides the region with a literary alter ego. His early travels in the region are almost perverse in their choice of exclusions taking the bid for originality to extremes: he visits Jordan and avoids Petra; he visits Egypt but avoids the Valley of the Kings; most interestingly for the purpose of this discussion, he visits Arabia and avoids the desert. Unlike his predecessors, Raban is not interested in the desert as an existential canvas upon which to project human endeavour; for him it is much more prosaic – an inconvenience to be crossed before the real focus of travel as a locus for human activity begins again: 'There must, I suppose, be some stretches of desert which really do correspond to that romantic image …. Most desert, though, … is simply boring – hundreds and hundreds of miles of it, stretching away like a flat Sunday afternoon' (p.160). Raban's conceptualisation of the desert as a 'flat Sunday afternoon' in a region where the weekend is arranged around Friday is significant. It imprints upon the supposed empty space notions of English leisure: it is empty, perhaps, because it has yet to be tackled on the Monday morning of Western enterprise. But the concept of a boring space is not the same as an empty space and by negating the desert in his work, he leaves it free, somewhat perilously so, to become part of what Said termed an 'imaginative geography'.[77] In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said comments on how 'the earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography'.[78] In glossing over the landscape, Raban contributes to the notion of *terra nullius*, empty land that seems suggestive of

[76] Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), p.240.
[77] Said, *Orientalism*, p.55.
[78] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* [1993] (New York: First Vintage Books, 1994), p.7.

struggle-free geography and where the thinking of it as empty is tantamount to an invitation to exploit. If this seems farfetched in a postcolonial era, then it is interesting to turn to the example of Desertec, a largely European project that envisions creating electricity by 'exploiting vast energy resources in the Sahara'. While able to overcome technical hurdles, and signing various memoranda of understanding with North African nations, the political and social problems are proving hard to overcome: after all, who owns 'the sun, wind, and land in a desert that is not, in fact, empty'?[79] Geographers such as Sharlissa Moore and J. Scheele show that the Sahara is far from empty and in human terms 'is perhaps the fastest changing, most dynamic, and wealthiest region of the African continent'.[80] Despite its growing population, rapid urbanisation and development of resources, however, it is still perceived as empty by Western imaginations. If, as Said went on to state, the 'struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings,' then Raban's decision to leave out the desert in what has become a well-read work of travel literature can be read as propping up, rather than resisting old modes of representation.

Raban spends his time in the great desert cities of Doha, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sana'a, Cairo and Amman and although the resultant travelogue is, as Peter Whitfield describes it, 'a very incomplete survey of its subject' it does at least capture 'a new awareness' of an urban landscape arising out of oil production and the politics of black gold.[81] Through a collection of encounters with the people he meets and the stories they have to tell, from taxi drivers to eccentric expatriates, Raban redefines the region as a place not that dissimilar to the country he left behind with the same preoccupations revolving around property ownership, trade deals, concerns over education and legacy, changing family values and stress-related health concerns that occupy people in any fast-growing, urban environment. At face value the material seems subversive; this after all is no monologism purporting to give an authoritative perspective on Arabia but a polyphonic collection of perspectives drawn from those who live there. On closer inspection, however, Raban's selection of material is globalising in nature and is underpinned by his own distinctively Western agenda. This agenda is led not by the urban experience of the modern Middle East but by the literary legacy from which he is trying

[79] Sharlissa Moore, *Sustainable Energy Transformations, Power and Politics: Morocco and the Mediterranean* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), Chapter 4.
[80] J. Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.7.
[81] Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History*, p.273.

to escape.[82] He has read the regional classics by Doughty, Lawrence and Thesiger and recognises the supposed 'vivid, affectionate special relationship between the English and the Arabs' (p.15) that springs out of their descriptions of alterity: in the desert of the nomad, Raban writes, previous writers found 'a perfect theatre for the enactment of a heroic drama of their own – a drama whose secret subject was not really the desert at all but the decadent life of the London drawing room' (p.15). Raban's avoidance of desert description can be read, then, as a writing back to the trinity of desert literati. In an interview with Canton, Raban writes: 'Fuck it! I'm going to write a kind of "anti-you" book. No camels; no little brown boys'; this kind of binary bias where the focus of his Arabian travels is artificially stripped of its desert hinterland therefore seems less of a 'headlong plunge into [Arab] modernity' (p.35) and more of a gallop away from the London drawing room.[83]

It is easy to be critical of Raban in hindsight but it is obviously important to remember that he was writing in a specific historical moment; indeed, reading *Arabia through the Looking Glass* before the popularisation of Said's *Orientalism* (I speak from first-hand experience here) offered a new perspective on the Middle East in travel writing that appeared at the time as fresh and exciting. Raban admires the audacity of the Gulf project, in the building of cities such as Abu Dhabi on a desert sand bar, steel and concrete taking the place of the poverty that belonged to the region's pre-oil history when people in inadequate housing scraped a living from pearling. In this regard, in the lack of nostalgia for an Arabia of unremitting hardship, the text continues to resonate today. 'Europeans have idealised the Middle East as an almost timeless place', writes Sandy Isendstadt and Kishwar Rizvi in *Modernism and the Middle East*, 'a region that stands in distinct and didactic contrast with the disruptive displacement and disillusionment that has resulted from its own industrialisation,' so it is refreshing at one level to read a text that dared to celebrate the process of modernisation through 'industrialised building processes and urban infrastructure' that is such an abiding feature of the modern Middle East.[84]

Much has been written on the subject of Arab modernities over the past few decades, with Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Said's *Orientalism* laying the foundations for

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[82] Raban, in interview with James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, pp.245-53. Raban describes Lawrence, Doughty and Thesiger, all of whom appear in *Arabia through the Looking Glass*, as 'figures to rebel against', p.246.

[83] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, p.246.

[84] Sandy Isendstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, eds., *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008, p.3.

Arab anglophone commentary.[85] As Yasser Elsheshtawy points out in *The Evolving Arab City*, the very words 'Arab City' evoke 'a multitude of images, preconceptions and stereotypes' and he defines it as 'a setting where one can observe the tensions of modernity and tradition; religiosity and secularism; exhibitions and veiling; in short a place of contradictions and paradoxes.' He goes on, however, to recognise that these perceived anomalies are largely Western preoccupations that play 'into clichés about what constitutes an Arab or Middle Eastern city'.[86] While the Arab city is caught between various struggles for modernity, Elsheshtawy states that in essence it is about 'trying to ascertain one's place in the twenty-first century'.[87] This touches on an entire discourse revolving around globalisation that lies somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter, but if we take Manfred Steger's '*very short* definition of globalisation' as being about 'growing worldwide interconnectivity', and reduce it to its most simplistic terms, it is possible to detect in the West a concern regarding cultural homogenisation that is not shared to the same extent in the Middle East.[88] Indeed, the dynamic that involves a combining of the global with the local, or what Roland Robertson terms 'glocalisation', has had an arguably invigorating effect on the individual cultures of the region.[89] Jaafar Aksikas offers an accessible way into the subject by describing the growing sense of urgency for modernisation in the region that grew out of the relationship with the West and the challenges of colonialism:

> Arabs developed a certain kind of consciousness of the necessity of modernization and national *nahda* [renaissance][sic]. As time went on, ideologies of national modernisation and renaissance became more and more powerful and more anti-colonial in nature ... these ideologies shared common concerns, which centred on the following issues: anti-imperialism and the search for political independence; the search for unity of all Arabs and/or Muslims; modernity and social development; and cultural authenticity.[90]

Modernisation does not necessarily signify Westernisation and the key word here is *'nahda'* because it resists the Western binary of traditional and modern in the perception

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85 Aijaz Ahmad, 'Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said,' in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

86 Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed. *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development* [2008] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

87 Elsheshtawy, *The Evolving Arab City*, p.4.

88 Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* [2003] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.17.

89 See Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

90 Jaafar Aksikas, *Arab Modernities: Islamism, Nationalism, and Liberalism in the Post-Colonial Arab World* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p.5.

of the Arab Orient by capturing both in the same concept. The sense of rebirth arises out of a strong sense of individual nationhood that draws for its inspiration on former periods of enlightenment and strength. The need to invest in cultural authenticity takes inspiration from this past, albeit underpinned by the continuity of Islam, while simultaneously reinventing some of the ways in which this is expressed through a modern, globally accessible cultural iconography. An Arabesque window in a new government building, *mashrabiy'yas* [lattice screens] appearing as motifs on tower blocks, bus stops with crenulations, the locally popular 'McArabia' *hilal* burgers, jeans worn under *abeyas* [Gulf women's outer attire], these can all be read as symbols of an assimilation of the past within the present. As Jane Jacobs writes, 'Rather than doing away with tradition, globalisation has delivered new conditions for its emergence; installed new mechanisms for its transference; and brought into being new political imperatives for its performance'.[91] This is an encouraging thought and can be seen powering the 2040 visions of the Gulf countries in their drive to focus on a new kind of globalised nationhood. There is no locally perceived discrepancy or contradiction, then, in building modernity that both embraces what Gwendolyn Wright refers to as an urban 'desert vernacular' inspired by Western preconceptions of an Arab city, while simultaneously promoting processes of indiginisation [replacement of reliance on expatriate workforce with local Arab human resources].[92] No contradiction, in other words, between the global and the local – except in the texts of Western travel writers who attempt to make sense of it.

Raban is a case in point. Naturally, not all people in the Middle East have embraced the new modernity and this is something that Raban reflects upon during his journey through Arabia. One of his acquaintances, a playwright in Qatar, laments the loss of the old days when people were more sociable and intimate. An easier life – an urban life – he felt, had arrived at the expense of close community. Raban is surprised to encounter this kind of nostalgia for an austere past, a mythology he thought 'peculiarly Western' (p.117), and comments that it is 'one of the privileges of the rich to idolize poverty from a safe distance' (p.117) and it is significant that the wealthy young Qatari he chats with is too young to have known the hardship involved in a pre-oil Gulf existence. Oil has undisputedly transformed the lives of Arabs – but not of all Arabs

[91] Jane Jacobs, 'Tradition is (Not) Modern', *The End of Tradition?*, ed. by Nezar AlSayyad (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.29-44 (p.32).

[92] Gwendolyn Wright, 'Global Ambition and Local Knowledge', in *Modernism and the Middle East',* ed. by Isendstadt and Rizvi, pp.221-254 (p.236).

equally. Not only are there vast differences in wealth and opportunity for the citizens of an oil rich nation such as Qatar compared to a country such as Oman which is of modest income, but there are also differences in the way the wealth is distributed among city and desert dwellers. Raban's work reflects on the adaptability of the region's inhabitants, and in particular the Bedu, to the rapid change brought about by oil production. Billie Melman argues that the Bedu such as described by Raban have become part of an archive in an 'urban mock-utopia built with oil money', written out of the landscape through the redundancy of their traditional way of life.[93] This is certainly one reading of the fate of the Bedu in Raban's work, but it is not the only reading. In fact, Raban is at pains to emphasise the modern mobility (social and physical) enjoyed by the Bedu: ostensibly their lives have changed, but fundamentally the internal structure of their families, their tribal allegiance, their practised nomadism, has contributed to settlement but not to their eradication or marginalisation. Describing the Emiratis of Al-Ain, a desert oasis town on the edge of the Empty Quarter, for example, Raban observes the shift in expectation of a Bedu family that has swapped the *bait ish shar* (goat-hair tent) of old for a house of breezeblocks, concrete and air conditioning:

> Six years away from being desert nomads, they were talking confidently about careers in engineering and medicine; ... they gave every sign of having adapted gracefully to a life in which Modern Tissues, the Range Rover, the twin-tub washing machine, two televisions, floral Thermos flasks, air travel and the local Hilton were taken perfectly for granted. (p.141)

This description of the Bedu is unrecognisable as the 'lumpenproleteriat' that Thesiger had in mind when he predicted their demise through settlement in shanty towns.[94] State-funded education and inclusion in state-building through representational institutions such as *majlis a'shura* [lower house of the Omani State Council, or parliament] has helped the Bedu avoid marginalisation and irrelevance in the modern world. This is in encouraging comparison to their marginalisation as described, as we have seen, by James (now Jan) Morris half a century earlier. In this sense, Raban writes that the Bedu have 'been better prepared for a world of cars and skyscrapers and jet travel than anyone in Europe or the United States', and he goes on to recognise that a city such as modern Abu

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[93] Billie Melman, 'The Middle East/Arabia: "the cradle of Islam"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing,* ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.112-119 (p.119).

[94] Melman, 'Middle East/Arabia', p.118. Thesiger wrote that urbanised Bedu lost their values and became 'a parasitic proletariat squatting around oil-fields in the fly-blown squalor of shanty towns', Thesiger, *Arabian Sands,* p.87.

Dhabi, 'with its migrant tribes of exiles, had not made the skills of the desert nomad redundant; rather it was testing and straining them in a way that they had never needed to be so fully exercised before' (p.146). This 'development' is something that Raban attributes to the highly evolved internal social structures of the Bedu, enabling them to be flexible to change, comfortable with strangers, mobile in adverse environments and ready settlers in favourable environments.

In Raban's estimation of the Bedu's ability to adapt he shows an insight that precedes the more self-reflective studies of later travellers. Indeed, his observations on the Bedu are very similar to those we have already encountered in Michael Asher's work at the end of the century. Nonetheless, *Arabia Through the Looking Glass* is primarily a text designed for Western readers, to challenge Western prejudices. The discussion now turns to a text the appeal of which is deliberately broader, and addresses the Middle Eastern context in which the author, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, lives rather than merely travels in.

Mackintosh-Smith's Inverse Archaeology

In an email exchange with James Canton, Mackintosh-Smith memorably wrote that travel writers belong to a 'sort of Fibonacci sequence' where each influences the other: 'I see us all as a series, in which travel becomes Travels and reading the Travels generates more travel, and so on *ad infinitum*. It probably goes all the way back to Gilgamesh'.[95] This is an innovative approach, particularly as the author focuses on Ibn Battuta, a non-Western source. The use of the Old Testament as an inspiration for European travel in the Levant is well documented in pilgrimage literature, including in relatively modern books such as *The Way of a Pilgrim*, but other than this, Western travel writers tend to reference each other rather than focusing on regional or local texts.[96] In *Travels with a Tangerine: From Morocco to Turkey in the Footsteps of Islam's Greatest Traveller* (2001), Mackintosh-Smith writes a celebrated account of going in search of the fourteenth-century traveller, 'Ibn Battutah', whom he affectionately refers to as 'IB'.[97] While ostensibly writing a footstep account (a term referenced in the extended title) where a primary text forms both

[95] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, p.238.
[96] Anonymous, *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues his Way* [1930] translated by R.M. French (San Francisco: Harpers and Row, 1952).
[97] Ibn Battuta is referred to in this thesis using the more common transliteration of the traveller's name – namely, without the concluding 'h'.

the pretext and the context of a second journey, Mackintosh-Smith's choice of a North African, mediaeval, Arabic-speaking Muslim as the inspiration of his journey sets up an immediate counterpoint with his footstep contemporaries. In an unpublished email interview he writes that:

> Maybe when you look at the Arab/Arabian/Islamic present through the eyes of someone born 700 years ago who, even if he wasn't Arabian, was culturally Arab and a Muslim, you're getting an unusual and useful perspective. Obviously Arabs/Muslims have changed in many, many ways over that time, but in some ways they haven't changed much; at least, I think it's true to say that they've changed far less than people in say Western Europe.[98]

Generally footstep travellers in the region lament the changes wrought on the land and culture in the time between the two journeys. Mackintosh-Smith, in contrast, celebrates his experiences in the modern Middle East as proof of the 'cultural eternal present' (interview) or as a continuity with the past, thereby shedding the nostalgic or elegiac framework that, as has been demonstrated, is a marked feature of the genre. This is not to level at the text the censure of what Johannes Fabian calls the 'denial of coevalness' – the tendency of anthropologists to observe their interlocutors as if they are 'Others' that are impervious to change, or which belong to static time rather than existing in the same timeframe.[99] Rather, it is to see in his work the ability to make two timeframes simultaneously relevant – one past, one present.

A further point of contrast with other footstep travellers arises out of the six-hundred-year time gap between the first and second journey. Mackintosh-Smith's relationship with Ibn Battuta is not one of competitive positioning but of touching moments of shared experience, established largely through the author's brand of self-deprecating humour.[100] This is particularly significant as Mackintosh-Smith is walking in the footsteps not of a fellow white, Western male foreigner in the region, but of someone whose religion and culture he does not share, despite his impressive knowledge of Arab history and the Arabic language. This knowledge allows for a much deeper reflection on the culture of the region: the people the author meets become protagonists in the story,

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[98] Author's unpublished Email Interview with Tim Mackintosh-Smith, 22 March 2016.

[99] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p.31.

[100] Mackintosh-Smith writes: 'I love bathos, and IB is bathos personified, with a measure of pathos here and there too', Author's Email Interview with Tim Mackintosh-Smith, 22 March 2016. See Appendix C. A master of bathos himself, Mackintosh-Smith writes on encountering a moray eel: '"It bites really hard," they told me, "specially when it sees something red." I looked at its nutcracker jaws and made a mental note never to swim in Omani waters wearing red bathing trunks.' Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Travels with a Tangerine* [2001] (New York: Random House, 2004), p.199.

not just decorations of a narrative that is mostly about white, Western preoccupations. This leads to an additional point of contrast between Mackintosh-Smith and other footstep travellers and which justifies his consideration in the present discussion: namely, the focus of his journey which spans the desert heart of the Middle East but is nonetheless not intrinsically about the desert.

In common with Ibn Battuta, and indeed Jonathan Raban, Mackintosh-Smith's narrative is about the urban or at least human experience. The desert, where it is mentioned at all, is incidental. Unlike Raban, however, his avoidance of the landscape is not a deliberate challenge of Western presentations of Arabia, but more empathetic with local travel patterns where the desert is an inconvenience to be tolerated en route between communities.

The search for signs of Ibn Battuta functions as a device with which to string together diverse experiences across a number of countries with mediaeval history as the unifying theme; the result, in contrast with most footstep travellers, is a focus on tracing continuity in a living past rather than nostalgia for a culture that has been lost. This fascination with the present is demonstrated through every chapter, despite the diversions into arcane reference and what Mackintosh-Smith refers to as the 'ghostly tread' of his predecessors.[101] The highlights of his journey are those moments when the past is tangibly present, as when he runs into the villager at the tomb of Al-Murshidi, in Upper Egypt, who quotes Ibn Battuta at him: 'As he read, or recited, it seemed that the years which had elapsed since the original visit were insignificant beside the constants of place and memory. I had chanced, I felt, on one of those fragments of existence withdrawn from time' (p.68). As we have seen, travel writing connected with the Arabian desert has a strongly elegiac quality, as epitomised by Thesiger's famous curse on his followers: 'If anyone goes there now looking for the life I led they will not find it'. Of course he was referring to a very specific Bedu context but nonetheless this is a theme that runs through a lot of other literature engaging with the region. Mackintosh-Smith's work, however, refutes this idea as he traces continuity between the age of Ibn Battuta and the modern Arab world. In the email exchange with James Canton, the author is explicit about the features that distinguish his work from Thesiger and other writers on the region:

> The place we've written about has changed, since the thirties and forties, in social, political and other ways: but much has stayed the same, and it's that continuity that fascinates me. It's more the case that where I come from has

[101] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad,* pp.242-43.

> changed – that I bring with me a different cultural kit-bag to the ones my predecessors brought, that I see through a different lens.[102]

Far from eyeing his subjects up in a quasi-anthropological way that is loaded with judgement (as revealed in Raban's surprise that Arabs express nostalgia for a past of hardship), Mackintosh-Smith reverses the gaze and recognises that he is the Other in this spatial and temporal dialogue. By decentring the location of his perspective, he sidesteps the need to compare his observations against those of his own literary forebears, allowing the narrative to become more of, and in, the moment.

The idea of using an aged text to reveal something about modern realities, of finding traces of the past in the customs and manners of the living, is a process that the author refers to as 'inverse archaeology' (pp.252-53). He uses this refractive device to make the point that while Arab culture has a deep conservatism that at times verges on superstition, the frequent referencing of the past in the present is indicative of a deep and satisfying cultural continuity. This sense of continuity is something the author prefigures in his own text:

> At the high noon on the Gulf of Oman, there was almost no shade; just a few crew-cut trees quivering in the heat haze. I turned off the track, made for one of them and lunched on Bombay mix in a meagre fretwork of shadow. Then I opened the *Travels*: 'I turned off the road', wrote IB of this same track, 'and made for a tree of *umm ghaylan'*. (p.197)

The apparent simplicity of the incident defies an underlying complexity of intention. On one level, it illustrates Ibn Battuta's text being used as a roadmap through the modern country, in this case of Oman, wherein the author coincidentally makes the same choices after 700 years. The description moves from the sublime to the ridiculous with the throwing in of the Bombay mix, a deliberate leveller that reminds the reader not to take the coincidence too seriously, deflates any sense of pomposity arising from kindred decision-making with the great IB, and emphasises the modern context of the author's own journey (assuming, that is, there was no Bombay mix in Ibn Battuta's time). The impingement of twentieth-century realities on the narrative, the embracing of details that foreground the journey in the present, is in marked contrast with accounts of other footstep travellers who are cautious of mentioning anything modern in case they undermine the authenticity of the footstep enterprise. Such incidents in *Travels with a*

[102] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad,* p.238.

Tangerine have a contradictory quality: they telescope the time between the centuries while at the same time emphasise the unreachability of the past. Ibn Battuta is caught in glimpses, but like a mirage the nearer the author approaches him, the farther away he appears until he dissolves into history. There are echoes here of the ever-unattainable quest for knowledge that dangles ahead of any journey and that cuts across borders in both Western and Arab cultures. As Roxanne Euben writes in *Journeys to the Other Shore*, there is a need to 'progressively destabilise a series of neat oppositions between, for example, the literary and the historical, political theory and *rihla*, Islamic and Western travel, and masculine and feminine mobility'.[103] In this Euben helps to rescue Arab travel from the distorted perspective of contemporary popular imagination in the West that unfairly conflates Arab travel, less with *rihla* (travelling in search for knowledge of its own sake rather than as a means to an end such as Said identifies in much Western travel literature), than with acts of sabotage and terrorism.

In common with Ibn Battuta, Mackintosh-Smith keeps his focus firmly on people rather than place throughout *Travels with a Tangerine*. Where he mentions the desert at all, it is a landscape stripped of physical or topographical features. It is true that he describes feeling 'suddenly and utterly contented' on finding (near Edfu) all the necessities of desert life – 'shade, tobacco and cool water stored in sweating earthenware jars' (p.121) – but the desert itself is described in negative terms:

> Next morning a lorry of excruciating slowness took me across a minimal, almost a nihilistic landscape – a mere joint between earth and sky, both the colour of plaster. The rare verticals, a milepost or the odd lone bush, assumed enormous significance. At Thumrayt [in Oman] I boarded the minibus. (p.220)

Here the desert is not just a contrast to the sown, it is something to be avoided on the ground and in the text; it has an existential quality that inspires and repels, hovering in the background as a psychological space that gives a context to human encounter. It is fitting, then, that in the author's childhood dream, which can be seen as a modern equivalent of William Wordsworth's 'Dream of the Arab' in Book V of *The Prelude*, he describes flying over the desert in a telephone box, quintessential emblem of modern communication and time travel that any fan of Dr Who will recognise. Furthermore, in this dream Mackintosh-Smith's desert is not one of intrinsic wilderness, but of nomad

[103] Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NU: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.15.

encampments.[104] His is a social history – a journey about people, not about 'empty' landscapes. Hajj, as the biggest example of shared travel on earth, is the context in which Ibn Battuta's journey is made and it sets out a very different tradition to the Christian crusade that informs many other Western writers travelling in the region since the fourteenth-century. Mackintosh-Smith does see some parallels, however, with Western patterns of travel: 'For the Maghribis, the whole experience was a sort of Grand Tour: travellers like IB were treading a similar road to the one which eighteenth-century Englishmen, nineteenth-century Americans and the Australasians of today would follow around Europe.' (p.28) He goes on to quote Ibn Jubayr and surmises that Ibn Battuta must have read this Maghribi author before venturing out (p.30). What is striking here is that the opposition between East and West (*maghrib* in Arabic) is similar to that found in Western literature but it is an Islamic West, not a Christian West that provides the point of reference. This comparison casts a shadow over the contrast between East and West so meticulously described in travel literature engaging in the region, suggesting that it is an artificial construct arising out of cultural ignorance and a lack of knowledge of the Arabic language. The author is able to redefine the relationship because, as he is at pains to point out (in the email exchange with Canton), he is fluent in the Arabic language and resident in the region, something he sees as distinguishing him from his predecessors:

> [for Thesiger] Arabia was a place where he collected beautiful memories to take away and sigh over. Freya delighted in the strangeness of it all – and I think in her own strangeness in Hadhrami eyes. In contrast to them both, I'm at home here, not a transient, and the 'strange' is familiar.[105]

This statement helps authenticate Mackintosh-Smith's account and this is mirrored in the text. The ability to feel at home with his subject, for example, appears to give him the confidence to take liberties with the literal truth – something that many modern travel writers to the region are in fear of doing in case it undermines the authenticity of the narrative. When questioned about an inventive passage in *Travels with a Tangerine* where Mackintosh-Smith purportedly bumps into someone wearing his old school blazer in the souq in Sana'a, the author comments that the description may have been 'very slightly naughty',[106] – 'but not a lie'.[107] The use of 'comic riff', to use a term Carl Thompson

[104] 'To write about deserts in Arabic you have to be a poet, which [IB] wasn't (and neither am I)'. Author's Email Interview with Tim Mackintosh-Smith, 22 March 2016. See Appendix C.
[105] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad,* p.239.
[106] Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad,* p.241.
[107] Author's unpublished Email Interview with Tim Mackintosh-Smith, 22 March 2016.

coined to describe the use of humour and fictional devices in modern travel writing, contributes to the general meaning of the moment, even if it may not be literally true.[108] The emblematic wearing of an English blazer by a Yemeni is less about the cloaking of the local in Western preconceptions, and more about global commonality, highlighting shared experience. It is the blazer that is described (jackets are a common item of clothing in Yemen), not the *dishdasha* or *wizar* worn underneath, and the focus of the humour is presented at the expense of the author, not at the wearer of the jacket. The jacket becomes, as such, a symbol of the more encouraging face of globalisation, the one that celebrates interdependence and 'enhances people's chances to acknowledge their common humanity across arbitrarily drawn political borders and cultural divides'.[109] The idea that an English blazer, with its connotation of wealthy public-school ownership, has become available to someone from the 'impoverished South' is a welcome reversal of the usual lament regarding the inequalities of globalisation. Furthermore, it reverses the general direction of cultural commodification, albeit in the category of 'shirts and shoes' that David Harvey suggests are distinct from other 'cultural products and events'; the blazer, with its totemic potential, becomes part of the 'highly porous boundary' between the two and in this case takes on the 'special character' of the Other.[110] It contributes, in other words, to breaking down reductive binaries.

The playfulness of Mackintosh-Smith's work not only makes it eminently readable in the tradition of modern picaresque adventure, but it also helps to parody the traditionally austere and sonorous literary treatment of the region, in accounts, for example, by Doughty, Thomas and Palgrave. In so doing the people and the places he describes take on a more familiar complexion where cultural difference is appreciated and shared humanity emphasised. This makes his writing partially postmodern, at least in the sense identified by Linda Hutcheon (1988): 'I would want to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations'.[111] Through parody, Mackintosh-Smith destabilises the status quo of Orientalism by casting doubt on the authority of the authorial 'I/eye'. In the preface to *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land* Mackintosh-Smith admits that he treads the 'thin line between seriousness and frivolity' and that the repeating of

[108] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.89. Some modern travel writers, Thompson asserts, 'claim ... the authority of fiction, and by so doing side-step the requirement that they be strictly truthful in their reporting.'
[109] Steger, *Globalization*, p.xvii.
[110] David Harvey, 'The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture', *Socialist Register 2002: A World of Contradictions*, 38 (2002), 93-110 (p.93).
[111] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.94.

'questionable anecdotes' is part of that equation.[112] In this sense, the thin line can be seen not just as the tension between travel literature and fiction, but also between Western subject and Oriental object, and Mackintosh-Smith is keen to note throughout *Travels with a Tangerine* that he is no Mandeville or Marco Polo and that the time is long past when travellers 'according to the old proverb, might lie by authority' as if they have some command over the truth of cultural representations (p.215). Of course, all such refutations help to establish the authority of the text in time-worn fashion and ultimately the reader is left guessing whether the wonders he describes, particularly of coincidence, could in fact be true. On bumping into Moroccans in the *jebel* at Wadi Darbat in Dhofar, Oman, for example, Mackintosh-Smith writes: 'I stared at him. In Wadi Darbat, a migrant Tangerine was almost as improbable as a passing penguin' (p.241). Even more improbably the visitor turns out to have written two papers on Ibn Battuta. In blurring the line between fact and fiction, Mackintosh-Smith finds a fitting objective correlative for Ibn Battuta's world of 1325, 'a world of miracles and mundanities, of sultans, scholars, saints and slave-girls, in which outrageous fortune and dubious dragomen…steered a course that lurched between luxury and poverty, asceticism and hedonism' (p.9). Like T.E. Lawrence, Mackintosh-Smith understands the malleability of history and, in the same way as Anderson recognised Lawrence to be ahead of his time in his manipulation of historical conceit, it is possible to suggest that Mackintosh-Smith is similarly ahead of his time in redeeming history from pastiche.[113] Frederic Jameson argues, according to Tim Woods, that postmodern fiction 'merely reproduces the past as nostalgia'.[114] Mackintosh-Smith, on the other hand, shows that history can be used, as Linda Hutcheon argues in her defence of postmodern fiction, in an interrogative and instructive way to arrive at something much more potent.[115] Creating a sense of Ibn Battuta's world of wonders, Mackintosh-Smith consciously problematises the relationship between history and fiction to reveal the inner world of travel, or at least capture insights revealed through

[112] Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land* [1997] (London: John Murray, 2007), Prefatory Note.

[113] Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East* [2013] (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), p.3.

[114] Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* [1999] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p.69. Mackintosh-Smith's work displays features of postmodernism, including the presentation of what William Burroughs referred to as 'negatives and absences' (Ibn Battuta is not of course real as a companion), its aesthetic presentations of commodities (the Bombay mix), and the subversion of elitist culture (he makes an ancient travel tome written by a Islamic scholar accessible). William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch* [1959], ed. by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles, New York: Grove Press, 2001).

[115] See Wood, *Beginning Postmodernism*, pp.69-70 and his reference to Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

the travelling experience that the reader can recognise as fundamental truths, even while remaining sceptical of passing penguins.

One of the most significant incidents in the Arabian part of *Travels with a Tangerine* occurs on the Hallaniyat Islands, off the coast of Oman. The author makes the (not altogether unwitting) mistake of calling them the Kuria Muria Islands and the local sheikh takes him to task over it, entering into a discourse on nomenclature in which he is keen to emphasise the purpose behind the change of name. For the reader, the incident is less interesting for the politics of the name change, than for what the incident represents and it is hard not to sympathise with the sheikh who laments the imposition of outmoded labels to describe modern realities merely to suit the sensibilities of the traveller. This brings us back to the Arabia that Raban describes and the pride with which local inhabitants express their new modernity. Mackintosh-Smith is a resident in one of the poorest parts of the Arabian Peninsula as well as a traveller who delights in writing about life in the region's urban metropolises so he will of course be aware of the semiotics involved in delineating the region with outmoded vocabulary. Significantly, however, he leaves it up to the reader to censure or concur with the portrait of a people that he describes. In this sense, in his ability perhaps to move beyond Orientalism, to avoid what Dallmayr refers to as the 'bland assimilationism of a melting-pot cosmopolitanism,' where everyone is obliged to use the same definitions in a neatly homogenised cultural production. If, as Dallmayr suggests, 'global development can avoid turning into a global nightmare only if it is accompanied by a cultivation of deeper human potentials and aspirations, aspirations foreshadowed in different ways in the plurality of cultural traditions', Mackintosh-Smith's work, that allows for multiple readings of the same subject as seen through the perspective of a Yemeni or an Englishman, a Thesiger or an Ibn Battuta, is surely a cause for optimism.[116]

The work of all five travellers discussed in this chapter have attempted, in Colin Thubron's words, to 'humanise the map' of Arabia.[117] Indeed, it is impossible to separate the desert from those who dwell in it and it is notable that in a place largely devoid of people, the focus of their work is intensively on the few who do live there, rather than on the landscape itself. It might be thought that the erasure of the desert from their discourse is a belittling device in which the human story colonises the space and allows no room

[116] Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays in Cross-Cultural Encounter* (New York: State University Press, 1996), p.xxii.

[117] Colin Thubron, 'Don't forget your toothbrush' [online], *The Guardian* (2000), available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/23/travel.travelbooks [accessed 15 July 2019].

for the landscape to 'speak'; but this is not the only reading. In some senses, the desert looms all the larger for being just beyond the described – it leaves an intuited impression of, as Raban puts it 'heroic emptiness' (p.160) or is chased through metaphor in the labyrinths (an Arabic synonym for desert) of town (p.29). In this sense, the absent landscape foregrounds a kind of Via Negativa, a deconstructive theology that attempts to describe god by negation, or to quote Tim Woods, 'to speak of God only in terms of what cannot be said about God: both conceive of saying as an *avoidance* of saying something'.[118] This returns us to the immutability of the desert space posited by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the opening citation of this chapter and is a subject that will be approached, partially through the lens of ecocriticism, in chapter four of this study.

This chapter has probed the distinction between desert and sown to show the inappropriateness of reinforcing old tropes of the Orient that carry with them overtones of discredited ethnography. While bland pseudo-equivalents (for example of desert dweller equating with 'noble savage' and city dweller equating with 'civilised') have been largely avoided by the writers analysed in this chapter, it is clear that racial stereotyping continues to attach to modern representations of the region, making the 'undoing [of] named binaries' all the more important as a task. In the work of Mackintosh-Smith, there are hopeful signs of the productive part of globalisation (or perhaps what Chakravorty Spivak might call 'planetarity') that allows for a multiplicity of perspectives which in turn destabilises the authority of one culture as it seeks to know or represent another.[119]

The attempt to resist the tendency to 'reduce difficult situations to simple oppositions' is explored further in the next chapter which focuses on gender. Just as the Bedu and their liminal role between desert and sown has provided an opportunity to focus on representations of the Other in this chapter, gender is used similarly to contest the notion of 'rootedness' in the next.[120] The purpose of this approach is to contribute to, in Reina Lewis's words, a 'recognition that gender, race and subjectivity are complex, plural and contingent' and thereby unsettle the norms of the prevailing *his*torical discourse.[121]

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[118] Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, p.57.
[119] Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p.92 and p.72.
[120] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* [2000] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.251.
[121] Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, p.1.

3: Gendering the Desert: Women and Desert Narratives

In a field dominated by white Western men, it is instructive to be reminded that not all modern desert writers answer to that description and indeed, white Western women in particular have a distinguished, if under-represented, place in the anglophone canon of Arab desert literature. While fewer in number, several modern female writers continue to engage with the subject. This chapter analyses their work to see if a different character either of the travelling self (the subject of chapter one) or of the Arab other (the subject of chapter two) is illuminated in the texts and whether their work occupies a liminal space in relation to male-gendered discourse. Through reference to feminist and postcolonial theory, this chapter also probes the work of male travellers as they write about Arab women to test the third research area proposed in the introduction of this thesis, namely the extent to which texts of modern desert-going writers provide commentary as much about the land left behind as the land of their destination. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the way in which the very taxonomy of desert encounter (the categories employed, the vocabulary used and labels imposed) reflects an inbuilt gender bias that reveals much about the continuing construction of East-West binaries and that these binaries prove stubbornly resistant to postcolonial attempts to champion the liminal and the in-between.

In the first chapter of *The Road to Ubar: Finding the Atlantis of the Sands* (1998), Nicholas Clapp places his wife, Kay, right beside him – not just on the plane to Muscat 'her face pressed to the window', looking out on a destination in which they are both about to invest equal time and energies, but also in his narrative of the expedition to find the lost city of Ubar.[1] This is in contrast to Clapp's fellow expeditioner, Ranulph Fiennes, whose own wife Ginnie is given the proverbial back seat. In *Atlantis of the Sands,* the minimisation of Ginnie Fiennes's role in her husband's account reflects no lack of interest, aptitude or involvement in the expedition (she is after all involved in the original idea (p.91), early planning (p.94) and on-site logistics (p.215)), and she at length emerges from obscurity in an apparently grudging paragraph where Fiennes notes that she was the first woman to receive the Polar Medal. The same paragraph reveals that Ginnie Fiennes was also the first woman permitted into 'the hallowed male portals of the Antarctic

[1] Nicholas Clapp, *The Road to Ubar: Finding the Atlantis of the Sands* [1998] (London: Souvenir Press, 1999), p.10.

Club'.[2] This information comes as a surprise to the reader as she is barely acknowledged in the rest of the account of their travels, despite the attested closeness of their relationship.[3] If there are reasons why Ginnie is not brought to the fore in Fiennes's text these are not given and her own successes as an explorer receive only one other mention: the reader learns that she was to be honoured for her achievements as an explorer at the Antarctic Club's annual dinner but Fiennes admits: 'I managed to make a dreadful mix up in my diary and we failed to attend' (p.135).

This dispiriting passage in *Atlantis of the Sands* begins to suggest the extent to which women are often erased from the text in the male-dominated accounts of wilderness exploration in general and in the genre of Arabian desert travel in particular. It is as if their inclusion in some way undermines the inherent authenticity of the endeavour and blunts its 'competitive edge'.[4] As shown by the accounts of modern footstep travellers in the region, such as those of Charles Blackmore, Bruce Kirkby and Adrian Hayes, while they may make a mention in passing of women travellers among the distinguished sequence of explorers in which their own travels are contextualised, they do not dwell on the exploits of women travellers as if to do so may cast doubt on the difficulty of their own endeavour. There are good historical reasons for this, as Carl Thompson points out: 'a common yardstick for demonstrating and asserting masculinity in travel has been the degree of danger and discomfort involved in the journey. The greater the risk and the difficulty, obviously, the more manly and heroic a traveller seems'.[5] By extension, place a woman in the arena of extreme experience and all the attendant challenges become lesser benchmarks of endurance. As will be shown in this chapter, the absence of women from desert literature is no newly observed phenomenon: Colin Thubron, reviewing Michael Asher's biography of Wilfred Thesiger, spells it out: 'This is a warrior's arena. Women are absent from it',[6] and Roslynn Haynes, in a more recent cultural work on deserts calls it 'a highly gendered space' where women 'are absent, or hardly even referred to'.[7] Where women do appear in male desert texts, they are generally present not

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2 Ranulph Fiennes, *Atlantis of the Sands: The Search for the Lost City of Ubar* [1992] (London: Signet, 1993), p.135.

3 Author's Interview with Nigel Winser, 2 June 2016. See Appendix C. Winser is well acquainted with Ranulph and Ginnie Fiennes.

4 See 'A Tradition of Intertextual Referencing' in chapter one of this study.

5 Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.176.

6 Colin Thubron, 'A lifelong search for just deserts: Thesiger - Michael Asher: Viking, pounds 20' [online], *The Independent* (1994), available at: https://www.independent. co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-a-lifelong-search-for-just-deserts-thesiger-michael-asher-viking-pounds-20-1451083.html [accessed 13 July 2019].

7 Roslynn D. Haynes, *Desert: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p.165.

as Western co-expeditioners but as Arab objects of male fantasy, consistent with old Orientalist tropes, or simply glossed over as a subject beyond the scope of the writer's gaze. Where the first chapter of this thesis explored presentations of self, and the second chapter representations of the Other, this chapter probes several strands of the 'highly gendered space' within the genre of desert writing in order not just to pay tribute to women's travels in the region but also to amplify the wider cultural significance of their contribution.

The first part of this chapter begins by considering, in general terms, how and why women feature so minimally in the subgenre of Arabian desert travel literature and looks at whether the literature that they do write shares the same 'position of enunciation' as that written by men.[8] While the discussion examines the attempt at reappraisal of a female literary legacy in connection with women's travels in Arabia, it argues that any differences occurring in women's texts arise largely as a result of differences in experience rather than on account of any essential gender difference. It considers some of the ways in which modern women travellers present a broader narrative of the region by virtue of their access to the domestic part of Arab culture normally hidden from men but, while their field of vision is guided by the type of experience they encounter, it suggests that this does not necessarily mean that they speak a different language, have a lesser or greater insight or are any the less impacted by the Oriental inheritance articulated by their male travelling counterparts.

The second part of the chapter traces the way Arab women have typically been presented in both male and female travel literature in the region. This precedes an examination of modern travel accounts by women writers who each embrace a distinctly feminocentric project in their writing by virtue of their chosen subject matter. For reasons that will be made clear, there are few works to choose from but each of the women commentators selected for discussion (Adrienne Brady, Jean Sasson, Geraldine Brooks, Marguerite van Geldermalsen and the photographer Helen Couchman) formulate an agenda with which they challenge, document or collude in the traditional perception of the Arabian desert as delineated by their male counterparts. These modern texts, all written in the past two decades, bear little in common with one another, and some stretch the definition of travelogue, but their inclusion in this discussion reveals whether the

[8] Shirley Foster and Sara Mills, eds., *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.7. This was a term used by Foster and Mills in their evaluation of Edward W. Said's neglect of women's travel writing in *Orientalism*. See also Georgine Clarsen, *Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008).

articulation of a counter-discourse based on gender represents a meaningful distinction, if only in terms of desert literature.

Running through many women's texts that focus on the region is a tension between the heroic and the domestic, the wild and the tame – themes traditionally of masculinity and femininity. In this context, the landscape provides not just a backdrop to the gendered space of desert travel literature but is also included in the act of linguistically gendering that space. To examine to what extent and purpose the desert is anthropomorphised, the discussion concludes by seeking parallels of the wilderness trope among four further women's desert texts, Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980), Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica* (1996), Jay Griffiths's *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (2006) and, albeit tangentially, Jo Tatchell's *Diamond in the Desert* (2009).

If, as June Hannam suggests, feminism can be taken to mean 'a set of ideas that recognise in an explicit way that women are subordinate to men and seek to address imbalances of power between the sexes', then this chapter takes a feminist approach in concurring with much modern criticism that 'women's voices should be heard'; in texts where they are not heard, the question is asked as to what this implies of the desert literature under scrutiny.[9] The chapter explores some of the resonances between feminism and postcolonialism in which notions of patriarchy (defined by John McLeod as 'those systems – political, material and imaginative – which invest power in men and marginalise women') are seen to share common ground and how the discourse regarding patriarchy is problematised by the relationship between first and so-called third world contexts.[10]

Where are the women? Western women's travels in Arabia

Even a brief survey of desert literature prompts the question: 'Where are the women?' According to Edward Said, an estimated sixty thousand books were written in English about the near East between 1800 and 1950, many of which, including the classics by J.L. Burckhardt, Richard Burton, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Charles M. Doughty, T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger, focused specifically on the Arabian Peninsula.[11] Many of these

[9] June Hannam, *Feminism* [2007] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp.2-3.

[10] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* [2000] (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.99.

[11] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin-Peregrine, 1978), p.204. Said does not cite a reference for these figures but he does quote a source for the greater numbers of travellers visiting the Islamic East from Europe in comparison with those travelling in the opposite direction: Ibrahim Abu-

authors became household names to the reading public of the nineteenth and early twentieth century but, with the notable exception of Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, few Western women appear in these accounts and fewer authored accounts of their own. Indeed, the absence of women in the body of desert literature associated with the region is so pronounced that it has become, according to Haynes, part of 'desert mythology'.[12] But to recognise there have been few women desert-travellers is not to say there have been none. As Carl Thompson notes of travel literature as a whole, 'women have in fact been prolific producers of travelogues, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.[13] In desert literature their texts were overshadowed by the dominant male discourse until projects like Lesley Blanch's *The Wilder Shores of Love* brought a new critical interest to women's travel writing on the region. First published in 1954, this work established a fashion for group biographies of Eastern-bound women and prefigured the current appetite for a rehabilitation of this group of travellers reflected across the field of global travel literature as a whole. Anthologies such as Mary Morris's *Maiden Voyages* (1993), Jane Robinson's *Unsuitable for Ladies* (1994), and Dea Birkett's *Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers* (2004), which accompanied an exhibition of the same name at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2004, all include accounts by women of travels through the deserts of the Middle East and, together with Virago's reprinting of women's travel literature, have helped champion a greater visibility of women's contributions to the genre.

As these anthologies show, Western women have been travelling and writing on the region since the fourth to sixth century when Egeria, who numbers among the earliest Western travellers to write of a journey in the Middle East, recorded her pilgrimage to the region's Christian sites.[14] Although it was commonly assumed in subsequent centuries that women could not physically endure the privation of extreme wilderness travel and 'must be protected from nature and bandits alike',[15] the travails of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the early eighteenth century and Lady Hester Stanhope in the early nineteenth demonstrated that women were more than equal to the task, and the difficulty shifted from

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Lughod, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp.75-76.

12 Haynes, *Desert*, p.165.

13 Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.3.

14 *Peregrinatio ad terram sanctam*, or *Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, written somewhere between the fourth and sixth century was written by a nun, Egeria [Etheria], in a series of letters to the sisters of her religious order. See M.L. McClure and C.L. Feltoe, eds., *The Pilgrimage of Etheria* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan, 1919).

15 Haynes, *Desert*, p.165.

'cannot' to 'should not' as the century progressed. Nonetheless there was never a point at which women 'did not' travel to the region and the list of Victorian female endeavour in desert lands during the nineteenth century was impressive, resulting in works on archaeology in the Holy Land published in 1846 (Lady Hester Stanhope), convalescence and letter-writing in Egypt in the 1860s (Lady Lucie Duff-Gordon), horse-breeding in the Nejd in the 1880s (Lady Anne Noel), administration as wives to noted Arabists and specialists in their own right (Isabel Burton and Mabel Bent in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and Violet Dickson and Doreen Ingrams in the first half of the twentieth century), and even butterfly-collection and love-making in the Lebanon at the end of the Victorian era (Margaret Fountaine).[16]

The achievements of these women can be reckoned not just in terms of their endeavours but in the fact that they made their journeys at all. Travelling beyond Europe, especially 'without escort, chaperon, or husband', was perceived, according to Mary Morris, as a dubious activity that put women physically and morally at risk.[17] Constrained by the presumed perils of travel and by norms that, as Tim Youngs identifies, associated 'travel with masculinity', and 'stasis and domesticity with the feminine,' women travellers to Arab lands were in some senses performing an act of trespass into distinctly male territory.[18] The few who, like Fountaine, strayed across the threshold of exploration, situated as it is at the far end of the travel continuum, either attracted social opprobrium or feared for their reputations on returning to polite society, sensing that they were engaging in activities that were not wholly 'proper or befitting to [their] station in life'.[19] A ditty in *Punch* addressed to the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) at the end of the nineteenth century shows their concerns were well-founded:

> A Lady an explorer? A traveller in skirts?
> The notion's just a trifle too seraphic:
> Let them stay and mind the babies, or hem our ragged shirts;
> But they mustn't, can't and shan't be geographic.[20]

[16] The published texts arising from these travels are listed under 'Primary Sources' in the Bibliography of this study.
[17] Mary Morris, ed., *Maiden Voyages: Writings of Women Travellers* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p.xv.
[18] Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.135.
[19] Margaret Fountaine, *Love Among the Butterflies: Travels and Adventures of a Victorian Lady*, ed. by W.F. Cater (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), p.155.
[20] 'To the Royal Geographical Society', *Punch*, 104 (10th June 1893), p.269.

Written in 1893 at around the time the RGS was debating the inclusion of women among its membership (and about the time Fountaine was beginning her considerations on free love as a precursor to the chosen context of her entomological expeditions in Syria a decade later) the verse has a menacing undertone that makes it clear that women are welcome neither in the field as a expeditioner nor in the journals and proceedings as an author. The *Times Literary Supplement* of 1907 lamented that 'delicately-nurtured women' have ceased to be a *'rara avis'*, in traversing 'sandy deserts'; the same paper later asserted in 1912 that no 'piece of actual exploration of the first importance has yet been accomplished by a woman'.[21] This rejection of female endeavour in a hitherto male enterprise is in contrast to the evidence supplied by the women themselves; Fountaine alone contributed one of the best records of *diurnal lepidoptera* of the period.[22] It is also mirrored in the history of the RGS itself which only finally admitted women in 1913, despite their initially being proposed for membership in 1887, and only after four failed attempts and one reversal of decision, eighty-three years after the society was founded.[23]

Margaret Fountaine's *Love among the Butterflies* makes a significant contribution not only to the field of Lepidoptera but also to the genre of desert travel writing as her book is suggestive of a new kind of female travel in the region. Her journeys are propelled by the hitherto largely masculine goal of science and it is significant that she describes her scientific inclination arising directly from her nature: 'I was a born naturalist, though all these years for want of anything to excite it, it had lain dormant within me'.[24] Fountaine's various romantic encounters represent an act of editorial selection by her male editor, W.F. Cater, from a diary of 'well over a million words'. By focusing on these intimacies at the expense of her intellectual output, Cater repositions Fountaine in the more familiar female camp of romance rather than risking her representation in the male camp of geography. Fountaine remained unpublished, in accordance with her wishes, for exactly one hundred years from the date of the diary's commencement. James Canton posits that the notion of unmarried intimacy between an English woman and an Arab meant that the travelogue was destined to be only ever a 'distinctly ... personal confession,

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[21] Dea Birkett, ed., *Off the Beaten Track: Three Centuries of Women Travellers* [accompanying 2004 Exhibition] (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006), p.120.

[22] Sophie Waring notes that Fountaine collected 22,000 butterflies and published her findings extensively: 'Fountaine herself is under-researched', according to Waring and this article contains a useful 'account of her entomological career': Sophie Waring, 'Margaret Fountaine: A lepidopterist remembered', *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science*, 69, no.1 (2015), 53-68 (p.53).

[23] The first and only female president of the Royal Geographical Society was elected in 2012.

[24] Fountaine, *Love among the Butterflies,* p.55.

not written for an audience'.[25] While it is possible that the one hundred-year embargo may have been put in place to protect family members, this interpretation is hard to reconcile with a narrative that is celebratory and in Fountaine's own words, 'far from feeling ashamed';[26] whatever the intention, the theatricality of the hundred year embargo functions both as an act of 'heroic self-fashioning' as good as any male attempt at the same, and an acknowledgement of Fountaine's own modernity as she waits for social norms to catch up.[27] Fountaine could have simply burnt the diaries, or given instructions for their destruction, but this would also have meant destroying the methodically curated knowledge of insect habitat that the diaries also contain and the destruction of knowledge is too high a price to pay, one suspects, for the sake of protecting a reputation Fountaine is only partly interested in maintaining.

Fountaine's concern for knowledge, hitherto perceived as the preserve of men, hints at the professionalism of later generations of women travellers, as they find reasons to travel in the region – engaged, for example, in the assumed masculine pursuits of political administration and nation-building undertaken by Gertrude Bell in Iraq, religious exploration and conversion to Islam as illustrated by Isabelle Eberhardt in the Magreb, cartography that Freya Stark carried out in Yemen and exploration by Rosita Forbes in North Africa. While women travellers in the region became accepted and some even admired in the early twentieth century, difficulties in access replace social opprobrium as the major impediment to travel, with the conservatism of many of the countries in the Middle East creating the perception of an unfavourable climate for Western women travellers, particularly those travelling alone.[28] Institutional hurdles put in place by regional governments in their attempt partly to guard against a perceived dilution of culture through gender interaction has until relatively recently further limited the access of Western women to the region with strict visa regulations that forbid the entry of women to much of Arabia, except in specific circumstances related to employment or the accompanying of an employed husband. In addition, widespread war and conflict has largely sealed off much of Southern Arabia to all travellers of either gender, except those who are employed in a military or humanitarian capacity. It is largely for these practical reasons that so few desert travel accounts by women have emerged from the region in

[25] James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* [2011] (London: IB Tauris, 2014), p.181.
[26] Fountaine, *Love among the Butterflies*, p.150.
[27] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.174.
[28] See, for example, the advice given to female travellers in Anthony Ham et al, 'Women Travellers', in *Middle East* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2012), pp.618-619.

recent decades. There are a few notable early exceptions including Jan Morris (although this is complicated by the fact that she travelled at the time as James), Barbara Toy and Ethel Mannin, a working class socialist who spoke out against the creation of Israel and the 'monstrous injustice' perpetrated on the Palestine Arabs.[29] Among the few more recent women writers to the region, most have tended to engage with desert travel as a context for socio-ethnographic accounts, journalism and expatriate tourism.

While they may be few in number, then, women have nonetheless contributed richly to the diversity of travel literature pertaining to the region and while it is tempting to categorise their output as a form of hybrid or alternative voice that lies outside the established and essentially male tradition of desert literature, this also does them a disservice, ensuring their work remains forever a postscript to the perceived main event. As Susan Bassnett points out, this often unwitting marginalisation has nonetheless been a common approach by many reviewers.[30] The titles of early anthologies of women's travel texts alone – including *Unsuitable for Ladies*, *Maiden Voyages* and *Off the Beaten Track* – show the extent to which the focus is on the exceptional among women travellers, foregrounding only the more unusual, eccentric, or adventurous accounts and omitting those texts which may seem more mainstream or mundane. Dea Birkett, for example, states that women are 'rarely as we expect them to be. They surprise us still', and even in the twenty-first century a former BBC journalist is able to describe Lady Hester Stanhope as brave but mad in a piece entitled 'Great British Nutters':[31]

> In an age when most upper-crust women couldn't fart without a chaperone, Lady Hester was charging around the Middle East on an Arab stallion, dressed as a bloke. She went where she wanted and did as she pleased. Her ladyship was a law unto herself.[32]

'A law unto herself' is the dominant discourse within which women travellers to the region have been considered, their journeys and their writing described as eccentric, breaking the mould, not entirely female, and certainly not feminine.[33] Women, it is argued

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[29] Ethel Mannin, *A Lance for the Arabs: A Middle East Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), p.43.

[30] Susan Bassnett, 'Travel writing and gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.225-41.

[31] Birkett, *Off the Beaten Track*, p.13.

[32] Simon Bendle, 'Lady Hester Stanhope: Kooky Desert Queen' [online], *Great British Nutters: A Celebration of the UK's pluckiest adventurers* (2008), available at: http://greatbritishnutters.blogspot.com/2008/07/lady-hester-stanhope-kooky-desert-queen.html [accessed 13 July 2019].

[33] See, for example, Sara Wheeler, *Terra Incognita* [1996] (New York: Modern Library, 1996): Wheeler's lack of fear in Antarctica made her either a token male ('Everyone's a guy here!' (p.74)), or she is seen as 'a benign, barking-mad free spirit, like the tweed-skirted Victorian "lady" travellers' (p.97).

by some critics including Debbie Lisle, must adopt the register of men in order to be heard, and therefore cease to become typical of their gender. Lisle detects 'a masculine, rational and aggressive organising scheme' in their work that 'writes over feminine characteristics in the self and in others'.[34] It could be argued, however, that at the heart of the project to evaluate women's travel writing as a species of transgendered discourse (in that women are presented as assuming the characteristics of male discourse) is the suggestion that women have been obliged to borrow from a male register, and that this voice is not their own. This in turn suggests that there is an un-borrowed reality lurking under the surface of their travelling and writing that is intrinsically different from that of their male counterparts. A reassessment of women's travel writing has been underway in some quarters since Shirley Foster and Sara Mills attempted to edit a different kind of anthology, entitled in an appropriately anodyne manner as *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* (2002). In this volume, Foster and Mills challenge the implicit notion that women's travel writing is eccentric by arguing that it is only made to seem so through the kinds of writing selected to illustrate the point. They show convincingly that the eccentric female traveller must be seen 'as only one of a range of different roles which women travellers could and did adopt'.[35] Despite this pioneering work, the notion of essential difference is a recalcitrant one that carries with it an inherent hierarchy affecting women not just as travellers but as writers too.

'Pay, pack and follow' – the female voice in desert literature

Robin Bidwell's comprehensive account, *Travellers in Arabia* (1976), refers to a few key female figures (such as Mary Wortley Montagu, Isabel Burton, Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark) among the several hundred male travellers covered in his chronology but none earn a whole chapter, despite their contribution to the literature of Middle Eastern exploration. Similarly, in their list of major explorations in Arabia published in 1978, Zara Freeth and Victor Winstone note fifty-six distinct journeys, only four of which were undertaken by a total of three women – again none of whom earns a whole chapter. Two of the most famous Arabists, Richard Burton and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, travelled frequently with their wives and these women in turn played a significant role in their husbands' literary output: despite this they are generally not accorded the title 'Arabist' in their own right

[34] Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.95.
[35] Foster and Mills, *An Anthology*, p.2.

by biographers. Indeed, even in 1990 Kathryn Tidrick is able to dismiss Anne Isabella Noel Blunt as a 'reliable but unimaginative companion' on her husband's journeys; Tidrick goes on to condemn Lady Anne's published accounts as 'rather pedestrian narratives', mere preludes to the important work found in Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's own diaries which form the main focus of Tidrick's discussion.[36] This is a harsh criticism of work that is fresh with lived experience, full of carefully observed detail and infused with a genuine delight in the desert.[37] Tellingly, Blunt's style, as Freeth and Winstone point out, is 'admirably clear and easy for the modern reader' – a comment not entirely intended, it seems, as a compliment.[38] Ali Behdad identifies the way in which the 'project of exotic adventure, as Victor Segalen has remarked, can only be singular and individualistic – and ... masculine'. The female companion plays the role of 'the observer, the sketcher, and the recorder', the 'deheroicised female witness'.[39] Similarly, Lady Anne's contemporary, Isabel Burton, struggles to be known as anyone other than the woman who wrote a biography of her husband, Sir Richard Burton, and who horrified generations of subsequent Arabists by 'sorrowfully, reverently, and in fear and trembling' consigning his journals to the fire.[40] The sense of 'irreparable loss' threads through the description of the event by the biographer, Lesley Blanch, who surmises in *Wilder Shores of Love* (1954) that Isabel Burton has acted not in accordance with her husband's wishes as his executor but out of implied insignificant concerns for his reputation and through marital jealousy provoked by the time he spent away from her:

> It was these hidden, mysterious aspects of his life in the East of which she was jealous. She had always stood beside him, her presence belying the insinuations; now in death, she saw her chance. His name should live on, untarnished. She would protect the legend from the man.[41]

Isabel Burton is reduced in Blanch's assumption of her motives to a malignant or at best misguided caretaker of knowledge – of the 'fruits of a lifetime's adventure and study' –

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[36] Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* [1990] (London: Tauris Parke, 2010), p.112.

[37] Desert descriptions abound in Blunt's diaries: 'The view in front of us was beautiful beyond description, a perfectly even plain, sloping gradually upwards, out of which these rocks and tells cropped up like islands', Lady Anne Blunt, *A Pilgrimage to Nejd: the Cradle of the Arab Race* (London: John Murray, 1881, 2 Vols.), January 23, Vol. I, Chap. IX, p.209.

[38] Zara Freeth and Victor Winstone, *Explorers of Arabia: from the Renaissance to the Victorian Era* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p.272.

[39] Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), p.97.

[40] Isabel Burton, cited in Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love* [1954] (London: Phoenix, 1993), p.124.

[41] Blanch, *Wilder Shores of Love*, p.124.

whose only role is to execute decisions already taken and to 'pay, pack and follow' her husband.[42] Burton's judicious destruction of a man's texts is portrayed by Blanch as a form of suffocating and posthumous mothering that tames the masculine endeavour of scientific understanding and makes it impotent and ungodlike – a cross-gendered fall from a garden of Eden perhaps: 'Isabel acted towards Burton very much as England was then acting towards the East. She colonized him. To Burton's East, she became the managing West, civilizing, refining, elevating, protecting, suppressing ... and her burning of his journal was the ultimate gesture of conquest' (p.11). Blanch states that with that deed the 'great and baffling character of Richard Burton vanished for ever' (p.124), whereas in fact the deed helped fashion that character, allowing for the immodesties of speculation to replace circumscribing fact. Contrary to Blanch's assessment, then, the legacy of the 'great and baffling character of Richard Burton' profited handsomely from the intimation of Knowledge Lost.

In focusing on the impact of wife upon the hero husband's legacy, Isabel Burton's role as generator of knowledge in her own right (as writer of *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and the Holy Land* (1875) and in the studies she makes in *A.E.I.* (*Arabia, Egypt, India,* 1879)) is overshadowed. Indeed, Blanch and Tiddrick both treat their accomplished female subjects as a side-line to the main male project: in this they conform to the pattern that Behdad identifies, where the man is presumed to fulfil the authorative role of Orientalist while the woman is marginalised as incidental or a mere adjunct in the dominant business of Othering.[43] Said set the tone for this critical oversight in *Orientalism* – a work that many critics have, according to Geoffrey Nash, 'found lacking from a gender point of view'.[44] Said notes that in male writing associated with the East, 'women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing', but Said does not interrogate women's writing to establish whether women resort to the same stereotypes and, through this omission, he contributes to their continued erasure from the Orientalist discourse.[45]

More recent feminist theorists such as Lisa Lowe, Sara Mills and Billie Melman – whose book, *Women's Orients*, rescues many women writers from obscurity – have

[42] A famous note written by Richard Burton to Isabel Burton, his wife, on being recalled from Damascus, cited in Blanch, *Wilder Shores of Love*, p.82.
[43] Behdad, *Belated Travelers.*
[44] Geoffrey Nash, ed., *Travellers to the Middle East* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), p.xv.
[45] Said, *Orientalism,* p.107.

addressed the gaps left in Said's work.[46] In analysing how colonial discourses are 'multiple, precarious, contested and more ambivalent than Said conveys in *Orientalism*',[47] Mills in particular argues that as women have occupied a subordinate position to men throughout much of the previous two centuries, they may share a certain kinship with the subordinate subject of colonialism too, even as the privileged nature of their status as Western, white and educated holds them within the prism of colonialism.[48] Similarly, in the influential *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt attempts to show how female colonial writers attempt to distance themselves from the dominant male narrative, while Reina Lewis takes this work further by considering the 'extent and manner of women's engagement with the discourse of Othering, and the possibility of their speaking with an alternative voice free from or subversive of the dominant (male) discourse'.[49] This begs the question, as Nash poses, as to 'what differences then, if any, we might expect to encounter in women travel writers as distinct from males?'[50] Or, as Susan Bassnett puts it: 'Do women's travel accounts differ from those written by men in any fundamental way, and is there a way in which travel writing is inherently gendered?'[51] One might query, in contrast, whether any such differences imply a lesser contribution of East-bound Western women to either an understanding of the region they describe or, in the context of the current discussion, to the genre of desert travel writing to which their writing contributes.

Mills, one of many who have attempted answers to these questions, identified early women travellers as 'proto-feminist' (although she reassesses this in later work), at least in their leaving of the domestic realm, and found in women's texts a strong story-telling tendency wherein 'narrative incident ... [forms] the focus of attention'; this is in contrast with men's accounts that often focus on the collection of facts and data with narration assuming only secondary, and often merely picaresque importance.[52] Mills identifies further their focus on the 'personal and on relationship in general',[53] – an

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46 Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), and Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work* [1992] (London: Macmillan, 1995).

47 McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.60.

48 Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, p.29.

49 Foster and Mills, *An Anthology*, p.8.

50 See also Nash, *Travellers to the Middle East*, p.xv.

51 Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.227.

52 Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.29.

53 Bassnett, 'Travel writing and gender', p.227 (in writing about Sara Mills).

observation shared by Mary Morris who contends that in the writing of Freya Stark or Isabella Eberhardt, 'the inner landscape is as important as the outer, the beholder as significant as the beheld', overlooking perhaps that an entire generation of Romantic writers shared the same focus, regardless of gender.[54] Jane Morrison belongs to the same generation of critics after Said who take it for granted that a gender distinction exists. She dedicates a chapter of her book to women travellers in Arabia, and finds that women's travels are 'different, certainly, but not, as generations of critics might have us believe, less valid'. While she contends they share the same urge to find freedom from the constraints of society, and are just as capable of adventure despite 'being assumed the gentler, fairer, weaker sex, burdened by sexual harassment, menstruation and childbirth', she characterises their differences largely as a result of external factors, noting for example that women have often had an inferior education; they have needed to be mindful of reputation but have not generally needed to satisfy a patron. This, Morrison argues, means they can afford to be 'more discursive, more impressionable, more ordinary'– better able to map the inner space while their male counterparts focus on mapping in a more literal sense.[55] Wendy Mercer, a champion of what Hélèn Cixous termed 'écriture féminine', has sought to identify not so much a feminine content as a distinctively feminine register: one that replaces the conquering of the 'them' by the 'us' with a more fluid sense of boundary, one that replaces objective observation and judgement with something more spiritual, intuitive and sympathetic.[56]

All these commentators, while disagreeing on *how*, take it for granted that women *do* write and travel differently from men simply because they *are* different from men. Later critics, however, including Foster and Mills – the latter in something of a revision of her earlier perspective – raise concerns about this kind of essentialist position. They address the problems of this assumption by applying the work of gender theorist, Butler, and feminist theorists Anne McClintock and Beverley Skeggs, showing that while gender is one lens of a female traveller's perspective it may not necessarily be the predominant lens and that ultimately one looks in vain for a style of women's writing that is clearly distinct from that of men.[57] This is the case with Arabian desert literature where it is hard

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[54] Morris, *Maiden Voyages,* p.xvii.

[55] Morris, *Maiden Voyages,* p.xii.

[56] Wendy Mercer, 'Gender and Genre in nineteenth-century Travel Writing', in *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. by Steve Clark (London: Zed, 1999), pp.147-163. Cited in Nash, *Travellers to the Middle East*, p.xv.

[57] Foster and Mills, *An Anthology*, p.3. See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990] (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Anne McClintock, *Imperial*

to discern anything appreciably different about women's travel writing other than their access to and descriptions of the domestic, and this is largely a difference of content rather than of form or voice. The writing style of Gertrude Bell, a distinguished agent of the government in Iraq in the early part of the twentieth century, for example, resonated with her mentee, T.E. Lawrence, by whom she was much admired.[58] She participated in the collection of intelligence useful to the imperial project of her age and as such can be seen as contributing to the mainstream in her literary output. By the same token, Freya Stark, to use James Canton's phrase, 'began in contradiction to a colonial perspective but [was] eventually co-opted by it', providing insights and assumptions that shared much with the prevailing discourse. As such both women can be seen as part of the wider 'problem' of Orientalism as much as their male counterparts.[59] This is not to say, however, that their perspective is male, just shared. Rather than define two fixed perspectives with transgendered narratives gliding between the two, it seems more useful in Arabian desert literature, therefore, to avoid ascribing fixed attributes to male or female narratives altogether, accepting with Youngs and Thompson that there is no consensus on how to read women's travel literature, and no value in generalising about the characteristics of their writing.[60]

It is not the purpose of this discussion, then, to probe modern women's desert writing to discover a quintessential feminine voice, nor to treat women desert goers as either freaks or eccentrics who transgress gender expectations; rather, the intention is to consider their work as revealing of subjects that often lie beyond the opportunity of male experience. Barbara Toy, who published an account in 1968 of crossing the deserts of Arabia in a Land Rover, affords one such opportunity, in writing of an encounter with a Bedouin harem:

> Five women sat on the floor with their backs to the light ... I sat opposite the women, our knees almost touching. They were animated and excited, fluttering their headscarves, whilst the bangles on their pretty wrists made a tinkling sound. They could have been a row of brightly coloured birds on a bough.[61]

Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London: Sage, 1997).

58 Lawrence mentions in the context of 'Master Arabians' that 'Gertrude Bell, by twenty years of patient study, had won some reputation, too', Bertram Thomas, *Arabia Felix: Across the Empty Quarter of Arabia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), p.xv. The belittling phrase 'some' and 'too' aside, Bell is treated as a token male achiever in the field.

59 Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, p121.

60 See Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction*, p.132 and Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp.185-86.

61 Barbara Toy, *Travelling the Incense Route: From Arabia to the Levant in the Footsteps of the Magi* [1968] (London: Tauris Parke, 2009), p.22.

In gaining access to an area forbidden to men, Toy has an opportunity to make women the rare focus of her account. In an account that is otherwise rewardingly innovative that opportunity, however, is missed: this passage treats the women of the haram as aesthetic objects in a manner familiar to the Orientalist male fantasy trope. Remove the exposure to the harem in this passage, and Toy is indistinguishable from a male desert traveller, something Toy herself points up with irony, noting that her 'lack of husband, children, or even jewellery made me only half a woman'. She watches the women of the harem disappear through 'a minute door in the back wall, whispering again and departing in excited secrecy' and then gets back to matters of more importance to her: 'The Sheikh and I returned to the sterner problems of inquisitive Bedu and the radio'.[62] Some might read the explicit positioning of self among raiding parties and technology as Toy acting out the role of token male; more convincingly, however, this is Toy playing the part of resourceful female desert traveller with other things on her mind at that moment than family. One could argue about whether the imagery she uses ('fluttering', 'tinkling', 'brightly coloured birds', 'whispering ... in excited secrecy') belongs to a male or a female vocabulary, but the more important point is that Toy shares with her male counterparts an inability to reflect more deeply on Arab women's lives, dehumanising them as a collective piece of colourful landscape in which women are both voiceless and nameless.

The 'anonymisation' of Arab women in this way is an enduring trait of both male and female desert literature. Adrienne Brady's work, *Way South of Wahiba Sands,* is a case in point. One of the few women to attempt a travel account of a journey across Arabia in recent decades, she describes a four-wheel drive trip across the UAE and Oman. Offering at times a touching portrait of her relationship with her late partner, Richard, the narrative is less successful in its treatment of other women, objectifying rather than individualising the women she meets:

> Was it possible ... that the women disappearing between the trees were descendants from Persians, living in their mountain stronghold as their ancestors had done? ... Their slim build and colourful stylish clothes set them apart from black-cloaked village females …. We decided that an attempt to follow the women to see where they were heading would be impossible without being intrusive. Contenting ourselves with silent speculation, we watched their retreat until, unable to resist a shot of their receding back views, I reached for my camera.[63]

[62] Toy, *Travelling the Incense Route,* p.23.
[63] Adrienne Brady, *Way South of Wahiba Sands: Travels with Wadiman* (London: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2013), p.27.

These are not Arab women, or Omanis, let alone named individuals with jobs, husbands, families and histories (or 'herstories' to use Hazel Carby's term); these beings belong to a checklist of types (Persian descendants, villagers, the black-cloaked) observed at the end of the camera lens, and shot from behind as trophies of Brady's speculative gaze. Brady's failed opportunity to become acquainted with Arab women is slimly justified by a concern for their privacy but this is immediately contradicted by the act of capture and subsequent exposure in print. The 'black-cloaked' objectification of 'village females' implies criticism that these women are 'not like Us', that they are backward in their remoteness. Similarly the mountain women, with their 'receding back views', are 'in retreat' in the direction of Brady's imagined past, inviting rescue 'by their modern, Western sisters'.[64] Set in a broader context, this is the kind of writing that attracted the censure of early feminist critics such as Carby who see in feminist writing a similar 'Orientalist' presentation of the social practices of other nations which posits that women require the intervention of Western, educated, elite intellectuals in order to lead satisfactory lives. Whatever the other merits of the book, Brady is disappointingly unable to determine a counter-narrative for these village women.

The opportunity for a more productive kind of 'international cross-cultural sisterhood', one that gives voice to the women encountered and articulates their needs from their own perspectives, such as one would hope to be the result of a generation of postcolonial studies, remains elusive in Brady's work.[65] This dehumanisation of Arab women, the failure to give them substance in literature, and the presumption of speaking on their behalf belongs to a larger act of erasure and selective exposure that is explored in the next section.

The siren trope

Thus far, this chapter has explored the absence of women in desert literature as female travel companions and as female travel writers. It now turns to the even greater absence, at least until recently, of Arab women as subjects within desert travel accounts. Where Arab women are mentioned at all, they make an appearance largely as figures in an exotic tableau, without voice and conforming to the familiar representational binary in Western

[64] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.207 in reference to Hazel V. Carby, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp.212–35.

[65] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.197.

male literature of women 'veiled or splayed naked' – either languishing in their irrelevance or corrupting with their availability.[66] Foster and Mills identify this binary as arising out of the cult of the harem which they describe as being 'central to the fantasies which structure Orientalist discourse: in male-generated myth it is forbidden territory ... charged with erotic significance about which knowledge can only be voyeuristically obtained'.[67] In this way, the siren trope acts as a metaphor for the old Orient itself – a self-mythologising locus of desire and unattainability, wherein women are portrayed as objects 'both desired and feared by men' and without the agency of self-representation.[68]

The siren trope can be traced back to late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe and the Romantic movement in which poetry, fiction and painting gave cultural capital to the scant knowledge and febrile imaginings about Arab women in the experience of desert travellers. Works such as Delacroix's celebrated 'The Death of Sardanapalus', and Byron's Eastern tales which sold in record numbers, helped create the defining image of the Oriental female that persisted throughout the century in English literature.[69] Presented as submissive, seduced by superior physical strength and silent except in speech engendered by men, these notional Arab women are analogous to the Western colonial enterprise. This amounts, as Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford have suggested, to a 'double colonisation', celebratory of patriarchal values and achievements and indeed male dominance.[70] That Arab women are shown to approve this submissive, slavish role of theirs, as Rana Kabbani points out in her analysis of sexuality in Orientalist literature, is a convenient fulfilment of male, and by extension, colonial fantasy.[71]

Some travellers challenged this fictional presentation of Oriental women, including Lady Wortley Montagu who, in describing the activities of Turkish women, emerges as an early apologist for presumed local customs in an implied criticism of life back home. In explaining, for example, that although the law permits a Muslim man four wives, no 'man of quality' would make use of this liberty and no 'woman of rank' would

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66 Sussan Babaie in *Omani Women,* by Helen Couchman (Muscat: Soloshow Publishing, 2015), pp.79-87.
67 Foster and Mills, *An Anthology,* p.15.
68 Foster and Mills, *An Anthology,* p.7.
69 The first two cantos of *Childe Harold,* for example, were published in March 1812 and all five hundred copies were sold within three days; by the middle of the month, the author 'awoke to find himself famous'.
70 Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, *A Double Colonisation: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1986).
71 See Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1994), Chapters 1 and 2.

suffer it.[72] A century later, Karsten Niebuhr similarly condemns 'ridiculous stories' about women's roles noting that 'Arabian women enjoy a great deal of liberty, and often a great deal of power, in their families'.[73] Despite occasional attempts at demythologising the role of Arab women, nineteenth-century desert literature, including Richard Burton's exhaustive accounts of Arab sexual practices, served only to reinforce stereotypes of sensuality and sexual license. This contrasts sharply with the representation of Arab women in the twentieth century. Given their traditional eroticisation in Western literature, it is unsurprising perhaps that the ascetic desert travellers of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, Charles Doughty and T.E. Lawrence, avoid any engagement (physical or literary) with women; indeed, women are erased almost entirely from their texts. In Lawrence's work, their absence is replaced by discussions on chastity and the asexual, or homoerotic and male, camaraderie of the desert experience, establishing, as we have seen, the desert as a locus of uncompromising masculine endeavour. In a letter to Doughty, Lawrence described *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as an adventure that he hoped would 'appeal to Boy Scouts',[74] and misogynistic references (such as the 'raddled meat' of prostitutes and the lack of anything 'female in the Arab movement, but the camels') further establish Lawrence's text as unapologetically male.[75]

The proto-anthropological works of Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger in the mid-twentieth century are often singled out as providing detailed pictures of desert societies in Arabia and yet they reflect only half of the reality.[76] Given that family is at the heart of Bedu society and all endeavours revolve around marrying, having children and providing for that family, accounts that omit all mention of women and domestic arrangements can at best be considered partial but Thesiger in particular appears dismissive of this aspect of Bedu life.[77] Where they gain any mention at all, Arab women are objectified in *Arabian Sands* as the abstracted fulfilment of physical need: 'we seldom

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[72] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters of Lady M.W. Montagu during the Embassy to Constantinople, 1716-18* (London: John Sharpe, 1825), Vol. I, p.114.

[73] Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and Other Countries in the East*, translated by Robert Heron (Perth, Edinburgh and London: Morison et al, 1792, 2 Vols.), Vol.2, p.214.

[74] T.E. Lawrence, 'Letter to Charles Doughty' (7 August 1920) in T.E. Lawrence, David Garnett ed., *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), p.310.

[75] T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* [1935] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.28 and p.221.

[76] Thesiger did not claim to be an anthropologist: 'Although I have no anthropological training it seemed to me worth recording what I saw and what I was told'; cited in Alexander Maitland, *Wilfred Thesiger: The Life of the Great Explorer* [2006] (New York: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, 2011), p.121.

[77] See Alan Keohane, *Bedouin Nomads of the Desert* [1994] (London: Kyle Books, 2011): 'Children are a vital part of Bedu life', the result of intercourse that is considered 'a great pleasure for both men and women' (p.106); women, according to Keohane, carry the tribe's sense of honour (p.117).

spoke of sex,' Thesiger writes, 'for starving men dream of food, not of women, and our bodies were generally too tired to lust'.[78] According to Thesiger, women are considered by the Bedu as the bearers of sons, and as 'provided by God for the satisfaction of men'. Thesiger goes on to write of women, in reference to chastity, that 'deliberately to refrain from using them would be not only unnatural but also ridiculous'.[79] The term 'using them' is highly problematic for a modern reader, and yet is seldom commented upon in modern literary criticism of Thesiger's work; one explanation of this may be because Thesiger presents his observations as quasi-anthropological fact rather than as his own perspective of an ultimately private intercourse that would have remained hidden from his view.

Women occur in successive desert narratives as incorporeal objects of desire that help distract from the tribulations involved in crossing wilderness zones. As Bruce Kirkby writes (perhaps with ironic self-consciousness), travelling through the Omani desert by camel towards the end of the twentieth century, women, then food ('crisp baby carrots' to be precise) and then water present to the mind of the weary, camel-sore traveller, as fantasised therapies.[80] Towards the later part of the twentieth century, for reasons that are explored in the next section, women in male desert literature assume an altogether more sinister place in the male narrative, while in female narratives, they become figures eliciting sympathy.

The 'veiled best-seller'

The post-Orientalist transition in the perception of Arab women in modern feminist literature 'from figure of sexual allure to object of sexual abuse' is charted by Graham Huggan, and he alights specifically on the veil as being 'a symbol of oppression' in that discourse.[81] Huggan notes Gillian Whitlock's work on the 'veiled best-seller' and shows how this genre commercialises 'humanitarian imperialism' through sensationalised biographies of Arab women that offer 'the pleasures of empathic identification'.[82] Huggan concurs with Whitlock that these narratives give satisfaction in the self-

[78] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.125.

[79] Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p.168. Maitland comments that Thesiger 'never talked about physical sex as an expression of love, or even of affection. His attitude to sex was perfunctory, immature and selfish'; Maitland further suggests he diverted his sexual energy into 'physically demanding pleasures', such as crossing the desert (Maitland, *Thesiger*, Chapter 11).

[80] Bruce Kirkby, *Sand Dance: By Camel Across Arabia's Great Southern Desert* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000), p.166.

[81] Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, p.166, in relation to American feminist literature.

[82] Gillian Whitlock, 'Tainted Testimony: The Khouri Affair', in *Australian Literary Studies*, 21, no.4 (2004), pp.165-77 (p.170), cited in Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, pp.166-167.

congratulatory illusion offered to privileged Western readers of participating in the agencies of social change. The veiled best-seller genre in modern female Arabian desert literature is analysed below, but first the discussion turns to modern male Arabian desert accounts where women are presented less as passive victims and as something more sinister – as inverse agencies of change.

In *Sultan of Oman,* an account of crossing the deserts of Oman in the 1950s, James (now Jan) Morris writes not just of the menace engendered by 'women, severely held in check, veiled with a hideous and alarming black beaklike mask, stiff and stifling,' but also begins to register the suspected tyranny of their attire, noting that '[the masks] gave them an air at once theatrical and pathetic.'[83] There is an illogical loathing expressed in the 'swarms of women in bright orange dresses like a shifting sea of orange peel, twittering together in the background' (p.84) as if Arab women, in their veiled anonymity, represent a spreading malignancy:

> The cumulative effect of sixty or seventy women disfigured by these things [peaked masks] was horrifying; with their black hanging robes, their dirty hands, their screeching voices and their beaked concealed faces, they were like huge hungry birds of carrion. (p.105)

Verging on the misogynistic, the description foreshadows a similarly menacing presentation of veiled women in Jonathan Raban's work. Writing after the oil boom of 1973, it is the anonymous encounters with Arab women in London that provoke the travels throughout the Gulf that he documents in *Arabia Through the Looking Glass*:

> It was the masks I noticed first. They made the women look like hooded falcons, and they struck me not as symbols of Islamic female modesty so much as objects of downright menace. It happened in a summer; one day Arabs were a remote people ... the next, they were neighbours.[84]

The sense of cultural anxiety towards the spread of an alien culture is concentrated in the depiction of women as predatory and malign ('hooded falcons'). The passage hints at an inversion of the desert trope that is normally associated with benign escape: here the desert is alluded to in terms of encroachment and desertification – always a negative concept in literature – as presumed desert dwellers are transformed from consumables (fodder for tourists) to consumers (rich urban neighbours).

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[83] James (now Jan) Morris, *Sultan in Oman* [1957] (London: Eland, 2008), p.17.
[84] Jonathan Raban, *Arabia through the Looking Glass* [1979] (Glasgow: Fontana, 1980), p.11.

Something of the hysteria provoked by Morris's 'hungry birds of carrion' and Raban's 'hooded falcons' is noted similarly in Tony Wheeler's *Bad Lands* (2007), where the author recoils at the 'sinister forms' of women who, invisible for the rest of the day, reappear at sunset 'like black-cloaked vampires' (p.296).[85] Mostly in Wheeler's work, however, the shock of difference is dealt with through uncomfortable travesty: 'wearing your glasses outside the slit can look quite comical', Wheeler writes, 'really serious Saudi women even wear black gloves so if they have to hand money out, or take something in, not a square centimetre of flesh will show' (p.270). Later he speculates on the difficulty of eating 'when you've got a bag over your head' (p.277). The descriptions are not intended to explore the custom of body concealment, to consider how Arab women may feel about the practice, nor to reveal anything about the specificity of the context in which this practice is adopted, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advocates in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.[86] The ironic tone is used only to discredit a practice that Wheeler finds distasteful from an aesthetic perspective as he asks: 'why do Saudi men treat their women so abjectly and why do they brand them with this absurdly uncomfortable and impractical outfit?' His concern is that men oblige women to look unlovely, 'something to be hidden away' as opposed to the acts of beautification he associates with other cultural practices such as ritual tattooing (p.296). As such, Wheeler risks the kind of double colonisation that we met with earlier, once as a male imposing a male aesthetic on the women he observes, and once as a Western traveller who assumes that women would be better served by the kind of costume with which he is familiar.

While perhaps intended as well-meaning on Wheeler's part, his defence of women whom he perceives to be under the tyranny of the veil is problematic for reasons that have been widely explored by modern postcolonial feminists. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' takes issue with an approach, for example, that presumes a 'discursive homogenisation and systematisation of the oppression of women in the third world',[87] and contests the very notion of 'universal womanhood' on a number of grounds, one of which (as McLeod illustrates) rests on the 'arithmetic method' which presumes that 'certain forms of oppression are

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[85] Tony Wheeler, *Bad Lands* [2007] (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2010).

[86] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' [1988], in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp.66-111.

[87] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory,* ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp.196-220 (p.198).

universal if they circumscribe large numbers of women'.[88] For Mohanty, the fact that a large number of Muslim women wear a veil does not necessarily mean they all suffer from oppression and she posits that some may choose to use a veil as a way of expressing political empowerment. There is a danger, then, that without careful consideration of the context, without listening for example to the women who wear veils in Saudi Arabia, that the cultural practice of veiling can be (mis)appropriated to a Western feminist agenda that does not advantage the presumed subjects of the argument. Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* (2003), a controversial book about honour killing in Jordan that was subsequently exposed by the 2008 documentary 'Forbidden Lies' as a fraud, is a case in point. Whitlock identifies that Khouri uses the book as a 'vehicle of activism', speaking for the Arab culture 'in terms of a binary logic that privileges the West as the representative of universal values of human rights, democracy and free speech'.[89] In what could be described as 'armchair travel disguised as humanitarian treatise', Khouri uses the Arab country placement with its 'touristic snippets of cultural information' to transfer authenticity to a text the main purpose of which is to reinforce relative notions of cultural hierarchy.[90]

Several other modern Western women writers who have travelled in Arabia have taken the same approach, taking the opportunity similarly to exploit their insider status, as women writing about women, to peer behind the veil and make value judgements about Arab culture. The term 'lifting the veil', commonly used in paternalistic contexts implying liberation through disrobing, has become such a commonplace one that it is hard to trace its origin. It has even earnt a visual correlative as becomes obvious when placing Geraldine Brooks' *Nine Parts of Desire* (1995), Donya Al-Hani's *Heroine of the Desert* (2006), and Jean Sasson's *Princess: More Tears to Cry* (2014), side by side: the covers of each of these high-selling 'pot-boilers' feature a pair of kohl-rimmed eyes framed by a *hijab* intended to work as an abstract for the content of these books.[91] The visual short-

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88 McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p.214.

89 Whitlock, 'Tainted Testimony', pp.175-76.

90 Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, p.164. For Arab scholarship on veiling, see Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Mary Jo Lakeland, trans., Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1991) and Leila Ahmed, *Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). According to postcolonial feminist scholar, Anna Ball, 'scholars such as these present vital alternatives to Western feminist interpretations of gender discourses in the Middle East and in Arab culture'; Anna Ball, *Palestinian Literature and Film in Postcolonial Feminist Perspective* [2012] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p.11.

91 Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), Donya Al-Nahi, *Heroine of the Desert* (Bhopal, Manjul Books, 2006), and Jean Sasson, *Princess: More Tears to Cry* (London: Transworld, 2014).

hand sometimes places these veiled faces in full frontal appeal to the reader or, in a reference to Oriental tropes, modestly deflects their gaze amid a border of head jewels and lace, with the cloth veil suggesting both a framing device and a restraining order on the wearer. Of course the implication is that the unsmiling subject of the outward gaze is imprisoned by her culture and, with mouth covered over, a silent victim of male patrimony, trapped in an unyielding and unforgiving environment. Of interest to the present discussion is the way that each book is set within a tangential desert context which acts as a symbol of that unyielding and unforgiving environment despite the predominantly urban landscape of the narrative. This is accomplished through allusions to sand dunes on the book covers, the selection of the word 'desert' in the book title and in the many oblique references to desert in all three books; the desert is referenced in this way in order to reinforce the sense of isolation and alienation conjured up by the desert trope which in turn carries with it, as we have seen, many of the old stereotypes of the Orient.

These books are undeniably popular: Sasson, for example, claims that her books have been 'a huge success all over the world. Published in over 40 countries, they have been bestsellers in many lands' and this boast appears to be evidenced by the ten similar titles of supposed non-fictional, Arab women's narratives to Sasson's name, with an output spanning twenty years and copyright held by her own Sasson Corporation.[92] With subtitles such as 'The world's most beloved Saudi princess speaks out about the struggle for women's rights in the kingdom', or 'The hidden world of Islamic women', or 'The true story of a woman who risked everything to reunite kidnapped children with their mothers', these kinds of books prey on sentimental impulses (snatched children, violent husbands, unfair imprisonment) and help project their view of women in the region as speechless victims onto the *abaya*-wearing women beyond the bookstands. A useful description of all three 'veiled best-seller' books,[93] by Brooks, Al-Nahi or Sasson, can be taken from Huggan who builds on the work of Elisabeth Bronfen in defining an 'Orientalist trauma fantasy that 'speaks through' the subaltern woman in the name of a liberated West'.[94] This particularly fits the Princess series of victim tales written by Sasson over the past two decades as she purports to give voice to Princess Sultana who, for reasons ascribed to the 'most rigid, male-dominated system, where ... [the] appointed

[92] Sasson, *Princess*, p.5.
[93] Whitlock, 'Tainted Testimony', p.169.
[94] Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, p.166. See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

male guardian has complete control over the female, from her first moment of birth to the last second of her death' (p.27), is presumed to have no opportunity to speak for herself. Sasson, who has travelled widely across Iraq, Kurdistan, Afghanistan and Kuwait (p.4) finding material for her monographs on Arab women's lives, becomes their supposed champion, giving voice where she claims they have none. The books use the desert as a framing device for a land of male dominance, unpunished honour killing and restrictions of freedom within which her heroines are apparently imprisoned. Where there might have been some satisfaction to be had in, as Spivak suggests, 'the subaltern giving witness to oppression' for the benefit of the 'less oppressed other', there is little comfort in the suspicion of a hoax or a fraud and Sasson has been coy in either admitting or refuting that the Sultana tales, which stretch credibility on many levels, are just that.

Huggan tries to rescue Khouri's *Forbidden Love* from a similar betrayal of trust represented in her travel memoir by arguing that time and space give distance to the tale and lightens the load on authenticity.[95] While it is hard to classify either the Sultana tales or *Forbidden Love* as travel texts, other than that they involve the authors drawing on their own knowledge of Arabia, they are deliberately presented as such and this contributes to the attempted legitimisation of the content. There is a map at the beginning of Sasson's *Princess: More Tears to Cry*, for example, and an appendix for the culturally illiterate which includes guidebook-style information about Saudi Arabian history, geography, economy and a glossary of terms – all details that are designed to emphasise the authenticity of the text for the unsuspecting reader.

An altogether more considered contribution to the genre of women's travel writing in Arab lands, Geraldine Brooks's travel journalism *Nine Parts of Desire* communicates an underlying agenda of cultural relativism. Building her narrative on genuine encounter she states, 'I did something so obvious I couldn't believe it had taken me a year to get around to it. I started talking to women' (p.11). It is not clear, however, whether she starts listening in the way that Hazel Carby urged in her seminal essay, 'White Woman Listen!'[96] Indeed, Brook's presentation of apparent facts – about Islam, about Arab women, about domestic life in desert lands – is manipulated to satisfy the prejudices of the intended Western readership:

> Like most Westerners, I always imagined the future as an inevitably brighter place, where a kind of moral geology will have eroded the cruel edges of past

[95] See Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, pp.167-69.
[96] Carby, 'White Woman Listen!, pp.212–235.

> and present wrongs. But in Gaza and Saudi Arabia, what I saw gave me a different view. From there, the future is a place that looks darker every day. (p.166)

Brooks admits that it is hard to dissociate Arabia from what she calls the 'background noise' (p.226) of prejudice and 'dire social practice' attributed to the cultural baggage surrounding Islam. This noise crescendos into what she describes as a 'roar' after the events of 9/11 which she attributes to the 'hate-mongering Islam' of Saudi Arabia and the betrayal of its own fundamental ideals. 'I thought' she writes 'of the other weeping faces we were never allowed to see: the bruised and battered Saudi women, hidden by the veil and imprisoned behind the high walls of their houses' (p.241). An exploration of Islam is the focus of *Nine Parts of Desire* where Brooks attempts to find links between the experience of twentieth-century Arab women, and indeed her own, in the imperatives given in the Koran: 'The reason for my sleepless night lay in that desert town. I couldn't check myself in a Saudi hotel room in the 1990s because thirteen hundred years earlier a Meccan named Muhammad had trouble with his wives' (p.3). Brooks goes on to say later in the book:

> Getting to the truth about hijab was a bit like wearing it: a matter of layers to be stripped away, a piece at a time. In the end, under all the concealing devices ... under all the talk about *hijab* freeing women from commercial or sexual exploitation, ... was the body: the dangerous female body that somehow, in Muslim society, had been made to carry the heavy burden of male honour. (p.32)

In this context, Brooks finds a way of recognising in the veil both emblems of the traditional representation of Arab women as desired and feared: in either case she recognises their objectification from the perspective of the Western observer as body, not as soul, personality, opinion or even as sentient partner in a relationship. While Brooks does not make the connection with the landscape explicit, the desert – which hovers at the edge of the narrative throughout – with its pared down features, lack of vegetation, and the frequency of its nomination as an empty space, makes the ideal context for this stripping back to body and becomes in some senses, as the locus of male competitive endeavour, a similarly encumbered space that has 'been made to carry the heavy burden of male honour'. The description of Brook's travels with King Hussein of Jordan, captures the way in which the environment is transformative for those who surrender to it, turning the effete, 'smooth-talking, Harrow- and Sandhurst-educated diplomat' into something 'much more potent: the avatar of his ancestor the prophet Muhammad, prayer leader,

warlord and father of the tribes' (p.122) – in other words, something much more male. The camel's blood spilt in the King's honour outside the Bedu tent they visit, becomes more than just a set piece from the 'tableaux from the Arabian Nights', it symbolises the male brutality traditionally associated with an environment in which Bedu women 'swathed in black veils and marked on the face with blue tattoos' press petitions into the king's palms (p.124). Brook's Arabia, then, despite the witness of the women she interviews, is a zone of continuing patriarchy in which women continue to be represented as silent supplicants.

There is one account, rare among modern Arabian desert texts by Western writers, male or female, that manages to get beyond the 'concealing devices' of Muslim society to reveal a richer complexity of encounter with Arab women. Marguerite van Geldermalsen's *Married to a Bedouin* (2006) describes the author's initiation into the lives of the Bdoul Bedu in Petra in Jordan.[97] Given that she settles in Jordan midway through her travels, instead of continuing to move, it is perhaps fairer to term this book a memoir although it shares many of the same characteristics of a travel text as defined by Jonathan Raban, the 'essential condition' of which 'is the experience of living among strangers, away from home'.[98] Geldermalsen refreshingly dismisses the pretensions surrounding casual discourse on the subject of veiling early in the narrative: 'Elizabeth felt it was polite to cover up because we were in a Muslim world, but I didn't care. If they wanted to cover themselves, fine. I didn't usually and I didn't see why I should change for anyone' (p.5). Effortlessly, over the course of the remaining two hundred and sixty pages, however, Geldermalsen moves literally and metaphorically under cover as she becomes a lover, then a wife and ultimately Umm Raami, the mother of Bedu sons, dressing to fit in or to be practical as her adopted life among the Bedu required. Her change of costume (and she is pictured on the front cover with headscarf, local dress and Western shirt) is the unconscious product of her assimilation into a life she grows to respect and value deeply for its sense of societal and familial loyalties. As she writes, 'I was welcomed and accepted by everyone, but it took me a long time to realise that by marrying Mohammad I had really become a part of something larger, and that it was never going to be just him and me' (p.53). Eventually, the Bdoul are moved out of the ruins of Petra and Geldermalsen's home is relocated from ancient cave to modern, concrete block

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97 Marguerite van Geldermalsen, *Married to a Bedouin* (London: Virago, 2006).

98 Jonathan Raban, 'The Journey and the Book' [1982], in *For Love and Money: Writing, Reading, Travelling, 1969-1987* (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), pp.253-60, cited in Youngs, *Travel Writing*, p.12.

and ‘so a way of life disappeared’ (p.271). There is a hint of elegy about the transition into a more modern way of life but in interview, Geldermalsen is sanguine about the move, recognising that the value of Bedu society is traditionally associated not with place but with connection, family and Islamic values.[99] Her account is an example of non-judgemental, non-comparative desert travel literature that reveals the life of Bedu women in the complexity of their relationships with each other and the outside world in a way that challenges assumed stereotypes: ‘I have not told of the girl who crept from her husband’s bed ... to meet her lover in the mountains, nor of how caring friends convinced her husband to overlook her behaviour and not commit a crime of honour but an act of *sutra* and forgiveness by treating her child as his own’ (p.271). She does tell of plenty of other stories, however, that illustrate how veil or no veil, women’s lives are just as nuanced, as Lady Montagu contended several centuries earlier, as those of her own New Zealand heritage, despite the differences in opportunity.

Married to a Bedouin is similar in the inclusiveness of its gaze to a travel account by Helen Couchman entitled *Omani Women* (2012). Couchman’s commentary takes the form of a series of confrontational photographs rather than words, supported by a catalogue essay by the Iranian critic, Sussan Babaie. The book arose from an exhibition of the works in Muscat whose subtitle, *About a Journey,* deliberately positions the work within the Arabian desert travel writing tradition. The book cover features a vast, flat, almost monochrome desert plain uninterrupted by any animate image, hinting at the backstory as we learn from the interpretative gloss that the work was inspired by Couchman’s encounter with two Bedu women on the edge of the Empty Quarter and this apparently led to the recognition that, in the catalogue of female representations, there were only ethnographic photos of indigenous women and only from nomadic tribes. Couchman sets out to redress this omission, featuring mostly urban, working women in an attempt to present, in the words of Babaie, ‘people with lives as complex individuals’ not just women behind ‘veils, looms and cooking pots’ (p.82). The images contest the familiar presentation of Arab women in Western male depictions as vulnerable, available or seductive: these are not women dressed to satisfy male gaze; in fact, men are simply irrelevant in these portraits where women are posing for women.

Babaie’s accompanying text provides a frame tale for the pictorial commentary; she claims that while Couchman was travelling in Oman, she encounters a man who

[99] Jenny Walker, ‘Married to a Bedouin’, *Jordan* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 2009), p.221.

claims that the last British person he met was Thesiger in the 1950s. Babaie's embrace of this detail is significant as she describes Couchman as bridging 'a gap as far as local memory allows' and shows willingness to hand the baton of Western male travellers' narrative over to a woman. While Babaie claims that a woman is able to bring more to the project of capturing other women 'in the way they wish to be photographed' by virtue of culturally privileged access (p.79), there remains a tension in the work that shows that the issues of difference are not about gender alone. The portraits form, as Babaie acknowledges, an ethno-anthroprographic project in which Arabs are delineated by a European and as such they are as telling about Couchman's own journey of discovery and her attempt to find something in common with her subjects as they reveal of each of the women portrayed. Interestingly, over half the hundred or more women, going against the common practice in Oman at this time, choose to be photographed wearing a veil or covering part or all of their face in some way, adding to the conflict of Couchman's attempt to see beyond the surface of each portrait. While Babaie claims that the 'portraits make observations that remain neutral, thus running contrary to the tacitly censorious shadow cast on the practice of veiling by Muslim women' (p.80), this is not wholly convincing as there is an irreconcilability about Couchman's perspective on each of her subjects compared with the chosen representation of self, betrayed by the sitter.

Given this interplay between observer and observed, European and Arab, desert and domestic, Couchman's images remain outside feminine stereotypes or feminist agendas. According to Babaie, 'while this is a journey for the artist, we – the viewer – are also implicated in an exercise in disrupting the old Orientalist tropes' (p.80) as we are involved in deciphering unexpected nuances surrounding the coded context of each woman. Mouza (p.43), for example, is fully veiled with just her extravagantly beaded wealth on display, but before assumptions can be made about a traditional life of rural labour, emblems of a different reality resolve on the eye – the watch she is wearing, the stylish sandals, the sealed roadside venue she chooses to stand by in the middle of the desert. Similarly, Zainab (p.17), in her magnificent pink veil and hennaed feet appears to be deliberately evoking the siren trope, her black, menacing shadow stretching into the past while her eyes are directed towards the sunshine ahead. Ultimately the self-fashioning portraits are not about ethnography, journalism or psychology – they are about people and a curiosity about each of the sitter's lives that is not 'detached from the loaded baggage' (p.85) of Orientalism as Babaie suggests, but is deliberately provoking of commentary on that discourse. For the genre of travel writing (and I still contend this

work can be considered as such, augmented as it is with a map of routes the author has taken), this is relevant because it suggests a less divisive and less reductive account of Arab women's lives.[100] 'The more I look at these images,' Babaie writes, 'the more it feels as though we are being viewed' (p.85). The key, given Babaie's gender and ethnicity, is in the satisfyingly inclusive 'we'.

Desert as an inconstant space

Throughout the history of desert literature, the landscape has been anthropomorphised and generally in the female form. In male desert literature as we have seen, women are often represented as both siren-like and chaste; similarly the desert in its feminine incarnation is sometimes projected as either magnetically dangerous and alien, or virginal and comforting to the soul.[101] The word 'pristine' occurs frequently in desert texts and there is a strong coincidence between concepts of the pristine with the lack of women in that space. Similarly, masculine boasts about penetrating the land, being the first to conquer the virgin territory of the sands, to map and chart in straight lines,[102] abound in male desert literature, as the explorer Nicholas Clapp identifies in *The Road to Ubar* (1998), where he touches on the race to be first across the Empty Quarter:

> Both Thomas and Philby saw the Rub Al-Khali as a beckoning yet veiled virgin. Thomas called the Rub Al-Khali 'the sands of my desire.' Philby called the same sands 'the bride of my constant desire.' But, though there were two suitors, there could be only one husband.[103]

Not so in Arab culture, of course, but Clapp's observation is not of Arab presence in the desert space, but of Western penetration. He goes on to state that Thomas embraced the Empty Quarter less as an 'enchanting bride' and more 'a hungry void and an abode of death'.[104] Death and cleanliness are intimately connected in desert literature; Lawrence, for example, in describing the desert as an arena of death was attracted to it, according to

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[100] I am using Tim Youngs's definition (or parameters of selection) for travel writing, here, which references 'predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator' in Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction,* p.3; the portraits are not prose accounts but they conform to every other part of these criteria.

[101] See Thomas, *Arabia Felix,* p.170, for example: 'Dunes of all sizes, unsymmetrical in relation to one another, but with the exquisite rounds of a girl's breasts, rise tier upon tier like a mighty mountain system'.

[102] This fanaticism for the straight line is discussed by Australian surveyor Len Beadell as he worked on the planning for the Gunbarrel Highway. Len Beadell, *Too Long in the Bush* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965).

[103] Nicholas Clapp, *The Road to Ubar: Finding the Atlantis of the Sands* [1998] (London: Souvenir Press, 1999), p.21.

[104] Clapp, *The Road to Ubar,* p.23.

Tidrick, 'because it was sterile and therefore "clean"',[105] a word he uses repeatedly (fifty-eight times) throughout *Seven Pillars of Wisdom.*[106]

The desert as emblematic of something both pristine and sinister continues in modern representations of the desert and is not confined to male travel writing. In *Tracks* (1980), the work of the celebrated Australian desert-traveller, Robyn Davidson, for example, the elemental nature of the space, stripped to the minimal rhythms of life and death in their unencumbered simplicity, is something described as simultaneously frightening and inspiring. Indulging uncharacteristically in the kind of 'competitive edge' more usually exhibited by men, she takes a moment of pride in being the first to step into untrodden space:

> There was nothing but sandhills and spinifex and interminable space. I was perhaps treading now on country where no one had ever walked before, there was so much room – pure, virgin desert, not even cattle to mar it and nowhere in that vastness even an atom of anything human.[107]

This is familiar territory – the pioneering trek, the nostalgic association with the past symbolised through the use of camels (connected thereby with Oriental tradition by virtue of their Middle East origins and handlers), the anthropomorphised landscape, the Sublime dimensions, the virginity, the first to encounter – but it is not necessarily feminine territory. In the writing of Davidson, the space becomes gender-neutral, its virginity conceptualised as a tension between the human and 'the rest' (a dynamic discussed through the lens of eco-criticism in the next chapter).

In a later work, Sara Wheeler attempts with less success to wrest the desert (in this case a cold desert) from specific gender connotation.[108] In *Terra Incognita* (1996), a book that famously probes the maleness of the space, Wheeler quotes Admiral Byrd, the first to fly over the South Pole but one of many to couch the ice in feminine terms, describing it as 'pale like a sleeping princess. Sinister and beautiful, she lies in frozen slumber' (p.xviii); similarly Scott notes that the continent 'possessed a virginity, in his mind, that provided an alternative to the spoiled and messy world' (p.49). Within this environment Wheeler, as a woman, is made to feel especially alien by some of the men

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[105] Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby*, p.178.

[106] As counted in Colin Choat, ed., *Seven Pillars* [online], Project Gutenberg Australia (2001), available at http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100111.txt [accessed 12 July 2019].

[107] Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* [1980] (London: Picador, 1998), p.190.

[108] References to the maleness of the Antarctic desert abound in Wheeler's polar account, including among the men who work there and 'pine for the old days when boys could be boys and girls weren't there' (p.247).

she encounters – particularly those on the British base: 'Short of erecting a sign outside the base saying GO AWAY, they couldn't have made me feel less welcome' (p.212). She traces their hostility directly to a sense of contamination that a woman represents in the male locale, as explained by one of the male scientists: 'They don't want the complication of women in such a pristine place' (p.219).

Looking for reasons why the desert is so often projected as a feminine space that is therefore jealously guarded for male encounter, Jay Griffiths notes in *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (2006), that 'The Arabic word for desert, *badieh*, is feminine, as is the word for desert waste, *barrieh*'.[109] This raises the question as to what makes this type of landscape feminine in character across cultures. In her analysis of Karen R. Lawrence's *Penelope Voyages* (1994), Sidonie Smith comments on 'the idea of women as "earth, shelter, enclosure"'. She suggests that this idea of woman 'as home' persists in modern literature, 'anchoring femininity, weighing it down, fixing it as a compass point'.[110] Land, in reverse, is often similarly gendered. Its association with earth, hence fertility and propagation, tend to construct the land as lover and mother to an assumed male inhabitant; it may be questioned, then, as to how it is possible that an arid desert, 'which cuts against motifs of fertility' is able to satisfy these gendered parameters.[111] Griffiths helps provide an answer in the section on 'Fire', where she traces the essential character of the desert to an inconstancy that matches the supposed nature of women. Her highly-referenced account is in itself innovatively wild in design (in that its chapters are not sequenced by time nor in countries visited but around the five elements) as well as wild in content (in the eclectic way, for example, in which references to Thesiger and the Bedu, the French Foreign Legion and the Turkana people, the author's own experiences and those of the aboriginal writer, Ruby Langford, are spliced seemingly chaotically, or as a stream of consciousness, into the text). Griffiths's polyphonic description destabilises the image of the landscape, making it vulnerable to the dynamics of the author's recollection and the connections she makes between those she references. This is exemplified in a passage about the mathematics, or 'sand algebra' (p.287) of the dunes that constitute the desert, where the words used to describe the desert dissolve into different meaning through translation:

[109] Jay Griffiths, *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.295.
[110] Smith, Sidonie, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 2001), p.x.
[111] Citing Anna Ball from unpublished supervisory interaction.

> The wind draws dented diamonds in the sand, patterns subetched by gravity. Maths has long been important to Middle Eastern cultures ... Omar Khayyam, poet of deserts, wrote a treatise on algebra and used the Arabic term *shay* to mean the 'unknown' in an equation. Translated into Spanish, the term was spelled *xay*, then abbreviated to *x*. The unknown, like *terra incognita*, this is *numerus incognitus*, desert space of mathematics. (p.288)

In the 'maths of sand', Griffiths is drawn to the 'absolute in number' which hints at the paradox of infinite stabilities, limitless in concept but fixed by numerical expression. This contrasts with the more feminine principles represented by the erratic rainfall and *wadis* that flood and cease; the desert, with its shifting form in which sand dunes move and change shape, twisters which rearrange the desert furniture and mirages that tremble with visual misinformation, becomes subject to ebb and flow and this in turn contributes to its binary representation as sinister and chaste, repellent and alluring.

The desert need not be defined, however, in terms of a simple binary of male fixture and female flux: in its constant transition between the two, it also operates within the imagination as a liminal space, a borderland of potential. In her work on Palestinian literature and film, Anna Ball discusses the liminality, or in-betweeness of Palestinians as inhabitants of a stateless nation 'lacking self-determination over its own boundaries'.[112] In this state, Palestinians are subject to the 'shifting regulations, boundaries and territorial claims cast upon them'. Ball goes on to explore how those within this unstable state are constantly, in reference to Deleuzian theory, in a 'state of "becoming" rather than "being"' and there are obvious parallels here with the Bedu whose tribal range in Arabia has been circumscribed by the imposition of borders that fail to take into account the logic of their community. Their state finds its physical equivalent in the Empty Quarter, the dunes of which are equally liminal in that they are never resolved, never wholly on one side of a border or another but in a constant state of influx and exodus under the influence of the shaping wind. As postcolonial feminist theorists point out, this state of becoming smooths the differences between genders: the liminal space offers opportunities for radical transgression and redefinition of those, including women in traditionally male territory, who are marginalised.[113] This is helpful in confirming why women are

[112] Ball, *Palestinian Literature and Film*, p.116. Ball makes reference to 'smooth space'; see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp.256-341.

[113] See explanation of the 'Third Space' in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.53-56.

frequently erased from desert texts as their presence is potentially destabilising of masculine certainties traditionally defined by Western travel.

There are obvious parallels between the way in which the desert is gendered and the way in which the land as a whole, particularly in the oil-bearing regions of the Middle East, has been characterised as an opportunity for penetration and domination by Western explorers. As Susan Bassnett recognises, 'the early history of colonialism is one in which new territories were metaphorised as female, as virgin lands waiting to be penetrated, ploughed, and husbanded by male explorers'.[114] In an era of postcolonial sensitivity, however, it may be expected that this characterisation of the desert as available for exploitation would give way to something more nuanced – a respect for the land in its own right, perhaps. And indeed, in some narratives (at least for some of the time, as in the science and wilderness texts discussed in the next chapter) this occurs. Traditional presentations, however, remain the norm. In Jo Tatchell's *A Diamond in the Desert*, for example, which is primarily about the oil-rich Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi in the twenty-first century, there is a passage that describes the author's visit to the Rub Al-Khali, or the Empty Quarter, 'almost a million square miles of sand, billowing like a great golden blanket as far as the eye can see, the largest expanse of dunes on earth'.[115] Tatchell reflects on the Bedu who 'lived side by side with their expansive, omnipresent God, privileged enough simply to be' and in contrast thinks of her own life and its insignificance. The desert is the empty space that offers this communion between creator and created and within which, in common with almost all other desert explorers, male and female alike, Tatchell chooses to reverse her gaze, tying human consciousness into the fabric of the desert landscape:

> Outside the cold leather interior of the car, there is nothing but the purest, most unself-conscious part of ourselves. The desert eases time and geography into one, and who does not dream of sailing along the sharp edge of the natural world, leaving buildings and ambition behind? It deserves to stay as it is, one of the last great uninhabited spaces in the world. (p.60)

It is notable that Tatchell does not feel that the desert should stay the same because of its own intrinsic value – as a landscape of note, as a habitat for adaptive wildlife, as an ecosystem with its own dimensions and rhythms – but only as a refuge for those weary of the 'buildings and ambition' that have complicated modern life. As such, the desert

[114] Bassnett, 'Travel writing and gender', p.231.
[115] Jo Tatchell, *A Diamond in the Desert: Behind the Scenes in the World's Richest City* [2009] (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2010), p.60.

remains a locus of potential exploitation and as an arena for escape, recreation and contrast from the tamed life of a globalised, urban experience. Into that opportunity steps all the modern infrastructure that helps facilitate wilderness encounter – the tour groups, the camps, the roads – bringing with it a new wave of explorers and exploiters who in their wake destroy the wilderness element, the very character of the landscape that made it attractive in the first place. Given that a wilderness cannot both be both virgin and explored, it remains to be seen how, in turn, the desert as trope will survive its collapse into the so-called 'accelerated sublime'.[116]

This chapter has argued that although few in number, women writers have throughout Western history contributed diversely to the genre of Arabian desert travel writing; despite the relative lack of opportunity in recent years to engage in extended desert travel, their contribution continues to this day in texts that allude to the desert, if only (in some texts) for the apparent sake of marketability. That these texts, by women about women, appeal to the travelling public is illustrated in the sales, and in the fact that a book such as *Married to a Bedouin* is still being reprinted over a decade after publication. However disappointing some of these books may be in terms of the failed opportunity to present any more complex a depiction of Arab women than their male counterparts, they nonetheless illustrate a new desire to write and read about this hitherto textually marginalised part of society that is in step with wider movements to 'give voice to the subaltern'. Dealing with their own marginalisation, as women writers in a highly gendered space, however, is perhaps more problematic. The nominal desert best-sellers are a case in point. They may represent dubious writing (as a result perhaps of a lack of critical mass) but it could be argued that these texts are held to a higher account than male accounts. There may not be much difference, in fact, in a woman crossing desert lands in search of veiled women (Geraldine Brooks) to men's travels in search of lost heroes but the former subject matter is considered domestic and outside the parameters of 'real' desert travel writing. Within this thesis, there was a strong temptation to leave these examples out of the survey of modern Arabian desert literature because of the quality of the writing but I chose to include them to avoid continuing the erasure of women within the history of the genre. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century may not be characterised by many desert texts authored by women, but the reasons for this, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is interesting in its own right. To ignore the few texts

[116] See Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, Chapter 3. This is discussed in the Conclusion of this study.

that do present as relevant to the topic on the grounds that they represent clichéd or inferior writing, is to hold women's writing to higher account than men's which is ultimately as problematic as excluding them from the discussion. It appears, at one level, that Lisle is right when she states:

> women must overcome their 'natural' limitations as women and become 'extraordinary' in order to be manly enough to travel and write books about it. In this way, the discourse of masculinity in travel writing continue to install an attending message of 'even women can travel' – imagine that!'[117]

Not only do women writers have to prove they can travel in Muslim countries, and that they are able to write about their desert experiences, they are also expected to be standard bearers for the postcolonial feminist project, bringing voice to the marginalised. This brings their endeavours to crisis as it is difficult to be accepted as a *bona fide* desert writer when the subject of the text is a topic beyond the traditional boundaries of the genre. Where they succeed, such as in Couchman's and Babaie's eclectic exploration of Omani women's identity, their achievement can be celebrated as a double intervention not only in bringing visibility to Arab women in 'desert texts' but also in recalibrating, in form and content, the delineation of that genre.

[117] Lisle, *Global Politics,* p.97.

4. Wonderment and Wilderness: Desert Science Writing

This chapter continues the theme of liminality raised by the discussion in chapter three but within the context of nature rather than gender. In continuing to explore how modern desert writing reveals much about the land left behind (the third of the research areas posited in the introduction of this thesis), the work of desert scientists, captured in moments of sublime contemplation of the natural world, is examined for the commentary it offers about the human place within nature. In identifying the artificial nature of boundaries between disciplines (for example, between scientific documentation and travel literature) that has become a feature of exploration narratives since the 1950s, this chapter employs ecocriticism to show how modern desert texts often reach towards a more equitable definition of the human relationship with the environment.

In *The Desert and the Sown* (1907), in a passage that runs against the grain of the familiar trope of empty desert, Gertrude Bell refreshingly slips behind the gaze of those she travels with to identify a different desert narrative to the one normally associated with Western travel in Arabia. Identifying that 'Arabs do not speak of desert or wilderness as we do', she writes:

> Why should they? To them it is neither desert nor wilderness, but a land of which they know every feature, a mother country whose smallest product has a use sufficient for their needs. They know … how to rejoice in the great spaces and how to honour the rush of the storm.[1]

Bell's association of the desert inhabitant with a deep understanding of nature is in itself a familiar trope suggestive of an Eden lost to urban societies, but it also hints at a moment of empathy within her own experience. The rejoicing in 'great spaces' the honouring of the 'rush of the storm' suggests that Bell is able to perceive the connection between Arab and desert because she shares a similar respect towards the 'mother country'. This connection could be read in two ways. If read through the familiar Western travel perspective of the desert as a zone of masculine posturing through quest, exploration and exploitation (often conflated as science), Bell's landscape, as the provider of the 'smallest product' for human sustenance, may appear feminised, domesticated or tamed for human need. A different reading, however, is the one that Bell posits as an Arab perspective: 'to

[1] Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown: Travels in Palestine and Syria* [Heinemann, 1907] (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2008), p.60. For a biography of Bell, see Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997).

them' this desert is comprised of a more harmonious balance between the human being and his or her place within the environment. Nature in this passage, then, is not mere scenery staged for a human story, it is represented as architect of its own space, and timekeeper of its own rhythms. With the human story reduced to only one small constituent part amid the 'great spaces', this passage can be read as sharing less of the colonising preoccupations of Bell's own era while anticipating more of the postcolonial sensibilities of the end of the twentieth century. Within a passage that appears to move desert as mother country into centre stage, there is a response to nature that not only runs contrary to the dominant discourse of Bell's day but also prefigures the ecocritical concerns of our own.

This chapter probes the familiar tropes of Arabian desert representation and considers to what extent they collapse into more nuanced constructions of the desert space under an ecocritical reading. Thus far, in a thesis that argues that the desert is often used as a *tabla rasa* upon which to project fundamentally Western preoccupations, the landscape has formed only the backdrop for human endeavour. The desert featured as the zone of historical re-enactment in footstep travel in chapter one and as an extreme otherness for heroic quest and endeavour. The desert as locus of human nostalgia for presumed lost innocence, and observed vicariously through the lives of the Bedu was discussed in chapter two; the desert also functioned here as a periphery, as an other in its own right, hovering beyond the urban, helping to define the metropolitan, and as an inconvenience to be crossed en route between human settlements. More positively, in chapter three, the desert context was posited as an opportunity to redeem marginalised voices, in particular, of women, written out of the dominant discourse; by extension, and perhaps less positively, the desert was explored as a gendered space awaiting human penetration to become fully real or present. In each case, the desert retreats into the background as the focus falls on narratives that concentrate on various human interests – on presentations of self, other and gender. This chapter, in contrast, considers modern scientific works where the desert is moved into the foreground. This requires an ecocritical approach which, as Robert Kern suggests, 'becomes most interesting and useful … when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere'.[2]

[2] Robert Kern, 'Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?' in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*, ed. by Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp.258-8 (p.260).

The selection of scientific texts (given their vintage qualities of mapping and naming) to demonstrate the foregrounding of nature may seem like an unlikely choice to advocate for nature and the wild from a non-human perspective. In recent decades, 'scientific writing' has become increasingly focused on the published communication of objectively observed facts for a community of peers; 'science writing', meanwhile, targets a broader readership and has allowed for a less technical approach. Both definitions assume a human centre, however, imposing order on a random otherness; neither generally admit to passages of lyrical prose.[3] In science writing connected with the Arabian Desert it is nevertheless possible to see moments when the author's observations are unable to be contained within their formal discipline, when the writer bursts out of the text to express a delight in the land and its occupants almost in spite of their field of study. At these moments, the scientist cross-dresses as travel writer, recording the experience, the strongly-felt emotions, of encounter with nature. In resisting categorisation according to established taxonomies, for example of physics, of entomology or of geography, the work of these scientists resists homogenisation and migrates across boundaries – in other words, it becomes 'hybrid', both in a taxonomical sense as being heterogenous, and in a postcolonial sense, as work that inhabits and reveals border zones. Such work mirrors the 'magpie' approach of ecocriticism which applies an 'attitude of inquiry ... that neither foregrounds nor ignores [human] involvements, [but] draws equally on knowledge from the sciences, the humanities, and the arts'.[4] By applying an eclectic ecocritical perspective to these moments of transgression in late twentieth-century science writing, it is possible to identify a step towards the kind of earth-centred writing that Lawrence Buell, one of the founders of ecocriticism, recognised as expressing a 'more even relationship of nature with culture, society, and the individual subject'.[5]

It is perhaps no coincidence that science writing that displays these moments of imaginative interlude appear to be a specific feature of late twentieth century desert accounts; such texts appear at the same point as the ecocritical movement becomes

[3] See Richard Nordqist, 'Definition and Examples of Science Writing', *Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms* [online], ThoughtCo (2019), available at: https://www.thoughtco.com/science-writing-1691928 [accessed 12 July 2019].

[4] SueEllen Campbell et al, ed. *The Face of the Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science, and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2011), p.ix.

[5] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p.48.

established as an independent and politically alert discipline.[6] These texts share with that critical corpus a sense of the environmental concerns of the day and, in the moments in which they describe a 'more even relationship' with nature, become part of a general agency for change. This study's contribution towards this agency for change is in identifying and analysing the moments when the Arabian desert is presented as a place of value in its own right and becomes part of what we might call a productive 'greening of the desert'.[7] As tidy as this sounds, however, the reality is obviously far more nuanced and the discussion concludes with a broader exploration, beyond science writing, of some of the eco-critical issues surrounding wilderness representation. The Arabian desert belongs to a constructed landscape that is no more 'politically [or] historically innocent' than the literature and culture that describe it; the effects of this invested geography is felt even today, for example in issues of conservation and land management.[8] To understand the context of these modern ecocritical issues, it is important to review the prevailing historical discourses that inform wilderness writing in general, and Arabian desert writing in particular, and it is to this context that the discussion first turns.

Emergence of science writing from travelogues

If for the Bedu of Gertrude Bell's description the desert is peopled with a series of lived and remembered connections, 'thicker with human associations than any city', for Europeans it remains resolutely connected, even in the main desert narratives of today, with emptiness, absence and abandonment.[9] Locked in the 'imaginative geography' of the West, the desert is generally presented as a place of implied mental and physical privation, symbolised by the solitary desert wanderings of Biblical prophets.[10] As Roderick Nash notes, in his history of the concept of wilderness, such landscape has long been 'instinctively understood to be something alien to man – an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had waged an unceasing

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6 William Rueckert was apparently the first person to use the term 'ecocriticism' in 1978, but the term took on its current usage as a subbranch of literary and cultural studies in the late 1980s and 1990s. See Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* [2010] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

7 See Campbell, *Face of the Earth*, p.183 where she usefully makes the useful point that 'language itself can complicate our understanding of deserts'; Campbell mentions 'green' is associated with ecological health, while the 'brown' of deserts seems 'ecologically injured or destitute, even when they may be vibrant with healthy biodiversity' (p.183). Desert is itself a word that connotes absence.

8 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin-Peregrine, 1978), p.27.

9 Bell, *Desert and the Sown*, p.60.

10 Said, *Orientalism,* pp.49-72.

struggle';[11] Western pilgrims, explorers and scholars have been drawn to 'this cruel land' – a land, which as Wilfred Thesiger famously suggested, 'can cast a spell which no temperate clime can match' – and for centuries have weighed their accomplishment in terms of the challenge it represented.[12] As we have seen, much recent travel writing connected with the region weighs its own accomplishment in turn against the exploits of those earlier pioneers, particularly T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger, whether literally in second or footstep journeys or solely through intertextual reference.[13] In analysing the effect of Joseph Conrad's work on the image of the Congo, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan write that 'every modern travel book that features the Congo as travel zone at some level reinscribes Conrad's classic novella *Heart of Darkness* (1898)'. In the same way, almost every modern travel book on Arabia reinscribes Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*, turning the desert into an equivalent 'abject zone of extreme yet undifferentiated "otherness" within which every aspect of life – landscape, people, culture, politics – presents itself as always already wrapped in metaphor and myth'.[14] As such, the Arabian desert, over the centuries of its literary delineation by Western travellers, has become a textual zone, at best 'incidentally geographical'.[15]

'Incidentally geographical', as a term used by Holland and Huggan for overinscribed places, may be a useful way of characterising the literary representation of the Arabian desert, but it should not obscure the fact that other modes of desert discourse have been 'specifically geographical' in their objective and that, until relatively recently, both literary and geographical content could be found operating simultaneously in desert literature. If, as Melman suggests in reference to Doughty's work, desert narratives may be 'superficially described as stories of the conquest of the void, or wilderness, as well as tales of risk which position the individual explorer in front of a hostile nature', then geography has provided one of the ways in which explorers have sought to make sense of the undifferentiated otherness – one of the ways, in other words, in which the human being has attempted to rationalise or tame wilderness.[16]

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[11] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* [1967] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p.8.

[12] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), Prologue, p.15.

[13] See chapter one of this thesis.

[14] Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* [1998] (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.69.

[15] Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p.67.

[16] Billie Melman, 'The Middle East/Arabia: "the cradle of Islam"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.112-119 (p.114).

In an opening chapter of *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt identifies one of two seminal historical episodes that have impacted on travel and travel writing as the moment when, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Linnaeus introduced a comprehensive system of taxonomy. Pratt shows how the naming of things brought about a transformation in the manner in which people explored and, more to the point, wrote about their explorations. Instead of the compendiums of zoological and botanical data that formed the appendices of earlier travel tomes, the 'observing and cataloguing of nature itself became narratable. It could constitute a sequence of events, or even produce a plot. It could form the main storyline of an entire account'.[17] This is significant when transposed to the context of desert explorations in Arabia because suddenly there is something to write about in an otherwise often prop-less landscape. The eye, lacking any immediate distraction, focuses in on the detail of the minimal life in view, and becomes observant of the minutiae in a landscape of essentially unencumbered forms. It is of little surprise, then, that embedded in the exploits of each lonely traveller, copious descriptions of the natural world appear in all the major desert texts in a process that can be charted back to the eighteenth century. This is the point when travel writing in general becomes institutionalised in that it becomes sponsored by and presented to the Royal Society;[18] indeed, from the eighteenth century and for much of the Victorian age, as Paul Fussell notes, travel becomes 'something like an obligation' upon those who were keen to contribute to the intellectual project of accumulating knowledge.[19] That activity eventually becomes streamlined into new disciplines. In this context, Holland and Huggan show that travel writing joined 'anthropology, geography, and the human sciences generally as one strand of a new regime of knowledges' that helped to encode the region of scrutiny.[20] Journal writing in the early and mid-nineteenth century became key to the accuracy of observation where precise notes on time, number and distance formed part of what Carl Thompson terms the 'epistemological decorum' of the day,[21] and ensured that, as Fussell notes, travel writing was able to 'share the space and borrow the authority' of human sciences.[22]

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[17] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* [1992] (London: Routledge, 2008), Chapter 2 and p.26.
[18] Hulme and Youngs, *Cambridge Companion*, p.29.
[19] Paul Fussell, ed., *The Norton Book of Travel* (New York: W.W.Norton and Co., 1987), p.130.
[20] Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p.92.
[21] Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.46.
[22] Fussell ed., *The Norton Book of Travel,* p.130.

If, as these critics suggest, a literature of science and conservation grew from within travel literature it could not be contained by it and the observations of amateur gentlemen (and one or two lady) scientists over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries become less about making a record of the flora and fauna encountered at a given point in time and more about evidencing and legitimating the author's presence within a geographical location. Desert writers during this period were cognisant of their continuing duty to record the physical nature of the earth, but largely as a reflection of the human story within it. *Arabia Deserta*, the work of desert explorer Charles M. Doughty, is a classic of its kind:

> Of surpassing interest to those many minds, which seek after philosophical knowledge and instruction, is the Story of the Earth. Her manifold living creatures, the human generations and Her ancient rocks ... that vast mountainous labyrinthine solitude of rainless valleys.[23]

The many detailed, scientific observations that Doughty makes on the desert lands in Arabia, attention is always drawn ultimately to man's (and the gender is specific here) interest in the landscape and the thoughts that it inspires about his place in the universe. This is reflected in the poetic literary tone in which the ponderous, multisyllabic words match the 'mountainous labyrinthine solitude' of its subject and hyperbole helps to set the description within the specific aesthetic of the Romantic Sublime. Described as 'the Story of the Earth', this is in fact the story of Man, striding through a femininised landscape, looking for philosophical insights imposed on the construction of place. The landscape is made performative, in other words, for human instruction.

Similar devices are used in the celebrated passages of natural description in T.E. Lawrence's account of Wadi Rum (in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*) and of *al-ramlah,* known as the 'Empty Quarter' to Western travellers, in Bertram Thomas's *Arabia Felix*.[24] Thomas, learning from the Bedu with whom he is travelling, writes that 'the sands are a public diary, that even he who runs may read, for all living creatures go unshod ... No bird may alight, no wild beast or insect pass but needs must leave its history in the sands, and the record lasts until a rising wind bears a fine sand along to obliterate it'.[25] Keen to make a more permanent record than a footprint in sand, Thomas details the fennec foxes,

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[23] Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* [Cambridge: 1888] (London: Jonathan Cape and the Medici Society, 1926, 2 Vols), Preface to second Edition, p.ix.

[24] See T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* [1935] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), Chap. 62 and Bertram Thomas, *Arabia Felix* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932) where, for example, Chapter 14 is entitled 'A Geographical Note on Rub Al-Khali'.

[25] Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.178.

sand cats, the 'twelve varieties of lizards, all alike endowed with pointed snouts for diving in the sands', the scorpions that were 'of pale green colour' and three types of snake, 'all of sand colour, boa, horned viper, and colubrid'.[26] As an amateur scientist, Thomas is identifying, classifying, noting and indeed celebrating nature for the education and enjoyment of learned society back home.[27] Given the Arab context, his work, and those of fellow explorers also contributes to the academic tradition of Orientalism, 'a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, peoples, and civilisations' that Said argues is a formidable part of the colonial project.[28] While science lends authority to the travel account, it also lends authority to the hegemonic perspective expressed therein.

The responsibility of travellers towards documenting wilderness areas loses traction after Thomas as science forms into more individual disciplines. The human print in the desert (tangibly etched as graffiti in the rocks of iconic Arabian landscapes) is reflected in desert texts that become increasingly more about the observer than the observed, and the almost obsessive recording of natural data that marks Victorian desert travel accounts runs its course in the first half of the twentieth century and more or less ends with Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*. This narrative not only represents the last text in which scientific desert observations are confidently recorded by an amateur, it also represents the apotheosis of self within the desert landscape; so strong is Thesiger's mark upon the desert in *Arabian Sands* that is almost impossible for future travellers to cross the same landscape without recognising Thesiger's presence within it. After Thesiger, travel writing is no longer deemed the appropriate vehicle of scientific detail as the disciplines of zoology, ornithology, geography, anthropology and ethnography claim this territory as their own, or as Thompson observes: 'The growing specialisation of science ... generated an increasingly technical scientific vocabulary that could not easily be reconciled with the requirement for a plain prose style in the travel account'.[29] Modern desert travel writers, such as Mark Evans, may take pleasure in referring to the wildlife they encounter, and in describing the features of erg and dune, but only as life-affirming events or challenges to overcome in the wilderness – as an ornament to their descriptions or as harbingers of meaning for the traveller, not as a contribution to the collection and expression of technical data, as Evans states: 'In the past, expeditions like the first crossing of the Empty Quarter made significant contributions to scientific understanding.

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[26] Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p.238.
[27] See Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.60.
[28] Said, *Orientalism*, p.55 and p.203.
[29] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.82.

Our journey is not so much about that, but is more about communication, and connection'.[30] The intention of Evans's book is less about the need to inform and more about the desire to create a sympathetic understanding of his subject – namely, Bertram Thomas, the communities who live along the desert rim and the natural world he encounters as he crosses the Empty Quarter.

If modern travel writers since Thesiger feel cut off from the tradition of 'voyages and travels' of previous centuries, scientists have lost ground too. Modern scientists are clearly expected to use a register and vocabulary appropriate to their discipline leading some desert commentators to renounce their professional authority in favour of a more literary approach that allows them to dip into the reserve of rich textual associations accruing to the subject. There is nothing new in this approach, as Holland and Huggan point out: 'It is as common for travel writers to disguise their scientific authority as to invoke it – a strategy that supports their advantageous rhetorical position as inquiring amateurs'.[31] Ralph A. Bagnold is one such self-styled inquiring amateur travelling in the 1930s who, despite being elected to the Royal Society for his work on desert physics, insisted on describing himself as 'an amateur scientist of no academic standing'.[32] His identification with amateurism suggests that he took pleasure in availing himself of the wider repertoire of narrative techniques more readily available to a travel writer than a modern scientist. The preface to *Libyan Sands* reads as part apology to science, part manifesto for future desert writing:

> I have collected my travels [in] … places where nothing exists, no sprouting grass blade nor worm of decay; where perhaps, in certain spots, nothing ever did exist; travels shared, companions changing but ideas preserved; and over all a sense of what travel is, and how it can be done with little pomp, little money, much love of it and very much preparation. (p.9)

The full title, *Libyan Sands: Travels in a Dead World,* captures the sense of lifelessness in this passage, of man centre-stage in the landscape and of fixed perspectives ('ideas preserved') projected onto the space. In much of Bagnold's writing, the desert becomes less about its own inherent qualities and internal communities and more of an 'otherness' of his own choosing and a familiar escape from urban society: 'all the constrictions of

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[30] Mark Evans, *Crossing the Empty Quarter in the Footsteps of Bertram Thomas* (UK: Gilgamesh Publishing, 2016), p.79.

[31] Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p.228 in endnote 11.

[32] Ralph A. Bagnold, *Libyan Sands: Travels in a Dead World* [1935] (London: Eland Publishing, 2010), p.227.

civilisation, walls, fences, conventions and police', he writes, 'surge up vigorously to the limit of the sown, there to shrivel to nothing before the freedom of the desert' (p.60). In his scholarly *The Physics of Blown Sand and Sand Dunes,* Bagnold explores reasons for the desert's enduring magnetism, finding something compelling in the 'simplicity of form, an exactitude of repetition and a geometric order unknown in nature'. Psychological analysis of the power of landscape is uncommon in a physics text book but from the outset Bagnold is inspired to write about the terrain in language that borrows from literature; indeed, within the introduction he describes the dunes as an anthropomorphic structure 'growing, retaining their shape, even breeding, in a manner which, by its grotesque imitation of life, is vaguely disturbing to an imaginative mind', giving insight into his values as man, rather than physicist objectively observing the landscape.[33]

The blended nature of Bagnold's text (part science, part travel writing) anticipates more recent desert narratives that similarly dissolve the boundaries between genres, either in a conscious acknowledgement to their travelling antecedents, or more commonly as a visceral response to an alien environment. By blurring the distinctions between science and travel, their work moves in a reverse direction from the canon to which it belongs, retreating to the early genre of 'voyages and travels' in an attempt to replace some of the wonder lost in the expression of modern science. Wonderment, as noted by Stephen Greenblatt, is a recurring feature in colonial travel writing, and a key trope of Oriental literature.[34] Bringing it back into descriptions of Arabian desert encounter therefore runs the risk of inviting comparisons with discredited and anachronistic modes of representation. Aaron Sachs argues, that the homogenising postcolonial critique of European explorers, in something of a homogenising statement of his own, has 'obscured any potentially useful, even radical ideas that might have been developed by European, literary, male, bourgeois scientists';[35] Sabine Wilke similarly suggests that an explorer may have been part of a project of domination, but he may also have something useful to say.[36] This is where a *postcolonial*-ecocritical approach is helpful as it allows something

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[33] R. A. Bagnold, *The Physics of Blown Sand and Sand Dunes* [1941, 1954] (Mineola, Dover Publications, 2005), p.xix (Introduction).

[34] See Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[35] Aaron Sachs, 'The Ultimate "Other": Post-Colonialism and Alexander von Humboldt's Ecological Relationship with Nature', *History and Theory*, 42 (2003), 111-35 (p.116).

[36] Sabine Wilke, 'Performing Tropics: Alexander von Humboldt's *Ansichten der Natur* and the Colonial Roots of Nature Writing', in *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives,* ed. by Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 197-212 (p.209).

useful to emerge from the text: as Ursula Heise notes, most critical reading under the postcolonial-ecocritical banner approaches 'literary texts by asking how accurately they portray the realities of colonial exploitation and environmental devastation, and to what extent the works' authors can be credited with attempting to resist these processes or with imagining alternatives to them'.[37] In a similar way, by using spectacle and wonder (or indeed, anguish and alarm), scientists, as the latest incarnation of travellers to Arabia, can equally be seen to trouble Orientalist tropes, paralleling postcolonial attempts to foreground the object of Western gaze and give it agency. Identifying opportunities for agency in modern desert writing is important because for as long as they are thought of only as *tabla rasa* upon which to project (in this case Western) human preoccupations, mapped and measured only for the next resource exploitation, deserts are likely to continue to be the chosen sites of atomic testing, oil extraction, indiscriminate land fill and unsustainable sport.

In the work of three relatively obscure science writers, physicist Uwe George (1976), entomologist Donald Walker (1987) and geographer Nigel Winser (1989), all of whom write about the deserts of the Middle East, some of the legacy of the of the old Orient lingers in the landscape they describe but their work is about more than just these anachronisms. In literary asides and anecdotes, they abandon their scholarly objectives to express moments when they are surprised by joy in the desert, and in so doing betray something of the *mysterium*, *tremendum* and *fascinans* that marked the origins of science writing as it grew from amateur roots. One reading of their work is to categorise it as part of what Haynes identifies as 'the emerging neo-romantic cult of the desert as a space for enlightenment and self-discovery', and indeed all the writers insert or implicate the first person in their accounts.[38] A more productive reading, however, through ecocriticism, examines the moments in which emotion towards the subject overcomes the scruples of scientific analysis and allows the writer to communicate the wonder of nature in all its glorious adaptation and biodiversity; at such moments, the author retreats from the centre of the account to the periphery. Within this kind of reading, the desert has a presence not just as an inanimate zone for human study, endeavour and exploitation, but as a place in its own right with its own logic and pattern – a 'bioregion', in socio-biologist Edward

[37] Ursula K. Heise, 'Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Question of Literature', in *Postcolonial Green*, ed. by Roose and Hunt, pp.251-58 (p.255).
[38] Roslynn D. Haynes, *Desert: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), p.143.

Wilson's phraseology.[39] The moments of agency may be small – a delight in the sand grouse, an encounter with a dust devil, a journey beyond the marked zone of enquiry – but they unmistakably evidence a growing consciousness towards the environment and raise questions about the human place within it.

Uwe George and the neo-sublime

In an ambitious physics project, the German naturalist Uwe George sets out to account for the growing desertification of much of the world's surface. The result is a mostly technical book, translated into English as *In the Deserts of this Earth*, that at times requires specialist knowledge to read and is complemented by diagrams, illustrations, graphs and scientific data.[40] It also includes, however, photographs of the scientist and his wife at work in the desert terrain, and resorts throughout to first person narrative to describe the emotional impact of working alone for extended periods in an Arabian desert environment.[41] In anecdotes and asides, George establishes the transgressive nature of his enterprise, moving beyond the scientific objective of his study to show how the desert environment impacts upon him as a traveller and dweller within the landscape. His work is chosen here to show how it connects to Haynes's 'neo-romantic cult of the desert', demonstrating the prevalence of this concept in a broader Western European rather than parochial English context, but also shows how it breaks free from this anachronistic perspective by imagining a new and more equal alliance with other, non-human desert dwellers.

Setting out his opening premise under the anthropomorphic title 'The Merciless Sun', George taps immediately into the psychology of wilderness encounter: 'The sight of the black, sun-scorched landscapes of rubble in stony ... desert' writes George, 'produces a feeling of devastation and chaos' (p.23). Words like 'endless abandonment', 'boundless region', belong to the vocabulary not of physics but of literature, and most especially to the aesthetic of the Sublime. Fear, or at least the frisson of danger, a feeling of diminishment in a landscape of enormity together with an inability to verbalise superlatives of space and silence, are common sublime responses to the untamed fastness

[39] See Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* [1992] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994). For a useful summary of the concept of 'bioregion' and its application to literature, see also Jonathan Bate, 'Poetry and Biodiversity', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), pp.53-70.

[40] Uwe George, *In the Deserts of this Earth* [1976], translated by R. and C. Winston (New York and London: First Harvest/HBJ, 1977).

[41] George worked mostly in the Sahara but also covered parts of the northern Arabian Desert.

of the desert and as such have formed consistently recurring tropes throughout the history of European desert literature. These metaphors are informed by the vocabulary of the Sublime, as most particularly defined by Edmund Burke in Britain and Immanuel Kant in Germany. Although by no means the first nor the most comprehensive study of the sublime in the eighteenth century, Burke's treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) was influential in providing a ready-made vocabulary for affecting visual experiences and it is often in his terms that travel writers couch their most hyperbolic desert passages.[42] The desert, with its heat and hardship leant itself well to sublime treatment for, as East-bound traveller Clarke states, 'Burke has instructed us to find [the sublime] in vastness and in terror'.[43] Clarke's choice not to describe a scene because it is indescribable (part of the 'words fail me' trope) seems to be informed equally by the Kantian notion of sublimity found in the indefinable, the indistinct and the overwhelming as articulated, for example, in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764).[44] Roslynn Haynes helpfully translates the sublime into a modern desert context in commenting on the traveller's 'awe at its immensity, terror at its starkness and fascination at its wildness'. She goes on to explain how these emotions trigger a psychological effect: 'this spatial-temporal combination, explains Haynes, is 'intense, vision-producing, almost literally mind-blowing, since it transcends the rational', and indeed, desert literature abounds with set-piece reflections on man's relationship with god and with metaphysical contemplation in general.[45]

The desert in its vastness, then, has often provided the ideal stage upon which to present the lone figure in the landscape, where he (it is invariably he) enacts dramas of an existential nature. George appears to fit neatly within this trope when he writes:

> I was standing there wholly alone, my body the centre of a vast empty disk. The horizon around me formed one uninterrupted circle. They sky was a glaring, colorless brightness, with not a cloud to be seen. Aside from me and the ground which I stood, there was nothing but the brilliantly white, shimmering disk of the sun. (p.4)

There are immediately obvious similarities in this passage with a moment of extreme egoism in a nineteenth-century English travel text, namely Alexander Kinglake's Eastern

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[42] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1759], ed. by James Boulton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

[43] Edward D Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries, 1810* (London: 1816-1820, 11 Vols), Vol. III, p.108.

[44] See Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[45] Haynes, *Desert*, p.115.

tale, *Eothen* (a popular Victorian travel account described by travel historian Peter Whitfield as 'a best-seller, a popular classic, still immensely readable, but full of ambiguities').[46] Kinglake writes: 'hour by hour I advanced, and saw no change – I was still the very centre of a round horizon … the same circle of sand still glaring with light, and fire'.[47] Centre-stage and spot-lit, this is the performative subject at the height of solipsistic contemplation, nature reduced to a stage for the performing id. This is the supreme 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' moment that Mary Louis Pratt notably writes of in *Imperial Eyes,* man positioned at the centre of a vast domain.[48] But where Kinglake's egocentricity can be read as part of an exalted colonial dominion that stretches as far as the eye can see, George's centring in nature is troubled and impinged upon by fear:

> An indescribably sense of loneliness and forsakenness overpowered me ... I felt as if I had lost all the inner standards that gave me an awareness of time and place. An infinite distance appeared to separate me from the nearest living being, and it would take me forever, it seemed, to cover that distance'. (p.4)

George is disoriented in this landscape, stripped of the calibrations (the 'inner standards … of time and place') that are both the tools of his profession as a scientist and the practical attributes that connect him to safety, community, home. Ironically, the distorting element of his experience helps to re-orientate George into a natural world that has a presence beyond his existence within it. Thus at the same time as George identifies existential angst present in the utter silence (a silence peculiar to deep desert wilderness), he is also becoming reattached to a more planetary understanding of the human in relation to the natural. The sense of being overwhelmed by nature only retreats when the author catches sight of his own track that leads him back, metaphorically and topographically, to the safety of camp. Ecocritics read moments such as these as instructive; as SueEllen Campbell writes: 'the dry places we call deserts possess, and can teach us to see, their own kinds of beauty, richness, and wonder, and they offer lessons for us all of adaptation, flexibility, toughness, and resilience'. George's lesson in relative scale in the fastness is one such moment of learning.

George may have shrunk in the landscape but at least he is still present within it. The French anthropologist, Marc Augé, in his study of supermodernity writes of the way

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[46] Peter Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), p.225.

[47] Alexander William Kinglake, *Eothen: Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East* (London: John Ollivier: 1845), p.276.

[48] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.201.

that the modern world has created 'empirical non-places' in which the individual is 'decentred in a sense from himself; he has instruments that place him in constant contact with the remotest parts of the outside world;' these portable telephones, computers and cameras mean the individual can live in a detached space that is 'wholly independent of his immediate physical surroundings'.[49] George's moment in the centre of a round horizon is in one sense an extreme version of the decentring of self in a non-place (in a 'land not sliced into places').[50] But this overlooks the fact that George goes naked into the wilderness (he travels only with canteen of water and compass, leaving behind the tools of connection, such as a vehicle and two-way radio, with the outside world) and in this condition, becomes disorientated and frightened by his vulnerability. He is therefore forced by the experience of the location to be completely *in the place* – indeed his survival depends upon it. Reflecting on the experience from the safety of camp he states 'the experience of being dependent on ourselves alone as we tramp through the boundless expanses of the desert, of trusting only our own abilities, enables us to recapture our identity. We can shake off the dross that our production-oriented society has heaped up in our psyches' (p.5). This connection with the wilderness, rather than the apparent taming it first suggests, is a moment of transcendence, a moment of recognising, as Augé advocates, 'that we inhabit a single planet, a fragile, threatened body, infinitely small in an infinitely large universe'.[51] Augé suggests that this 'planetary awareness is an ecological awareness' and as such George's project helps educate the reader, over the course of the book, in gaining an insight into the beauty and complexity of the desert as place.

If George's response to the desert shares some of the ways in which travel writers describe the desert as positioned in space (in other words, the desert as other than home and offering a site of what Kaplan calls 'philosophical epiphany'), it differs in the way the desert is positioned in time.[52] The track that leads George back to the camp proves that he is 'a being with a past and a future' (p.5). This is interesting because it touches on a key feature of the Arabian desert experience (as cradle of civilization) in which traditionally the past impinges on the present in an ontological kind of way. This

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[49] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* [1992] (John Howe, trans., London: Verso, 2008), p.viii.

[50] Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by S. Hall and P. du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp.18-36, p.20.

[51] Augé, *Non-Places*, p.x.

[52] See C. Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

connection with the past, a feature that Augé calls 'anthropological place' and which, in Saidian terms, links the Arabian desert to its 'imaginative geography', is not always present in description of deserts in other parts of the world. In *The Tourist Gaze,* Urry and Larsen identify the desert landscape of America, for example, as having a specifically future emphasis, divorced from the past. Quoting Baudrillard, they note that deserts in the USA constitute a 'metaphor of endless futurity, the obliteration of the past and the triumph of instantaneous time'; they go on to write that the empty desert landscapes 'are experienced through driving huge distances, travel involving a "line of flight" into the disappearing future'.[53] For George, as for most British writers who describe desert travels in an Arabian context, the journey is less about blotting out and more about filling in – detailing the 'natural history' of the region (in George's case, most notably his discoveries about the extraordinary survival techniques of the sand grouse) and engaging with the nomadic communities that help establish a continuity with, to use Augé terminology, 'a collective history'. This is very different from the way in which, as Urry and Larsen suggest, roads crossing American deserts have come to dominate, at the expense of the landscape and the communities through which they cut, developing their own homogenous characters (complete with fast food outlets and undifferentiated malls) that seal drivers off from the landscape beyond the tarmac strip.

While American accounts of desert often focus on the Anthropocene, the 'human-dominated geological epoch' (with its proposed commencement of 1945, date of 'the Trinity' experimental nuclear explosion in the New Mexican desert), modern anglophone Arabian desert accounts, as we have seen, consciously narrate a non-human space. Paul Shepherd suggests that the 'key spatial metaphors' of boundlessness and emptiness makes the desert experience the most sublime of all natural encounters.[54] To these spatial metaphors, one might add 'uniformity', a term coined by H. and H. A. Frankfort to describe the way in which landscape continues without change or incident within an entire scope of view. 'The interesting result of uniformity', the Frankforts suggest, 'is the way in which it accentuates any exceptional bit of relief that happens to break the monotonous regularity. Out in the desert one is conscious of every hillock, of every spoor of an animal, of every desert dust storm, of every bit of movement'.[55] These are the elements that are

[53] John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* [1990] (Sage Publications: London, 2011), p.66.
[54] Paul Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* [1967, 1991] (London: University of Georgia Press, 2002), p.160.
[55] H. and H. A. Frankfort, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1946), p.60.

studied with intense scrutiny by George who takes a holistic approach to the role all parts of the desert wilderness play in the evolution of the landscape and extrapolates from these scientific observations a prognosis for the future of planet earth. Telescoping in and out of the macro and micro zones of planetary physics and earth sciences, the author focuses on details that are folded into a larger web of being that he makes tangible through his ornithological field study on the sand grouse. In a moment when he suppresses a scream on account of the bird's family sleeping nearby, he recognises that 'now it was more than scientific interest that linked me to them'. This is an expression that owes its origins to another aspect of eighteenth-and early nineteenth-century European Romanticism, namely 'pantheism'. George describes a sense of overwhelming connectivity with the birds: 'we, the living, were linked in the face of what I felt to be the cruel coldness of the universe' (pp.176-77). This identification of kinship as equal sufferers under the sun, can be identified as a non-anthropocentric perspective. Diletta de Cristofaro and Daniel Cordle suggest that such moments challenge us to 'think beyond the human scale, to imagine – limited though such intellectual leaps must be – planetary forces, histories and spaces in the face of which we shrink into insignificance'.[56] In George's desert, the tiny adaptations of toads are brought under the same scrutiny as the geological events that have shaped the desert in which they live, helping to recreate that sense of scale and this is achieved not through the exposition of scientific data but by reference to the idiom of travel writing.

In George's desert, then, it is possible to read less of a reproduction of the Romantic sublime and more of a reconfiguration of that aesthetic attuned to today's ecological sensibilities. In the Burkean Sublime, the moments of contemplation of the vastness and terror may similarly try to capture, in Melman's words, the 'infinity of the universe and the human condition within it,' but the undiminished focus of gaze remains on the subject: even at the moment that man is described as infinitely small within the landscape, he is still the protagonist of the scene he constructs.[57] In other words, the Romantic desert is all about the writer who describes it. George's sublime, in contrast, pushes the human element sidewise and allows the desert to become all about the sand grouse.

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[56] D. De Cristofaro and Daniel Cordle, 'Introduction: The Literature of the Anthropocene', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 6, no.1:1 (2018), 1-6 (p.4).

[57] Melman, 'Middle East/Arabia', p.114.

Donald Walker's amateur pursuits

If Uwe George's work belongs to a European tradition (albeit one reconfigured for new purposes) of the Romantic sublime, Donald Walker's work references a more distinctly British aesthetic, namely the picturesque. Whereas George is a professional scientist, Walker's work emerges from an amateur tradition; even a casual user of field guides will instantly recognise the Linnaean nomenclature, the distribution maps, the illustrations belonging to each genus, the categorisation according to family in *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (1987).[58] At the time of its publication this book represented the only illustrated guide on Arabian insect life and in it Donald Walker and Tony Pittaway cover the various species known by amateur entomologists as 'bugs' in a field guide typical of the publishing house, Macmillan. The acknowledgements give credit to subject specialists (renowned lepidopterists, apiasts and general entomologists), as expected, but they also give the first hint that the field of study is larger than the world of expected entomological survey. The book, the reader learns, was 'prompted by a love for the beauty and freedom of the desert' and the contents of the book are 'records from a happy association with this environment' (viii); in the preface there is a reference to William Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper' and his 'weary bands/Of travellers in some shady haunt, Among Arabian sands' so that even before the book begins in earnest it is clear that this is a hyperinscribed space that will permit the scientist to stray out of the normal territory of dry data description normally associated with practical field guides. The introduction gives further clues as to the taxonomy of the text – something that might be referred to in entomological terms as a 'var', or 'variation', on the described norms of the genre – as it opens with a lyrical description of the desert environment, before embarking on general details common to a particular class of Arthropoda: 'Shimmering in the heat, the view from the top of the sand dune was extensive ... a delight of rolling sand and stone hillocks; ... in the cool dark recesses beneath the rocks other life existed; the insects ... insects belong to a large phylum or division of the animal kingdom …' (p.viii). The shift from lyrical to scientific language appears eccentric to the reader but natural to the writer who swaps register with similar rapidity throughout.

By the end of the book, the lyrical takes over altogether. Liberated by the desert subject to step out of his scientific role, Walker includes a concluding section called

[58] D. H. Walker and A. R. Pittaway, *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (London: Macmillan, 1987). Pittaway supplied the technical entomological data on the specimens both collected for study but the text was written by Walker. For this reason, only Walker is referred to in this discussion.

'Reflections on Arabia'. Described as a 'series of tales from experiences encountered in Arabia' (p.155), the eight vignettes, still clinging to third person anonymity and somewhat apologetically appearing in smaller font than the rest of the book are part travelogue, part memoir. The first of the eight tales, covering the author's arrival in the country of Saudi Arabia and his first encounter with the desert, marks a tentative first foray into travel writing proper:

> Slowly this kaleidoscope of colour altered the scene, forming an unforgettable picture with the minaret of the mosque and a palm tree silhouetted against the deep red sky. He was deeply affected by the beauty of his new surroundings. The call to evening prayers drew him out of his reverie. (p.155)

The third person narrator, the expatriate of the tale's title, is not embraced by the landscape but standing at the respectful distance of a spectator. The scene is framed by a fixed viewpoint and organised into a familiar composition of silhouetted foregrounds and retreating sunset backgrounds. In the peaceful and neat arrangement of mosque, palm and prayer, and in the reference to 'scene' and 'picture', it is easy to trace the Romantic legacy of Gilpin's Picturesque. William Gilpin, one of the leading proponents of this aesthetic in the eighteenth century, wrote that the Picturesque denotes 'such objects as are proper subjects for painting' and he associated it closely with the 'art of travel'.[59] Writing about Gilpin's description of Tintern Abbey, Tim Youngs states that 'travellers' accounts of the landscape do not provide a neutral version of it; they do not simply describe it; they *construct* it ... not as it is but as it strikes and affects'.[60] Holding up a Claude-glass to landscape in their travels East, travel writers similarly constructed the scenery in front of them: 'both the reality and the fancy', writes Henry Holland, for example, of a view in the Near East, 'combine in giving to the scenery the character of a vast and beautiful picture spread out before the sight'.[61] Part of this construction, of course, envisions the relationship between the East and the West. The Orient consisted for the Romantic a collection of illusory parts, observed from 'true-life', but interpreted in Western terms, and reassembled to form a two-dimensional picture, voiceless, and vulnerable to further re-interpretations by the spectator. Without the linguistic ability, the time or even the inclination, many travellers, not just in the 1800s but throughout Western travel East, are unable to graduate beyond the role of spectator, to glean anything more than a snapshot

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59 William Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* (London: 1794), p.36.
60 Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.44.
61 Henry Holland, 'Travels in the Ionian Islands', *Eclectic Review*, N.S.7 (1817), 353-372 (p.358).

either of the land or its inhabitants. The splendid views of set-piece scenery, such as those of Keppel whose 'numerous caravan tracing its way through the mazy winding of the road, added not a little to the living part of the picture'– and not a lot to literature nor to a refreshed view of the East.[62]

Walker's painting of the Arabian desert in the colours of the Picturesque, whether conscious or not, could be cast in the same unflattering light, wearily recasting familiar tropes – that is, were it not for the bugs. Weaving between the discipline of science writing and travel writing, the field guide delights in its subject. Describing fleas, for example, as 'small, wingless insects that live as parasites mainly on mammals' the register is predictably dry but when the text describes the flea as 'capable of *spectacular* leaps which sometimes exceed 100 times the length of its own body [emphasis added]' (p.111), it is possible to feel the excitement of the subject. This is travel writing as it extends from a heritage of desert exploration and amateur (without implying the modern pejorative now associated with the term) investigation. Edward Said, in an essay on 'Professionals and Amateurs', remarks that specialisation means 'losing sight of the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge' in preference for 'impersonal theories or methodologies.' Specialisation, in other words, is one form of professionalism that 'kills your sense of excitement and discovery' and reduces intellectual endeavour to an impoverished activity, carried out 'for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock'.[63] Said goes further to suggest that modern learning has become contained and restricted by the protocols of communication demanded by each specialist discipline and this has impinged upon the intellectual opportunity to challenge. In contrast, amateurism, Said suggests, is an ethical practice motivated by virtues such as 'care and affection rather than by profit'. In contrast to 'selfish, narrow' specialisation, it has the power to make 'connections across lines and barriers' unhindered by the self-serving and self-imposed restrictions set up by the professions.

As an amateur in the Saidian definition of the term, Walker's eight stories and the excited frame tales of each insect family belong to a new species of wilderness travel writing that aims to bind and connect the human with, in this case, the minutely observed world of the desert insect. In one of the tales called 'Time and Life', Walker describes a dying camel, imagining its role 'when it had run for hours with long stride carrying its

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[62] George Keppel, *A Personal Narrative*, II, p.2.

[63] Edward W. Said, 'Professionals and Amateurs', in *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp.73-83.

master effortlessly across the desert', now lying encircled by waiting ravens. The scientist does not attempt to intervene but returns to the scene over the course of three weeks and watches as death unfolds a whole drama of its own:

> Nature now assisted in its final departure. The work has been started by the ravens, then a Steppe Eagle had visited the carcase and then a Desert Fox. The remains were alive with activity as several different species of beetle and fly made it their temporary home, rapidly feeding and breeding, each carrying out its duty in the web of life. (p.160)

In the way the tale moves the focus from human sentimentality for animal as owned by man, to animal as part of a 'web of life', and in the way that it achieves this through combining the tools of travel writing with the focus of science, it resonates with the ethical scholarship advocated by Said, making 'connections across lines and barriers'. William Sherman writes that in the eighteenth century, 'instead of presenting readers with a hodgepodge of marvels, travel accounts sponsored by and presented to the Royal Society began the systematic collection of nature knowledge in the name of reason and public utility'.[64] Rather than seeing Walker as reductively returning to eighteenth-century aesthetics, his work can be seen as returning some of the wonder to the travel account in an age of hyper specialisation. In so doing, he contributes knowledge for a new kind of 'reason and public utility' put to the purpose of a modern concern for the environment. Sharing his fascination in the role of the beetle and fly in the desert's web of life brings a wider audience to the more scholarly parts of Walker's field guide and indeed supports the campaigns of Edward Wilson and others who advocate the importance of biodiversity.

Biodiversity, in a report that notes 'some 16,500 invertebrates from 31 taxonomic groups' (p.158) is one of the resulting observations of Nigel Winser's work on a sand desert in Oman, to which this study now turns. While primarily an expedition report, Winser's work shares many of the neo-romantic elements of George and Walker with similar sublime and picturesque vignettes delineating the familiar representations of the desert. Where Winser's work makes an interesting contribution to the genre, however, is in a new note of anxiety about the scientific enterprise itself. Both George and Walker appear confident in their activity, conducting science in the full expectation their work's value lay in some generic notion of its contribution to knowledge. Written over a decade later, Winser's work however betrays a thread of doubt. Winser the scientist has a

[64] William H. Sherman, 'Stirrings and Searchings (1500-1720)', in *Cambridge Companion,* ed. by Hulme and Youngs, pp.17-36 (p.29), in reference to eighteenth century travel writing.

confidence in the undertaking that is not wholly shared by Winser the travel writer. The discussion probes that dilemma and argues that it not only affords agency to the environmental debate to which it contributes but also reveals a new postcolonial angst.

Nigel Winser and a desert needing solution

In *The Sea of Sands and Mists* (1989), Nigel Winser, a trained zoologist who identifies as a geographer, sets out to record a major Royal Geographical Society expedition in the late 1980s, of which Winser was the main organiser.[65] The account is couched within the 'ancien regime' of Royal Geographic Society exploration (p.xv) in which deserts 'have long been a fascination for Britons' (p.xix), and the scientific pedigree of the text is carefully established. The reader learns, for example, that the study took a cross-disciplinary approach that involved the work of over thirty scientists and resulted in numerous scientific papers. The subtitle of Winser's expedition account, *Desertification: Seeking Solutions in the Wahiba Sands,* reveals the multidisciplinary nature of the project, capturing both a scientific and a political perspective and it includes the major findings of the scientists from each of the represented disciplines (including earth science, biology, zoology and geography), summarised by Winser for the layperson; the account concludes with an epilogue written by Dr. Roderic Dutton, the Scientific Coordinator of the expedition.

But the scientific pedigree is only part of the story: *The Sea of Sands and Mists* presents most consistently, in fact, as desert travel narrative. The account's credibility is anchored, for example, not as may have been expected by reference to fellow earth scientists, but by placing it within the tradition of desert literature: 'For all expeditioners Wilfred Thesiger is something of a hero. He is the last of the great desert explorers and for many he crowns the work of Burton, Doughty, Blunt, Lawrence and Philby, familiar names for those who have taken an interest in the British presence in the Middle East' (p.23). The reference to the desert literary 'greats' is not simply an acknowledgement in the opening pages, it informs the way in which Winser engages with the landscape, as he gains satisfaction, for example, in knowing that 'across the wadi was the head of the same swale that Wilfred and his companions had travelled through some thirty-eight years

[65] Winser, Nigel *The Sea of Sands and Mists - Desertification: Seeking Solutions in the Wahiba Sands* (London: RGS, 1989). The study focuses on Eastern Oman and one of the most compact sand deserts in the world known today as the Sharqiya Sands. The sands were formerly known as the Wahiba Sands and are named as such in the expedition reports; the name changed as part of the unification project of the current Sultan of Oman, Sultan Qaboos bin Said; place names associated with tribes were largely replaced to transfer space from local tribal claims to serve a more national agenda.

earlier' (p.119).[66] Winser, illustrated seated on a camel, camel stick in hand and in the company of the Bedu, is carving out his own space within the literary landscape, as equally as he is charting, mapping and naming the features of a geographical location as befits the nature of the scientific expedition he leads. In amongst chapters with a distinctly scientific resonance ('Taylorbase – The Field University' and 'Seeking Solutions') there are chapters with more lyrical titles ('Sand of a Thousand Colours' and 'The Sand Guardians') and even within the chapters a change in register marks the shift between the two idioms of science writing and travel writing. In a chapter on 'The Life Science Team', for example, the text is illuminating regarding the 'nitrogen-fixing bacteria' in the roots of the *prosopis* tree and how these 'bacteria combine gaseous nitrogen in the soil with other elements to produce nitrogen compounds that can be used as a fertilizer by the plant' (p.63) while also exalting in the pantheistic joy of drinking rain in the desert 'joining with the earth around … with the trees and every living thing' (p.85).

The bi-disciplined nature of the text, part science, part travel narrative, frames the central dilemma of Winser's enterprise: the scientist envisions the desert space as a problem to be solved or 'come to terms with' (a phrase he repeats several times), while the travel writer revels in the desert as it is and with all its imaginative possibilities.[67] The sense of the writer being pulled between these two positions continues throughout the text. Winser is proud that the work of the team (and indeed his own account of the expedition) 'will inspire others to come and take a closer look' (p.138) and he quotes Robin Hodgkin in *Playing and Exploring* (1985): 'These [unknown] worlds will only come to life if someone acts on them, plays with and explores them and then shares the resulting surprises' (p.138). Winser acknowledges, however, that a desire to communicate the value of the sands comes at a price. From a practical perspective, during the project he expressed concern that the work of the field centre could 'turn into a circus if we were not careful' and he cites problems with controlling the hundreds of visitors received at Taylorbase (p.31); he also concedes in interview that the expedition opened up the sands to tourism and that gave rise to concerns about the conservation of the area. But there is also an imaginative price to pay for definitions and delineations too – as if naming somehow equates with taming the wilderness: 'It seemed a sacrilege to be condemning [the dunes] to such scrutiny, but knowledge of the geographical jigsaw requires intimacy;

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[66] Author's Interview with Nigel Winser, 2 June 2016. See Appendix C.

[67] Desertification was considered in the 1980s as an issue that has since appeared less urgent. In Chapter 9 of *The Sea of Sands and Mists*, for example, Winser states: 'By the end of the project we had come to terms with the Wahiba Sands' (p.136). He uses the same phrase later in the chapter (p.138).

no corner could ever parry detailed inquiry' (p.28). Throughout *The Sea of Sands and Mists,* Winser is presented as experiencing the conflicting interests of 'man in the landscape'. In the scientific work carried out, in the definition and identification of the desert inhabitants, in the mapping and naming of a hitherto uncharted region, in the very presence of one thousand people in a space that formerly attracted none but the nomadic few, the sense of wilderness is eroded and with it the imaginative possibility it holds for freedom and escape.

This tension between what can be summed up as science and art is of course familiar Romantic territory that is neither new nor uncontested. Indeed, Winser's use of the phrase the 'condemning to scrutiny' immediately recalls to mind the famous lines in *Lamia,* written by the Romantic poet John Keats in response to Isaac Newton's theory of prismatic colour: 'There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:/We know her woof, her texture; she is given/In the dull catalogue of common things;' the poet blames philosophy (for which we can read 'science') for conquering 'all mysteries by rule and line' – in other words, for 'unweaving the rainbow'.[68] The passage has often been held up to represent a supposed opposition between art and science but, as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, points out this is seeing a binary where it does not necessarily exist. In a book, taking its cue from *Lamia,* called *Unweaving the Rainbow,* Dawkins makes the case for science as a means of revealing rather than unravelling wonder. He gives as an example the wonder of being born at all, given the statistical odds against it: 'The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia', and Dawkins suggests that in unwrapping one mystery, another presents and this in itself is beautiful.[69] 'The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us,' Dawkins writes with a presumed nod to the Sublime, 'is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable' (p.x). Given this perspective, Winser's work can be read as *releasing* the wonder of the desert through scientific study – a project affirming of the human place within nature and its controlling hand over it.

The trouble with this reading is that it requires a confidence in the scientific nature of the project that is not fully sustained in the text. Winser's text both unweaves the rainbow and nostalgically tries to put it back together again. Thus at the same time as

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[68] John Keats, *Lamia* (1820) Part II, lines 229-238, *John Keats: The Complete Poems,* ed. by John Barnard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.431.

[69] Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder* [1998] (New York: First Mariner, 2000), p.1.

Winser writes that he hopes the sands will become a 'living laboratory for international desert research' (p.45); at the same time as he writes that he looks forward to a time when the dunes are fully understood so that we will 'be able to control them' (p.140), and at the same time as he gives 'confidence to all who believe that all deserts one day can be turned green' (p.63), he is also wistfully straining after the 'heartbeat of the sands' and feeling like 'an intruder who had no right to be there' (p.131).[70] This is the part that makes Winser's account relevant not just to an ecocritical reading of the text (where these moments can be interrogated for the doubt they cast on the human project of dominating the natural world), but even more specifically to a postcolonial-ecocritical reading. Indeed it is the very ambivalence towards the scientific nature of the enterprise, captured through the frequent lyrical asides, that troubles not just the sense of human dominance over the landscape but also Western dominion over (or at least interference with) Arab land.

To illustrate a postcolonial-ecocritical reading of *The Sea of Sands and Mists* it is necessary first to identify some of the Oriental tropes that appear in the text. An obvious foregrounding of the familiar Saidian project of othering, apart from the setting of the text within a British rather than local exploratory tradition, appears in the introduction. In a bid to demonstrate the pioneering potential of the project (a necessary authenticating device in both science and desert travel writing) we learn that very few had travelled through the sands or knew them intimately until the Wahiba project brought it to the attention of 'over 1,000 individuals' (p.9). As Pavel Cenkl points out: 'by implicating unexplored regions as largely unpopulated "uninscribed and hence strategically emptied space[s]", cartographic and textual narratives [continue to] retail that emptiness as a hyperborean space of possibility'.[71] Many ecocritics make a similar point: Campbell states that deserts are often projected as empty and therefore need to be 'improved, redeemed, changed into something else. Hence our many dams and irrigation projects – and the familiarity of the phrase "to make the desert bloom"', and some of this thought appears to influence Winser's mission to find a 'solution to the desert' (chap.9).[72] Similarly, although the Bedu are mentioned throughout, they are not presented as part of a systematic understanding of the sands despite their having lived in the sands for centuries. This 'native' knowledge of the desert may only exist in oral record rather than

[70] The full quotation is as follows: 'Said was pushing the pace of the journey to suit us and this meant we had to disentangle ourselves from the warm hospitality being offered. The project as a whole suddenly seemed an intrusion in the life of these masters of the desert environment' (p.131).

[71] Pavel Cenkl, 'Narrative Currency in a Changing Climate', in *Postcolonial Green*, ed. by Roos and Hunt, pp.137-156 (p.146).

[72] Campbell, *Faces of the Earth*, p.238.

in scientific papers, but it conflicts with the Western assumption of 'unknown', 'unresearched' territory. Another Oriental trope presents in the form of the alien nature of the desert; described as mysterious, it is at times threatening and at other times alluring. Winser is drawn towards the desert, particularly the part marked out of bounds beyond their zone of enquiry, like many earlier British travellers were drawn to Arabia itself: 'disappearing into the Sands', writes Winser as he enters the Sands as his own danger zone beyond the reach of the scientists' camp, 'without much chance of being rescued with only small amounts of food went against all my expedition rules, but if we were to be desert travellers we had to do it properly' (p.119) – and by 'properly' he means challenging his Western identity in a zone of maximum otherness. These tropes are familiar to the Oriental discourse, part of the 'distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic ... landscape and sociological description' that Said argues helps to 'control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world'.[73] In this sense, and in the sense in which the whole desert project could be interpreted as mapping the region for Western interests, Winser, who read the eulogy at Thesiger's funeral, appears to be upholding the Western project of Orientalism.

This, however, is not a complete, and therefore not a fair reading of Winser's work; indeed, there are three main objections. Firstly, this reading overlooks the counter-discourse that the text establishes through the moments of doubt in the enterprise and through a communion with nature. In 'A Journey with Said Jabber Hilays', Winser accepts the invitation of his Bedu friend to undertake the journey beyond Taylorbase by camel and this friend becomes not just a practical guide through the sands but also a spirit guide in interpreting the signs of nature – the wildcat tracks, the gazelle and fox prints, where a 'small mammal had a squabble with a bird of prey' (p.126) – that they encounter. At one point Said Jabber Hilays sings a ballad and Winser recognises that 'here was desert data being communicated in verse' (p.127) and Winser becomes wrapped, albeit for a short time, in the Bedu experience. At length, they have to return to Taylorbase and Winser suddenly has a moment of clarity about his project:

> Said was pushing the pace of the journey to suit us and this meant we had to disentangle ourselves from the warm hospitality being offered. The project as a whole suddenly seemed an intrusion in the life of these masters of the desert environment. (p.131)

[73] Said, *Orientalism*, p.12.

This is not Winser as a pioneering British desert explorer, forming his identity in opposition to the threatening space of the desert, nor as a scientist trying to impose a Western logic on an alien territory; even less is it an ethnographer metaphorically measuring Bedu heads for spurious notions of primitiveness.[74] Like Thesiger, Winser becomes a guest in a landscape he recognises is full of someone else's customs, ballads, resources and rich with 'innate knowledge' (p.135). Indeed he feels privileged to become 'an integral part of desert life' (p.132) and learns from the values he perceives through the Bedu's generosity. Unlike Thesiger, Winser's Bedu education is not an anachronistic experience of a 'doomed race', it extends to their modern notions of land use and land management.

The Omani scholar, Hilal Al-Hajri, writes 'The ultimate contribution of British travellers to Omani culture is that they described everyday life in Oman, which is almost neglected in the few Omani historical works'.[75] He goes on to say that the observation and recording by these travellers, including on themes of 'natural phenomena', help to 'fill a gap in the cultural history of Oman'. This brings us to a second objection of an Orientalist reading of Winser's work. Seen in the light of Al-Hajri's comment, the Wahiba project is more about partnership than domination – and indeed many of 'the 1,000' included in the project were locally-based Omani scholars, guides, drivers, fixers and the project credits extend to the royal permission granted for the expedition, the sponsorship of the Diwan of Royal Court Affairs and many Omani corporations who underwrote the project (p.179). If only a few Omani scholars were involved, this is more of a reflection of the nascent education system in place at the time of the expedition (Oman's first university, Sultan Qaboos University, was only established in 1986).

As a third objection to an Orientalist reading, there is the point that the desert acts upon Winser and the science team as equally as they imprint their work upon it, becoming more of a home and a school rather than a zone of otherness. Winser writes that 'four months in the Sands leaves an indelible mark; it had changed the lives of the team. Few could now speak of the area and its people without enthusiasm and we were all protective of our new-found friendships' (p.144) – and by 'friendship', Winser includes their relationship with the desert. As he wistfully admits in interview nearly forty years later:

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[74] The reference is to Bertram Thomas who travelled with calipers to measure Bedu heads as part of an ethnography project. See Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, Chapter 3 on skull measuring and racial typing.

[75] Hilal Al-Hajri, *British Travel-Writing on Oman: Orientalism Reappraised* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2006), pp.24-25.

'There isn't a day I haven't thought about the Sands – we made friendship with the landscape and with all friends you respect them, and miss them, and want to go back to see them. The Sands are not a tamed space'.[76] These connections, these ties to place, are 'no airy fantasy', to use Said's term, they translate into practical ends but these ends, in Winser's case, are not sinister plots for postcolonial globalisation or resource exploitation. They result in positive environmental efforts that have involved supporting local conservation initiatives.[77] If 'many scholars' in the fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism 'see their academic, culture-focused work as part of a broader political effort to engage – critically, in many cases – with modernisation processes and their consequences, to imagine more equitable social structures, and to rethink the material bases on which such structures might be founded,' Winser's project (and indeed his life's work) fits into this category too.[78] Indeed, the legacy of the Wahiba project can be counted in the opportunities that it has created for local Bedu, not least in tourism – a result anticipated in the scientific overview of the project written by Roderic Dutton: 'the Centre, the tourist base and the guides will all create forms of local employment which use the unique knowledge of the Sands' people and allow them to combine local money-earning activities with their traditional way of life' (p.167). If the Sands have been tamed, it is largely by the Bedu for the Bedu, building on some of the potential released through the Wahiba Project.

In this light, it is possible to argue that despite suggested latent Orientalism, *The Sea of Sands and Mists* is an example of 'healthy post-colonial environmentalism' that extends beyond the project's apparent imperial tendencies.[79] Although ecocriticism's focus on the wild (and of place as home, the locally observed but the universally connected) is markedly distinct from postcolonialism's probing of the human (and the hybrid, the displaced and the disruption between local and global), the two share, in Graham Huggan's terminology, a 'productive overlap'. In Winser's text, the moments of integration with nature and the respect for the life of the Bedu point to the negotiations between the mapping and measuring of the scientist and the desire to convey a postcolonial disquiet conveyed though the text's travel-writing counter-narrative – part

[76] Author's Interview with Nigel Winser, 2 June 2016. See Appendix C.
[77] Winser was invited to return to Oman as part of Earth Watch and continues to work with local environmentalists to protect endangered species.
[78] Heise, 'Postcolonial Ecocriticism', p.251.
[79] Sachs, 'Ultimate "Other"', p.111.

of the 'fruitful alliance between the two critical/theoretical schools'.[80] But problems remain, as inevitable in any act of representation, and a productive probing of some of these modes of re-presentation is the subject of the final section of this chapter, the intention of which is not to come to any neat and tidy conclusions, but simply to engage with some of the complexities involved in the process of cross-cultural, cross-species representation.

Staging the desert for Western audiences

The work of George, Walker and Winser has been analysed above to show how it performs differently from and within the traditional parameters of both science and travel writing they inherit but, under the scrutiny of an ecocritical reading, all can be read as succeeding to some extent in transforming the imaginative geography of Arabia from barren legacy to fertile space for the productive discussion of the desert environment. But all three writers operate in a zone that is 'only incidentally geographical', built up instead 'out of several different kinds of knowledge – historical, political, anthropological, cultural, mythical and experiential'.[81] The accumulation of this investment invites the scientist to attempt a broader field than that narrowed by his or her discipline. In the preface to a later edition of his 1967 classic, *Man in the Landscape,* Shepherd notes the enduring appeal of an inter-disciplinary approach to engaging with landscape. Looking back on the 'idiosyncratic mix of visionaries, young geographers and landscape architects' attracted to his work over the years, Shepherd writes:

> I now see that we were trying to reinvent 'landscape,' to see it as a middle ground if you will, where visual perception, nature esthetics, and ecological order might meet, to find an area of understanding released from the opposition between Art and Science, even from the tyranny of the disciplines.[82]

When analysed within this context, caught in a reshaping exercise to 'reinvent' the Arabian desert, the work of these and other recent desert science writers performs as part of a newer tradition of wilderness philosophy and desert ecology. George, Walker and Winser all express a genuine affection for the wilderness they describe and try to encourage the reader towards a similar way of seeing that reveals the desert as habitat and home, rather than a land only of interest in its potential economic or imaginative use. In

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[80] Graham Huggan, '"Greening" Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50, no.3 (2004), 701-33 (p.701).
[81] Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p.67.
[82] Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape,* p.xxiii.

this they attract a similarly new kind of ecocriticism that focuses less on the narrative of nature writing and more on the 'textual tropes that establish the links between the natural world and the human observer, or between nature and culture'.[83] Within that cultural context, however, 'their Arabia' remains a construct that inevitably carries part of the imaginative legacy of the past. Furthermore, in writing to edify a primarily Western audience, and in their fashioning the space partially for Western (self-) discovery, their work takes on a documentary quality that serves to fix the space in the familiar binaries of subject and object.

Alexander Wilson acknowledges of wilderness writing in America after 1945 that it establishes 'a kinship with a natural world' that is seen to be somehow authentic but also treats nature like a 'a laboratory full of "things" to be observed and increasingly managed in the name of social mobility and economic progress.'[84] Karla Armbrusta sees the same contradiction at work in nature documentaries – on the one hand nature is presented as a resource to be used (through the application of science) while simultaneously presented as a lost Eden. Combined with technical staging devices that deliberately construct the landscape as 'exotic', these features serve to distance the viewer, to strengthen rather than dissolve boundaries between subject and object, nature and culture.[85] This bind is exemplified in Michael McKinnon's text, *Arabia: Sand, Sea, Sky* (1990), which according to the Preface was written to parallel the television series: even as McKinnon claims that their expedition was 'not in the style of earlier travellers' he immediately contextualises their journey within that literary context.[86] That literary context imposes a particular way of seeing onto the desert that forbids fresh insight – the desert cannot be seen in any other way than a place of awe, quest, challenge, danger, extremes, purgation, absence because generations of travellers and scientists, almost despite their best intentions, have bestowed those dimensions upon it. Shepherd argues that this kind of stereotyping of the landscape not only closes the eyes of 'subsequent travellers' it also releases them from the 'trauma of confronting the unknown' and he makes the case that mapping has a similar effect, emphasising one particular element of the landscape at the expense of others.[87]

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[83] Heise, 'Postcolonial Ecocriticism', p.256

[84] Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exon Valdez* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p.125.

[85] Karla Armbrusta, 'Creating the world we must save: the paradox of television nature documentaries', in *Writing the Environment*, ed. by Kerridge and Sammells, pp.218-238.

[86] Michael McKinnon, *Arabia: Sand, Sea, Sky* (London: BBC Books, 1990), p.75.

[87] Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape*, p.234.

The dilemma confronting Western science writers, or indeed any wilderness writers, then, is how to overcome the overbearing inscriptions of the past. In common with fellow Arabist, Michael Asher, who espoused the term 'deep ecology' to describe the integral connection between the natural world and an educative moral dimension to be intuited from wilderness encounter, McKinnon attempts to differentiate between *learning about* and *learning from* the desert.[88] This distinction helps unsettle the dominant discourse of imposing Western knowledge on Arabian landforms and encourages instead a listening, passive approach that opens the desert up for a different kind of enquiry. McKinnon's specifically educational agenda uses the literary platform to communicate an ecological message – one that will be familiar to television audiences of the iconic wildlife programmes of the age. From the outset he reflects ruefully on the changes brought about by the discovery of oil in the twentieth century and the infrastructure that has grown to support its extraction and recognises that as a result: 'Today, the preservation of rangeland and mountain habitats is the most important ecological issue confronting the people of the Arabian peninsula' (p.13). He concludes his book on a somewhat mournful note: 'The challenge today is to find a new equilibrium that will balance modern demands with the creation of a new ecological order that reverses the present trends and preserves a great inheritance for future generations' (p.215). The problem remains, however, not only how to achieve that balance but also how find a form of writing that is sufficiently released from the constructs of the genre (in this case desert literature) to allow for that equilibrium to be expressed. McKinnon, while identifying the problem, is unable to find a new form for this purpose, leaving it ambiguous as to whose inheritance he is talking about and which future generations.

Shepherd suggests that the exercise of determining merit in landscape is inseparable from the act of travel and that both are impacted upon by cultural determinants such as painting and drama and he reminds us that the word 'scenery' comes from the Greek word for 'stage'.[89] Just as farmland is of little interest as scenery to the farmer, the desert is similarly not an inanimate object to be gazed at by the desert inhabitant – even less is it a problem to be solved. Lynn Ross Bryant in her study of the psychology of national parks in the USA quotes William Cronon's essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness' and argues that 'the way we conceive of nature is exactly that: our

[88] Michael Asher describes himself under the professional profile of his Linked-In account as a member of the deep ecology movement.

[89] Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape,* p.119.

conception, our construction.' Nature is not something external but a way of seeing upon which we impose boundaries: 'It is hard for us to see that nature and wilderness are not objects existing out there, but constructs that organise human perception of the environment'.[90] Bryant reminds us that Native American cultures do not make a separation between nature, humans and other animals; this distinction between human and nature is characteristic largely only of Judeo-Christian cultures. It also overlooks, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin recognise in reference to the work of British eco-philosopher, Kate Soper, that human agency is evident in almost all aspects of the so-called 'natural world', leading to the concern as to which parts of that mediated space should be preserved or protected.[91]

Applying this perspective to McKinnon's conservationist project, it begs the question as to which type of Arabian desert McKinnon suggests we preserve – the desert as landscape of Bedu husbandry, the desert as watered by *aflaj* (traditional irrigation), the desert as place of oil extraction or the desert as location of thriving cities. Arabian desert is all these things to the people who live there and there are obviously ethical and political concerns about a Western subject pontificating on the fate of land use when not invited by the owners to do so. McKinnon's comments can only be justified if the notional environment is somehow magically removed from the political and transported into the universal.

Exploring the barren triumphalism of human over nature, Huggan and Tiffin, in a postscript to *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, trace the development of the concept of 'post-natural', or the 'death of nature', as articulated by eco-theorists and commentators such as ecofeminist critics, Carolyn Merchant (1980) and Donna Harraway (1991), and Bill McKibben (2006).[92] The key concept that each of these critics explores is the extent to which humans have shifted away from a sense of holistic integration within an organic entity towards a sense of extrication from it; this then leads to a sense of entitlement over it. There are several problems eco-critics suggest with the notion of separating humans from nature: it diminishes the sense of responsibility towards the outcomes of human intervention; it encourages a museum mentality towards wild space that is discreetly

[90] Lynn Ross-Bryant, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p.4.

[91] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* [2010] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p.224.

[92] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (London: HarperCollins, 1980); Donna Harraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 2006).

defined in opposition to tamed space, locking it into a moment of time; it leads to difficulties about what to do with indigenous people for whom the landscape is an evolving environment, and it leads to a sense of consternation that something intrinsically valuable has been lost if the landscape changes.[93] These concerns translate both metaphysically and practically in the texts not just of economists, conservationists and environmentalists whose work involves unravelling these dilemmas in a desert context but, as we have seen, all those who invest an imaginative value in wilderness. As a consequence, many desert texts include a mournful tone that revolves around the kind of paradox that Enato Rosaldo refers to as 'imperialist nostalgia':

> A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of "innocent yearning" both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity.[94]

Holland and Huggan, in quoting Rosaldo, argue that many modern travel writers deploy this kind of nostalgia to 'yearn for the "simpler" ways of life – often rural, premodern, preindustrial, that they, and their metropolitan readers, persuade themselves they need'.[95] It is this kind of nostalgia that proves highly attractive to succeeding generations of travellers, keen to visit 'just in time' or 'before it's too late' and this in turn leads to the promotion and exploitation of particular environments for their tourism potential, often at a cost to their sustainability. Sustainability, the carbon footprint, ethical concerns in general are not just the subject of science writing and investigation, they are also the subject of travel writing and indeed, as Tim Youngs points out, of travel criticism too.[96] Much of today's broad ecological discussion on wilderness revolves around an ethical concern not just about the human relationship with the environment and if or how it should be preserved, but also about whom should access it, and who should constitute its guardianship. A century ago these questions may have been of limited concern but in an era of ever increasing travel to ever remoter destinations when some suggest that 'by the simple act of travelling, you are contributing to the problem' of its piecemeal extinction,

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93 See chapter two of this thesis.
94 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* [1989] (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.69-70.
95 Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p.29.
96 Youngs, *Cambridge Introduction*, p.183.

this has assumed importance on a number of philosophical and practical levels that are explored in the conclusion of this thesis.[97]

With the discovery of oil and the development of geographical and scientific disciplines, the Arabian desert as the land of extremes has been crossed, mapped, exploited for resources, and described in various acts of human containment. Navigable on tarmacked roads, defined by satellite images, built upon by expanding cities and cultivated for agriculture, today's deserts of Arabia appear to be conquered by science. This chapter, however, has showed how a careful reading of the work of some scientists contests that notion – that even in the act of conducting science, there is wonderment that causes the scientist to pause and reconsider his or her relationship with the natural world. Some of these moments, as captured in science writing, continue to contribute to the region's 'imaginative geography' but, as has been shown, the layering of symbolism and nostalgic engagement can illuminate as well as obfuscate the human relationship with nature.[98] At its most productive, desert literature today presents the desert as a liminal space in which the old boundaries (containing unhelpful absolutes of science and exploration, nature and human, West and East) are made porous and human mastery of nature is troubled. With the erosion of boundaries, inevitably some of the old authority of science is eroded too, particularly as tourism seeps across the divide in place of exploration. It is important to reflect on whether the democratising of the desert space, where the wilderness as a trophy site of a few hardy travellers has given way to its promotion as the destination of tourism and the reimagining of the space for local interest, is anything to regret. This tension between nostalgia for wilderness by Western writers in the past and the new political realisation of the desert space today is brought to crisis in the conclusion of this thesis.

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[97] Jeff Greenwald, quoted in Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, p.183 (in reference to carbon emissions).

[98] Said, *Orientalism*, pp.49-72.

Conclusion: Desert as Shared Space

In an era when parts of the Arabian desert have been grassed over for golf courses (the example that the champion of wilderness, Jay Griffiths, uses as a symbol of 'the absolute dominion of man over wild nature'), and their fringes turned into ludic playgrounds for tourists, it is reasonable to ask whether the Arabian desert trope has at length become a barren legacy – a space as empty as the imaginative geography often used to describe it.[1] New desert travellers earnestly simulate the act of exploration in supervised forays off-road, guided by satellite technology and comprehensive guidebooks – such as the ones I have authored or contributed to myself; others, with a deliberate dose of irony or self-mockery, don Arabian headdress for a thirty-minute camel-ride and inevitable 'selfie' in which all hint of modernity (satellite dishes, mobile phone masts, shops, pickup trucks and the other accoutrements of a typical modern desert life) is carefully edited out. Such self-casting in an ossified landscape of set-piece props (Bedu, camel, sand-dune) represents an act that John Urry and Jonas Larsen in *The Tourist Gaze* might identify as an effort to 'tame the objects of the gaze', thereby reflecting and reinforcing stereotypes of the western imagination, not just of the desert but of the Orient as a whole;[2] this contributes in turn to what Hayden White has termed the 'fictions of factual representation' – texts that appear to perpetuate a dated literary legacy at the expense of reflecting today's Arab modernities.[3]

Even today's professional expeditioners, such as Ranulph Fiennes, Adrian Hayes, Mark Evans and Levison Wood, recognise the slight absurdity of the modern desert endeavour, or at least register that the achievement of crossing the desert today is, in Ali Behdad's terminology, a 'belated' activity, different in calibre to the accomplishment of former explorers.[4] In interview, for example, Evans is quick to point out that Bertram Thomas, unlike Evans's own expedition, 'had no map to follow and death was a distinct possibility'; now, in contrast, 'the only thing that can't be controlled is the weather'.[5] The anxiety about authentic endeavour is reflected in the resulting travel narratives that seek

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1 Jay Griffiths, *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (London: Penguin, 2006), p.6. The Dubai Desert Classic is played, for example, on one of the Peninsula's many green desert golf courses, the first of which was grassed in 1988; see 'Golf Courses in the UAE' [online], Spikeson.com, available at: https://www.spikeson.com/countries/united-arab-emirates-golf-courses.php [accessed 11 July 2019].

2 John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* [1990] (Sage Publications: London, 2011), p.167.

3 Cited in Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* [1998] (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.10.

4 Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994).

5 Author's Interview with Mark Evans, 19 March 2016. See Appendix B.

frequently to distinguish the journeys from those undertaken by tourists. As observed by Levison Wood, an expeditioner who recently walked around Arabia, as the distinction narrows between traveller and tourist, exploration has inevitably become 'a profession, a job'.[6] While this job obliges the traveller to generate stories to satisfy sponsors and fulfil publication and television contracts, the ability to write something distinctive has become increasingly challenging when anyone with a guidebook can do the same. Indeed, so apparently tame is the activity of exploration, given today's fully-supported expeditions, that it has led Geoff Dyer to argue that it signals if not the death of travel literature, then at least the second journey form of it – or what Dyer calls the 'literary equivalent of package tours in which destination and experience are so thoroughly predetermined that one is reluctant to make a booking'.[7] In a region where, as was shown in the introduction of this thesis, travelling is heavily invested in the inscripted past, this suggests that the era of meaningful desert travel in Arabia, together with the accounts that such travels once inspired, may have run its course.[8]

This concluding chapter, in summing up the arguments made throughout the study, investigates this assumption and questions whether the Arabian desert offers only a barren legacy for today's explorers and travel writers. The discussion identifies that even though the distinction between travel and tourism has been eroded by virtue of relatively risk-free desert expedition and facilitated desert access, the Arabian desert continues to attract expedition and to excite literary engagement, albeit in new or extenuating forms. Two of these forms, namely the 'accelerated sublime' and what might be termed the 'secular pilgrimage', are analysed here and the discussion shows how they help twenty-first-century travellers distinguish their travels in an era when tourism appears to have tamed the locus of heroic adventure.[9] As such, the discussion brings to a conclusion one major theme of this study, namely the ways in which desert travellers since 1950 have sought to authenticate their accounts in an ever-increasingly globalised context.[10] While the Arabian desert has become more readily accessible, the region to

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6 Author's Interview with Levison Wood, 15 October 2017. See Appendix D. See Levison Wood, *Arabia: A Journey Through the Heart of the Middle East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2018).

7 Geoff Dyer, 'Is Travel Writing Dead?' [online], *Granta*, 138 (2017), available at: https://granta.com/is-travel-writing-dead-dyer/ [accessed 13 July 2019].

8 See 'Studying Arabia as a Country of the Mind' in the introduction to this study.

9 See Claudia Bell and John Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002).

10 Authenticity has been traced through intertextuality and association with former explorers (in chapter one); through drawing attention to Arab modernities through urban and mechanised travel (chapter two); by gaining access to domestic contexts, forbidden to white, male travellers (in chapter three), and in science writing that confers authenticity on personal expressions of wonderment (in chapter four).

which it belongs has appeared, post '9/11', to have become more intimidating, at least to non-Muslim Western travellers – a misperception exacerbated by the need for visas to travel in some countries and ongoing conflict in others. This perception is reflected in a new, distinctly politicised type of desert text that capitalises on Arabia's resurrected danger zone status. By bringing attention to this, and other new work here, and by showing the relevance of today's desert literature to wider discourses of travel, the discussion may open up possibilities for more in-depth critical attention to this genre in future.

Narratives of distinction

One of the distinguishing features of the modern footstep writers presented in chapter one of this thesis was their desire to be recognised as accomplishing something worthwhile in binding their journey to that of a predecessor or by using intertextuality as a shorthand for 'we, the travellers' as distinct from 'you, the tourists'. As Maria Leavenworth points out: 'there is a contemporary ambivalence towards travel when many want to travel but no one wants to be a tourist'.[11] Few among desert travellers recognise their own implication in creating new paths for future tourists to follow. In *Wilderness Oman* (2002), for example, a photographic memoir of travels in the Arabian desert, Malcolm MacGregor identifies the impact of tourism on the environment and singles out casual groups of visitors against whom he can distinguish his own photographic journey within the country, namely 'wadi bashers [a local expatriate term for four-wheel drive expeditions], mountain bikers and tour groups'.[12] Yet with lyrical passages of text and enticing photographs that invite the reader to follow MacGregor into 'this unknown and remote country,' it is contradictory to complain thereafter of a diminishment in wilderness when others take up the challenge.[13] As shown in chapter four of this study, the dilemma of wanting to bring the wonders of wilderness to a wider audience and a desire to keep it wild is a familiar bind of many desert writers, few of whom seem to see their own footprints within the area as part of the act of taming.

The need to distinguish self from tourist has a long pedigree and as such has attracted much critical attention over the centuries (as shown in the introduction of this study). Some modern critics share a general disdain towards tourism. Paul Fussell, for

[11] Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, *The Second Journey* [2009] (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2010), p.24.
[12] Malcom Macgregor, *Wilderness Oman* (Devizes: Ptarmigan Publishing, 2002), p.22.
[13] Macgregor *Wilderness Oman*, p.6.

example, differentiates between traveller and tourist, positing the 'self-directed' wanderings of the one as a higher order activity than the 'externally directed' itinerary of the other.[14] James Buzard documents the historical divergence of the two concepts, pointing out that the term 'tourist', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was originally used interchangeably with 'traveller' and only acquired its modern pejorative connotation with the development of mass tourism in the middle of the nineteenth century. Buzard suggests that it is at that point that travel came to be associated with 'boldness and gritty endurance'; tourism in the meantime came to be seen as an imitative activity, the 'cautious, pampered unit of a leisure industry,' the roots of which can be traced back to Thomas Cook's first package holidays of the 1840s.[15] The definition of tourism and travel continues to evolve and, in an era when both concepts appear to be eliding, Carl Thompson pinpoints the current difference as the intervention of an agent in organising 'most aspects of the journey for the traveller'.[16] Tim Youngs meanwhile identifies that an enduring element of the distinction lies in the choice of, as much as in the planning required to reach a destination – the 'mass tourist' travels along the beaten track, the 'cognoscenti' seeks to get off it.[17] The distinction between traveller and tourist, other critics argue, also lies in the quality of person attempting the track, opposing the 'sensitive traveller' against the 'vulgar tourist'.[18] There is something contradictory, as Buzard notes, that tourists can be both 'superficial surface-skimmers' – such as MacGregor's undiscerning wadi bashers, mountain bikers and tour groups – and 'the blundering agents of profound (and lamentable) social and cultural change', but nonetheless, there is little reward from a writer's perspective in belonging to the 'wrong' camp. It could be argued that no tourist intends to have a negative impact on the wilderness, but the fact remains that en masse, that is often the perceived outcome. Buzard contends that 'rhetorical attempts to exempt oneself' from the responsibility for the outcome (for example in terms of landscape degradation) 'are futile', but this does not stop recent desert travellers seeking a way in which to cast their journeys appropriately – as sensitive traveller, not vulgar tourist.[19]

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[14] Paul Fussell, ed., *The Norton Book of Travel* (New York: Norton, 1987), p.651.
[15] James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture' 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.2.
[16] Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.49.
[17] Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.58.
[18] Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, p.6.
[19] Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, pp.12-13.

The traditional way of achieving merit for a desert journey was to cut new ground, but in an era where there is little new ground left, an alternative approach is to cover old ground in new ways. In the field of Arabian desert literature, there are examples of both: almost all the modern travellers analysed in this study have sought to distinguish themselves from their tourist counterparts by claiming what has been termed throughout this study as the competitive edge – the venturing into new territory or into old territory in novel ways in order to invest greater authenticity in the modern venture. Most admit that the endeavour is somewhat specious. Success, in terms of Arabian desert travel, is mostly measured in terms of having what the traveller regards as an authentic experience and this is generally connected with the distance strayed from the beaten track; this sense of authenticity has been steadily eroding in direct proportion to the number of visitors following suit. This is no new sentiment, as the distinguished desert traveller, Freya Stark, lamented in the early twentieth century:

> Even now the crossing of the desert is an everyday affair, and although the Nairn Motor Transport do what they can, and cook your breakfast-sausage romantically for you in the open desert over a fire of camelthorn ... they do not quite succeed, one must admit, in giving the true nomadic feeling to any except most innocent travellers.[20]

Stark's sense of desert travel as tourist performance is the antithesis to Thesiger's purporting to reach Arabia 'only just in time', before modern communications made enjoying an authentic experience more accessible to less extraordinary people.[21] For modern desert explorer, Levison Wood, little chance remains of a genuinely authentic experience: 'Of course', he states in interview, 'travelling in the desert is a form of escape – even Thesiger went home. You're always a foreigner in the desert and a foreigner travelling in the desert is always less authentic'.[22] This realisation accompanies Wood as he walks or travels a punishing five thousand miles through thirteen Arabian countries alone (accompanied only by the cameramen) in just four months in order to prove that his travels amount to more than just a holiday in the sands.

As we have seen (in chapters one and two) modern self-styled professional explorers, such as Ranulph Fiennes and Adrian Hayes, make 'a great show of the extent to which they journeyed "off the beaten track", thereby avoiding tourists and the

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[20] Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches: Journeys through Iraq* [1937] (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2012), p.1.
[21] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.11.
[22] Author's Interview with Levison Wood, 15 October 2017. See Appendix D.

infrastructure that supports them,' even at the expense of appearing foolish to the local people they encounter.[23] Mark Thomas who circumnavigates the Israeli Barrier in *Extreme Rambling* (2011),[24] and Leon McCarron, who describes deliberately hiking along new recreational trails in the Middle East in *The Land Beyond* (2017) refashion the paths of their journeys as something more significant or exotic – 'arteries that connect the disparate parts of a country built on nomadism and movement'.[25] All are eager to prove they are not on holiday. Some take their narratives of distinction to extremes, and it is to a brief analysis of these hyper-modern accounts that the discussion now turns.

Post-tourism and the accelerated sublime

In his provocative account of today's travel writing, *Extreme Pursuits,* Graham Huggan analyses what he perceives as a growing cultural anxiety around the exponential growth of tourism and concludes that it has led, among other consequences, to a rise in travel texts that correspond to what has been termed the 'accelerated sublime'.[26] In reference to Claudia Bell and John Lyall from whom the term derives, Huggan defines this concept as a 'hyperinscribed' natural space in which tourists engage in extreme activities as leisure pursuits in order to satisfy an 'ever-intensified search for experiential authenticity'.[27] This includes not just those activities that involve technology (such as daring adventure sports in wild places) but also 'older, more endurance-based activities' that imply a 'purer, less technologically mediated engagement with the site'.[28] It also, crucially, involves risk. As has been demonstrated throughout this study, expeditions in the deserts of Arabia provide exactly this kind of 'older, more endurance-based' activity, especially given the opportunity to travel by camel rather than motorised transport; it has also perennially involved at least the perception of danger as part of the traditional othering of the desert space. Indeed, ever since the Swiss explorer Jean Louis Burckhardt cut through the Siq at Petra in 1812 disguised as a *hajji,* anxious for his life in case he showed too much interest in the wonders he was rediscovering for Europe, Arabia and the desert in particular has provided just such a hyperinscribed space.[29] A survey of the superlatives of endurance in

[23] Thompson, *Travel Writing,* p.124.
[24] Mark Thomas, *Extreme Rambling* (London: Ebury Press, 2011).
[25] Leon McCarron, *The Land Beyond: A Thousand Miles on Foot through the Heart of the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p.179.
[26] Graham Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits: Travel/Writing in an Age of Globalization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p.6.
[27] Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits,* p.99.
[28] Bell and Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime,* p.193.
[29] Jean Louis Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London: The Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, 1822).

a desert context shows that the quest for the competitive edge, for the 'more extreme, more dangerous, farther away, deeper, steeper, or faster', is evidenced in modern travel literature connected with the Arabian desert too, but taken to even more extraordinary extremes.[30] The excitement afforded by the prospect of danger in travelling within the region is still underpinned by the vocabulary of the sublime as the so-called 'shock and awe' military campaign of the 1990s showed. In modern critical theory the term 'accelerated sublime' has emerged to describe a peace-time equivalent, defining the connection between landscape and identity as realised through expedition, extreme sport and what Kathleen Adams calls 'Danger-Zone Tourism'.[31]

Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century self-aggrandising desert narratives, in which the (usually male) author puts himself centre-stage in locations of real or perceived danger, form almost a subgenre of masculine-oriented desert travel literature associated with the region. Conforming to the characteristics of the general accelerated sublime, these male accounts are undercut with an ironic patina that is in itself a kind of self-distinction, reflected in titles such as *Misadventure in the Middle East* (2007) which features the author as 'Tramp, Artist and Spy' in the subtitle of an otherwise fairly ordinary tale of a car journey through Iran, Iraq and Arabia; *Bad Lands* (2007) and *Dark Lands* (2013) which deliberately place the author, according to the back covers, in 'some of the most repressive and dangerous regimes in the world' and *A Tourist in the Arab Spring* (2013) which, despite the book's dedication to the 'martyrs of the Arab Spring', is in fact less about the martyrs than about the writer's supposed daring in venturing to countries in post-war chaos.[32] All three accounts are deliberately political and, to differing degrees, overtly aware of the Orientalism in which their work is contextualised, even if they find it impossible to provide an entirely new mode of representation. In the ironic, self-deprecatory tone familiar to the accelerated sublime, Henry Hemming, for example, mocks the pomposity of his project to 'alter Western stereotypes about the region' (p.5). Despite devoting two chapters to a discourse (verbalised as a dialogue) on how to manage the Oriental legacy, he nonetheless re-presents the stereotypes he seeks to unravel, casting the region as 'on the one hand [as]

[30] Bell and Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime*, p.193.

[31] Kathleen M. Adams, 'Danger-Zone Tourism: Prospects and Problems for Tourism in Tumultuous Times', in *Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia,* ed. by Peggy Teo, T.C. Chang and K.C. Ho (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), pp.265-278.

[32] Henry Hemming, *Misadventure in the Middle East: Travels as Tramp, Artist and Spy* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007); Tony Wheeler, *Bad Lands* [2007] (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2010); Tony Wheeler, *Dark Lands* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet Publications, 2013); Tom Chesshyre, *A Tourist in the Arab Spring* (Chalfont St. Peter: Bradt Travel Guides, 2013).

the hotbed of modern-day suicidal terror, and on the other a more Orientalist, antique and sexually louche land of Ali Baba flying-carpet fantasy' (p.5). All three of the authors are at their most interesting when grappling with the literary difficulties of representing the Other.

In the difficulty in finding anything new to say, in the use of parody, in the recycling of the past as nostalgia, and in the links with popular culture and mass media, it could be argued that accelerated sublime desert literature is illustrative of the last throes of postmodernism.[33] What makes it new, is the political dimension to the work: these travels are conducted less in an imaginative geography and more along practical axes of the modern Middle East in an age of perceived terrorist threat. Tony Wheeler's contribution to the accelerated sublime in *Bad Lands* and *Dark Lands,* for example, describes visits to countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq that have become off-limits by virtue of their internal politics and relationship with the world at large, and he uses his travels in the region to express political opinions about what he perceives as the 'failed state' status of the countries he visits. Writing for a largely Western readership, Wheeler's final assessment is in some measure re-assertive of old East-West relations: 'For all the whining about how unfair the world is to Islam,' Wheeler writes at the end of the Saudi Arabian chapter, 'it's the country's inward-looking, tightly constrained, narrow-minded view of its religion and its position in the world that is the real cause of the Saudi problem' (p.300). His prescription for 'the Saudi problem' is increased tourism and he notes 'there's plenty to see, getting around is quite easy and the facilities are more than adequate' – a summary worthy perhaps of a guidebook. In mirroring the focus of Lonely Planet, the publishing house he co-founded, to promote travel that is off the beaten track, Wheeler writes: 'My first thought, when George W. Bush announced his Axis of Evil, was "I want to go there." Well who wouldn't? He'd inadvertently created an adventurer's travel wish list'.[34] If part of the prospect of encountering danger in zones that are off the beaten track is to heighten the sense of heroism involved in travelling there, it is also about trying to recapture an 'imagined geography', and points to the broader sense in which the boundaries of the Middle East are frequently redrawn and reimagined according to the political and social interplay between West and East.[35] It is also, as

[33] Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* [1999] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp.68-71.
[34] Wheeler, *Dark Lands*, p.6.
[35] Carl Thompson, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Carl Thompson, [2016] (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), p.xviii.

Vincent Cheng argues, about travellers recapturing a lost sense of 'their own cultural identity in an increasingly globalised world'. The outcome, Cheng identifies, is the ability 'to continue to be able to assert difference and superiority'.[36] When Wheeler, as 'Guidebook Guru', asserts that difference and superiority in relation to the Middle East, it carries with it the problematic potential to influence a wide readership, recalibrating the East-West relationship in the latter's favour.[37] At the beginning of the introduction to *Bad Lands* Wheeler poses the question: 'what makes a land bad?' He concludes that 'it's got nothing to do with geography or topography.[38] The cover of *Bad Lands*, however, features palm trees and a camel together with skull and crossbones, an oil derrick and army tanks, as if the anthropomorphised desert landscape is somehow complicit in, or at least, symbolic of human malady. However coincidental, the negative connotations of desert – dead, dying, barren, empty, baked, desiccated, sterile, encroaching on fertile land – help to re-establish this particular landscape as an objective correlative of failing statehood.[39]

Tom Chesshyre's romp through the Arab countries of North Africa and parts of Arabia a year after the Arab Spring of 2011, described in *A Tourist in the Arab Spring*, ostensibly shares some of the newly politicised stance of Wheeler's and Hemming's work but errs more on the side of 'post-tourist', in the Maxine Feifer sense of the term. As Thompson points out, 'getting off the beaten track, and of being a "traveller" rather than a "tourist", are usually self-deluding fantasies and illusions'.[40] In doing his best 'to act like' a tourist (p.118) while going to sleep 'counting gunshots above the rooftops' (p.97) Chesshyre appears at best naïve. At worst, he appears to be courting the kind of 'disaster tourism' that Graham Huggan describes in *Extreme Pursuits*: 'Disaster tourism embraces a wide variety of sometimes incompatible activities: from safely insulated, unashamedly voyeuristic appreciations of other people's extreme misfortunes ... to deliberately risky visits to current war-torn zones and dangerously unstable political sites'.[41] Disaster tourism and the texts that it produces can be seen as a sinister development because they create the new kinds of 'global stereotypes' that Alan Keohane warns of in his work on the Bedu; these, he argues, promote the idea of Arabs as 'villains ... and hooded faces'

[36] Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp.2-3 and p.6.
[37] Tony Wheeler, 'Philosophy of a Guidebook Guru', *UNESCO Courier* (July-August 1999), 54-55.
[38] Wheeler, *Bad Lands*, p.7.
[39] Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze*, pp.65-66 on the subject of desertification.
[40] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.126. See Maxine Feifer, *Going Places: Tourism in History from Imperial Rome to the Present* (New York: Stein and Day, 1986).
[41] Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, p.100.

fuelling a new sense of cultural distinction.[42] It also fuels the apocalyptic rhetoric provoked by the events of 9/11: 'people are more fascinated with apocalyptic prophecy than ever before,' writes Jason Boyett; 'this may be due to the dire events happening around the world on a daily basis, especially in the Middle East'.[43] By mapping Arabia along the uninterrogated 'axis of evil', the achievements made through postcolonial critique and more enlightened encounter, such as are observed in the modern desert writing highlighted throughout this study, are disappointingly reversed.

Part of the process of projecting Arabia back into the unmitigated hostile space traditionally associated with desert, is to reverse the perceived domestication of the space through exploration and recreate a suitably challenging climate in which to define the modern quest. As Debbie Lisle writes in *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*: 'Travel writers can no longer have that treasured moment of being first anywhere, but they can certainly be the first to prove their masculinity by travelling in a dangerous, brave or impossible way'.[44] In an age where former virtues of manly courage and strength are no longer taken for granted, it is perhaps notable that texts conforming to the accelerated sublime appear to be trying to regain the space for primarily male endeavour.[45] This has a commercial angle too; as Levison Wood puts it: 'if there's no risk, there's no expedition – without risk, it's a holiday!'[46] In other words, as Gary Krist writes, for it to be 'real' travel writing, it has to depict the experience of hardship.[47]

If for some the modern desert experience offers a gendered space for proving male prowess, for others it represents an antidote to the banality that characterises much of the accelerated sublime. In the absence of extrinsic details, the desert has traditionally forced travellers inward, provoking introspection of either a solipsistic or of a productive kind. Those writers who embrace the desert experience as a 'rite of passage' contribute to a more nuanced thread of recent desert literature. Indeed, if the accelerated sublime strand of texts is unencouragingly retrogressive, despite its attempt to be radically new, a more optimistic prognosis of the Arabian desert genre, as briefly explored below, can be found in the modern secular pilgrimage.

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42 Alan Keohane, *Bedouin Nomads of the Desert* [1994] (London: Kyle Books, 2011), Preface, p.7.

43 For a satirical account of today's obsession with apocalyptic theories, see Jason Boyett, *Pocket Guide to the Apocalypse* (Orlando: Relevant Books, 2005).

44 Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.95.

45 See Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, p.100 and p.103.

46 Author's Interview with Levison Wood, 15 October 2017. See Appendix D.

47 Gary Krist 'Ironic Journeys: Travel Writing in the Age of Tourism', *The Hudson Review*, 45, no.4 (1993), 593-601.

The modern secular pilgrimage

Billie Melman, Michael Grimshaw and Rosylnn Haynes are among many recent commentators to show how, over the centuries, travellers have endowed the desert with redemptive and purifying powers which '"cleanse" the suffering individual'.[48] The Arabian desert, as origin of the three great monotheistic religions forged from violent conflict and upheaval, has always represented a locus of inner journey and indeed of redemptive experience, and it is little wonder that writers draw on this tradition to give new meaning to their travels.[49] 'There it was', writes William Atkins in *The Immeasurable World*, his 2018 account of travel in seven deserts on five continents, 'the hyper-arid zone in all its abundance: solitary, godless, lonesome, deathly, barren, waterless, trackless, impassable, infested, cursed, forsaken – and yes, at the same time, the site of revelation, of contemplation and sanctuary'.[50] This work, allegedly arising out of a week's solitude and reading in monastic internship, shares with other recent Arabian desert texts a notion of the inner journey as quest with the transformative power to lead to a productive outcome. The 'search for individual identity conducted against a natural landscape', according to Tim Youngs, is an identifiable trope in travel literature as a whole with self-knowledge leading to 'a rebirth … which prepares one for a more fulfilling re-entry into society'.[51] Similarly Peter Hulme notes that, 'As the earth's wildernesses get paved over, travel writing increasingly emphasises the inner journey, often merging imperceptibly into memoir'.[52] Memoir is a good description for Lawrence Osborne's *The Wet and the Dry: A Drinker's Journey* (2013) and James Budd's *Half Past Ten in the Afternoon: An Englishman's Journey from Aneiza to Makkah* (2014). The two travel accounts form an unlikely pair to consider in tandem, the one being close to the accelerated sublime texts considered above, while the other is more an earnest foray into

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48 Billie Melman, 'The Middle East/Arabia: "the cradle of Islam"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing,* ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.112-119; Michael Grimshaw, *Bibles and Baedekers: Tourism, Travel, Exile and God* [2008] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), and Roslynn D. Haynes, *Desert: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

49 See 'A Tradition of Intertextual Referencing' in chapter one of this thesis. See also Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Lane Belden, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

50 William Atkins, *The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places* (New York: Doubleday, 2018), p.21.

51 Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction,* p.99.

52 Peter Hulme, 'Travelling to Write (1940-2000)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing,* ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs [2002] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.87-101 (p.94).

the picturesque. The two are linked, however, in a quest that is little to do with the countries described therein, and much more to do with the inner quest, the defining of self in the search for the soul.

Both texts build on antecedents such as Charles Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* (1888) and Geoffrey Moorhouse's *The Fearful Void* (1974).[53] The latter, narrating a journey within the Sahara, describes the extreme rambling – or nomadism – of the author (and an assortment of ill-judged companions) as he attempts, without any qualification or prior experience, to cross the Sahara from west to east on foot and riding camels.[54] The desert provides the conditions, nothing more, of a journey that is all about observation of self: 'My primary aim in going to the desert', Moorhouse writes, 'was not to establish a record, much as I might enjoy doing so, but to explore an extremity of human experience' (p.29). So extreme is the undertaking that he suspects that even Wilfred Thesiger, with whom Moorhouse rehearses his plan, 'thought my enterprise little more than a stunt' (p.31). While Moorhouse fails to complete his proposed journey and has to return home 'a defeated man' (p.279), it could be argued that he nonetheless accomplishes his stated aim and *The Fearful Void*, with its description of the psychological effect of extreme physical endeavour – 'Body was pain and it had no separate parts. I wanted release, nothing more. I wanted to sleep, nothing beyond' (p.159) – has become a classic of the genre, often cited in literary, cultural and theological criticism that probes representation of the modern self.[55]

Lawrence Osborne's *The Wet and the Dry* identifies with the work of Moorhouse and the monotheistic pilgrimage inheritance, despite appearing at first glance to lie at the farthest extreme of the accelerated sublime.[56] The author tries to garner credit for his journey through the somewhat preposterous endeavour to drink his way around, among others, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula; deliberately provocative, prodding taboos, gloating in his ability to circumvent local custom by gaining access to alcohol in the Muslim countries through which he passes, his comments in the opening chapters are

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[53] Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* [Cambridge: 1888] (London: Jonathan Cape and the Medici Society, 1926, 2 Vols) and Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The Fearful Void* [1974] (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

[54] Peter Hulme, 'Travelling to Write (1940-2000)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs [2002] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.87-101. Hulme makes the point that 'Thesiger's themes may look old-fashioned (even for their time),' but notes nonetheless that 'nomadic life is a constant theme throughout the last half century' (p.88).

[55] See, for example, Michael Grimshaw, *Bibles and Baedekers: Tourism, Travel, Exile and God* [2008] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p.1.

[56] Lawrence Osborne, *The Wet and the Dry: A Drinker's Journey* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013)

particularly glib as he hopes 'in some dark way that I might eventually stumble across that most delightful phenomenon, a Muslim alcoholic' (p.9). Two factors redeem his account, however: firstly, the way in which the choice of destination sets up a dialectic between 'wet' and 'dry', and secondly how that desert context contributes to a moment of clarity within the parallel inner journey. Tapping into anxieties about globalisation and what Roger Scruton memorably described as the West's 'addiction to freedom', Osborne's own personal addiction to freedom, in the form of alcoholic excess, makes it hard for him to avoid the faux Arabia of Western imagination that is recreated in the tourist resorts, malls and bars across the Middle East and 'present as a motif' of décor, iron lamps and Bedu tents (p.90).[57] In contrast to this homogenised zone of what he described as 'self-absorbed banalities', Osborne finds authenticity in stepping beyond the built environment. It is within this context that the desert becomes a site of pilgrimage and in which an identifiable moment of epiphany appears to occur:

> We lay together in the wildness, making words out of pebbles on the beach, walking through the dunes. We talked less and less, but this did not matter … the days at the desert sea were crystal-clear, in terms of consciousness. It takes several days for all traces of alcohol to leave the bloodstream, and when that happens the clarification is surprising. (p.94)

Austere and purgatorial, the landscape stripped of incidentals parallels the clarity enjoyed in sobriety, offering a transformational quality in which 'you move differently, you think differently; you sense things differently' (p.94). The landscape operates here not just as the site of personal redemption (however temporary) but also as a way of binding the individual back into the community from which he has become a pariah, making him more aware of his responsibilities, and provoking greater respect for both the country in which he is travelling and for the companion he is sharing the journey with. The moment does not last long but it is enough of an epiphany to make sense of the journey as pilgrimage and the opportunities that can be learned from the desert as 'dry', as a holistic environment not just as an unproductive other to the 'wet', and sets up opportunities for change on return home.

In common with new nature writing, this is desert writing that contributes to the kind of transformative literature advocated by Robert Macfarlane – a kind of literature that is not 'noisily game-changing' (as he identifies Mark Cocker as advocating) but

[57] Roger Scruton: *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (London: Continuum, 2002), p.127.

which (as Rebecca Solnit proposes) sows its seeds quietly and awaits incidental fertilisation.[58] The connection between Osborne's narrative of a drinker's journey around the Middle East and James Budd's reverently sober memoir, *Half Past Ten in the Afternoon*, may appear tentative but they both share a deep sense of attempted redemption through their desert encounter.[59] Budd's narrative, published in 2014 but focusing on the author's memories of his time as a teacher in Aneiza in Saudi Arabia between the years 1965 and 1970, may have remained as a pleasant, if unremarkable account of an unremarkable town were it not for the parallel journey that charts the author's faith from its first stirrings in Aneiza to its apotheosis in Mecca many years later. The journey's spiritual heart is not in the journey to Mecca, nor is it as Budd suggests his journey from agnosticism to Islam; for the reader, the epiphany of the account is in the moment of expulsion from the Arab town Budd had made his home. Although 1960s Aneiza looked much the same as it did when Doughty stayed in one of its mudbrick houses at the end of the nineteenth century, the town that Budd describes is nonetheless on a fast-track to modernisation under the influence of globalisation. In the almost obsessive enumeration of fast food outlets given in the last chapter ('two McDonalds, two dunkin donuts, three Baskin Robbinses, a Pizza Hut, a Domino's Pizza, a Little Caesar, a Burger King, a KFC and a Starbucks' (p.185)), Budd appears to be exiled not just from Aneiza but from an approximate garden of Eden that is forever locked in his memory. Indeed, in its painful evocation of displacement and exile, this is a text of 'rupture', such as Caren Kaplan writes about in *Questions of Travel*. Throughout this study, similar moments of rupture have been interrogated for the insights they offer not just about representation of people and place but also about the human condition as hemmed in by modernity. In moments of exile, there is at least a productive sense of dislocation – of fortunate fall into nomadism or a wandering along the path 'between', but never arriving 'in'. Exploration of the interstices of place and time, where the path is all, has a redemptive, postcolonial quality to it and indeed Deleuze and Guattari theorise that monotheism arises out of nomadic life, lived in the 'smooth spaces' of desert, steppe and ocean, precisely because a sense of the absolute is only possible to experience when freed from locale and conquest. In this sense,

[58] Robert Macfarlane, 'Why we need nature writing: A new "culture of nature" is changing the way we live – and could change our politics, too' [online], *New Statesman*, Nature (2015), available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/nature/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing [accessed 28 June 2019].

[59] James Budd, *Half Past Ten in the Afternoon: An Englishman's Journey from Aneiza to Makkah* (London, Arabian Publishing, 2014). Part of this commentary has been published in my review of the book in *Studies in Travel Writing*, 20, no.4 (2016), 425-7.

Budd's conversion to Islam, which means 'surrender', can be read as the reward of expulsion.[60]

Accounts such as those of Osborne and Budd – superficially retrospective studies in the conquest of wilderness through adventure tourism and through globalisation – can therefore be read more productively as accounts in which modern man (or woman) goes 'in search of a soul, in search of home'.[61] In their new 'spirituality and earnestness', they cover similar territory, albeit through different modes, to the twentieth-century wilderness texts (encompassing mountain and desert) of Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980) and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987).[62] The inner journey, framed by external wilderness, becomes a form of therapy, a retreat to a supposed simpler life that has not yet been, as Youngs puts it, 'buried and distorted by the weight of the post-industrial, mechanised world'.[63] In this, the twenty-first-century desert soul-seekers appear to herald another revival of Romantic primitivism, reached at through the extremities of experience – drinking to excess in the case of Osborne, for example, or undergoing religious conversion in the case of Budd.

As a result of modern infrastructure, it is not just the 'extreme traveller', however, who is privileged to experience the redemptive quality of a desert experience; in today's Arabian desert, almost anyone with a guidebook (included those on limited means and of limited mobility) can find their way to a sand dune and commune with nature with potentially similar effect. Describing his own theological inner journeys, Clive Pearson asks: 'Are we tourists, travellers or exiles as we negotiate our way through the legacy of the Enlightenment and modernity?' and of the three he appears to choose to cast himself as the former – an 'intelligent tourist' with 'a Lonely Planet at hand'.[64] In the 1990s Buzard posited that the distinction between traveller and tourist was 'highly specious' and today, when all parts of life appear to be accelerating and travellers share with tourists the desire for the most pleasure in the least time,[65] Huggan is among other commentators

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[60] Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam: Revised Edition* [1989] (London: Stacey International, 2001), p.219.

[61] Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, p.71.

[62] Hulme, 'Travelling to Write', p.90.

[63] Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction*, p.97.

[64] Clive Pearson in Grimshaw, *Bibles and Baedekers*, p.vii.

[65] Mark Evans talks about the frustration of not being able to sit around the camp fire on his crossing of the Empty Quarter because he was required to keep up with the demands of real-time media and had to complete the entire journey within a predetermined timeframe. Author's Interview with Mark Evans, 19 March 2016. See Appendix B.

who assume that the distinction is entirely dead.[66] There is an elegiac quality to Huggan's comment that mirrors a statement made by Fred Inglis who writes of the Romantic journey that it is always 'on the point of vanishing' and the way of life the traveller encounters 'is always on the edge of extinction'.[67] He goes on to suggest, however, that travelling 'after' does not necessarily mean travelling less meaningfully and indeed the reimagination of the desert as pilgrimage for a new generation of elided travellers and tourists, oppressed by the realities of their own digital era (not to mention the illusions of a 'declining and decadent West'), are contributing further accretions to the Arabian desert legacy.[68]

Democratisation of the desert experience

'The "otherness" of deserts' writes Haynes in the concluding sentence of her study of the cultural value of the desert, 'has come to epitomise a new perspective; the unexpected beauty of minimalism, the acknowledgement of, and respect for, dissenting values and a questioning of economic rationalism and materialism as pre-eminent goals for our planet'.[69] Stripped back to basics, but crucially full of potential for invigorated experience, the restorative and salvational power of deserts is felt not only by those who engage with it academically or through literature but by the casual visitor also. While many, as we have seen, dismiss tourism as a shallow and consumer orientated expression of modern society devoid of 'deeper spiritual or cultural significance', others such as Lynn Ross-Bryant recognise in tourism 'the pilgrimage of modern times'.[70] Writing on the phenomenal success of the North American national park as a magnet for tourism, Bryant identifies that 'pilgrimage and tourism are permeable experiences. Pilgrimage has always included "seeing the sights" as well as worrying about finding the next bed and breakfast. And tourism frequently involves a search for personal transformation'.[71] The Arabian desert acts as 'sacralised' space, to use MacCannell's phrase, in which travellers, with head bowed down beneath the sun, enter in awe.[72] Thompson argues, that such spaces

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66 Huggan, *Extreme Pursuits*, p.5: 'I am taking it as a given that there is no meaningful distinction between the tourist and the traveller.'

67 Fred Inglis, *The Delicious History of the Holiday* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.82.

68 Grimshaw, *Bibles and Baedekers*, p.52.

69 Haynes, *Desert*, p.208.

70 Lynn Ross-Bryant, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p.6.

71 Ross-Bryant, *Pilgrimage to the National Parks*, p.6.

72 Dean MacCannell *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp.42-48 and quoted in Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p.162.

eventually become 'fetishised and commodified' as they become embraced within the entire panoply of the tourism industry; in the Arabian deserts, this is evident in the growing number of tourist camps offering the obligatory camel ride to watch the sunrise, serving last suppers over dying embers, paying homage to the Bedu as caretakers of the Other, peddling trinkets such as camel bone as talismans of the pilgrimage into the dunes – part of what Holland and Huggan call the 'sanitised spectacles of mass tourism'.[73] This commodification, however, does not necessarily mean that the redemptive or inspirational value of the experience is circumscribed; it could simply indicate that the space is functioning well as an authentic locus of wilderness engagement for a greater number of people, a kind of democractisation of the experience that has hitherto, as we have seen, been a somewhat elitist, male-oriented, able-bodied phenomenon. Tourism can be seen within this context as a force for good, rather than negatively as an erosion of wilderness and the values represented therein.

Paul Shepherd makes a surprising apologist for the tourist in *Man in the Landscape*: while he regards the tourist as a fool, 'taken seriously only by those bent on fleecing him',[74] he also concedes that there is a reciprocal benefit flowing between tourism and wilderness and views tourism as a 'bad performance of a true virtue' (p.xxvii). That virtue lies in the appreciation of the natural world and in seeing it as an instructive alternative to the mechanised and artificial environment that most tourists inhabit. In their enthusiasm for wilderness, Shepherd concludes, tourists could just 'be the hope of mankind':

> The tourist moves in a sphere which has no immediate connection to the conduct of his daily business. … Out of his daily niche, his potential increases…for he is on a pilgrimage or he is wayfaring, the best thing for his soul. … In this plastic formative mood he is essentially a new and different person.[75]

The ability of the desert to become a transformative zone for those who enter that space, traveller or tourist alike, is most usually considered from the perspective of a Western as opposed to an indigenous gaze. Any manipulation of that space that does not conform to a sense of desert as other, tends to attract opprobrium in both travel and critical writing. Many desert cities, for example, are often weighed in the balance against the wilderness

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73 Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters,* p.2.
74 Paul Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* [1967, 1991] (London: University of Georgia Press, 2002), p.150.
75 Shepherd, *Man in the Landscape*, p.156.

from which they appear to be in opposition. In *Arabia Through the Looking Glass*, Jonathan Raban attends the opening of the Dubai Petroleum Company's new headquarters and lampoons what he regards as the excess (a word that is often levelled at the modern desert city) on display: 'A fountain played at my elbow as I lounged, marvelling, on a prettily cushioned stone bench; this was kitsch so magnificent and inventive that it totally transcended the category – it was a triumph of happy make-believe'.[76] Urry and Larsen similarly single out the city of Dubai as an example of an 'evil paradise', or a place of 'monumental excess'; they chart Dubai's assumed rise and fall as an example of 'twentieth-century hubris', prefiguring the end of the so-called tourist gaze, and predict that the city's glamour will gradually fade when oil revenues run out and sea levels rise.[77] Urry and Larsen wistfully wonder whether the city's demise (as it turns out, incorrectly anticipated) might signal a 'reversal beginning in an Arabian desert' of the kind of unregulated consumption represented by Dubai. Urry and Larsen are perhaps guilty of their own tourist gaze here, tending to airbrush away 'undesired modern signs' which are contrasted against the supposed elemental wilderness. Why else mention 'an Arabian desert'? As we have seen, this is not an innocent term, but a whole collection of values wrapped up in a Western appreciation of wilderness.

Urry and Larsen write of Dubai's transformation from a 'sleepy village' into a shimmering Arabian Las Vegas as if the city has in some way been a victim, if not of its own success, then of Western capitalist forces upon it. While the growth of this and other desert cities in the region may have been accelerated through tourism (modern Dubai's commercial success has been built out of its capitalisation as a transport hub for long haul travel), it is hard to argue that it is a victim. Like European countries after the First World War that deliberately courted tourism by fashioning their cultural activities to the 'presumed or inferred interests of foreign visitors,' similarly, the desert countries of the Middle East have collaborated with transport and travel agencies, with universities and foreign governments, to maximise tourism as part of their diversification strategies.[78] Part of this strategy has involved deliberately recreating a kind of mythical Arab Orient for Western consumption. Despite the regrettable collateral of homogenisation occasioned by this approach, the rise in tourism across the Arabian Peninsula is not necessarily to be

[76] Jonathan Raban, *Arabia through the Looking Glass* [1979] (Glasgow: Fontana, 1980), p.196.
[77] Urry and Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, pp.239-40.
[78] Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, p.332.

lamented.[79] At the risk of stating the obvious, tourism is important to local economies. It benefits local people and can, with care, be conducted in a sustainable manner. While being cautious of lining up indigenous people as 'natives' upon which globalising agencies 'act', even Huggan and Tiffin recognise that local people have a role to play in deciding what is best for their communities.[80] This marks something of a departure from Huggan's scathing condemnation of tourism in his earlier work, *Extreme Pursuits*, which seemed to posit that tourism contributes to the kind of deliberate destruction and cultural appropriation of the lands it descends upon, rather as if tourism is like a plague of locusts stripping the local culture of its identity and worth. The problem with Huggan's earlier assessment of tourism is that it has overtones of what Michael Asher called the questionable spectre of 'a rich man telling poor men that they are better off poor'; I would argue that such a perspective represents a second post-capitalist imperialism that appropriates to itself the self-determining capacity of a country to decide for itself if tourism is of value to its evolution within the global community. The desert countries of Arabia have invested substantially in tourism – it would be a pity for the people therein (who within living memory of many of their inhabitants were compelled to endure a life with insufficient education, health care and infrastructure) if the whole institution of travel and tourism were now to be undermined by a neo-liberal crisis of faith in its power to benefit.

Within the ever-evolving debate about the potential benefits of travel and tourism balanced against the lament about globalisation, it is interesting to consider the impact that the increase in tourism has had on the sustainability of the imaginative wilderness. It raises the question as to whether the deserts of Arabia can remain as an effective other for Western preoccupations when, encouraged by the policies of local governments, more people are discovering the landscape for themselves, reaching farther into the fastness than ever before. Sustainability has become the new mantra for those involved in facilitating the journeys of these visitors in their interaction with the wild, and the modern guidebook has assumed the unfamiliar role of helping to transform the 'vulgar tourist' into the 'sensitive traveller'. Desert writing mirrors travel writing as a whole in this regard and while some, such as Geoff Dyer, might contend that the travel narrative is a dying art

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[79] The World Bank trend analysis covering the period 1995 to 2017 shows a sharp increase in tourism in all Arabian Peninsula countries except Yemen; see 'International tourism, number of arrivals' [online], The World Bank (2019), available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL [accessed 10 July 2019].

[80] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* [2010] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p.68.

form, it may just be that the baton is being taken up by a different form of traveller, writing a different, digitised form of text. Dyer's 'Round South America on a Pogo Stick' species of travel writing probably reached its desert apotheosis in Osborne's account of trying to find a bottle of champagne in Oman,[81] but it would be rash to assume that a genre that has withstood the gentrification of pilgrims, the professionalisation of amateurs, and the commercialisation of explorers will not similarly survive the democratisation of travellers.

Barren legacy?

While each of the four main chapters of this thesis addresses one of the three research questions that underpins this study (namely, the insights revealed by desert literature about the travelling self in chapter one, representations of the modern 'Arab other' in chapter two, and explorations of the land left behind in terms of gender and anthropocentric biases in chapters three and four), this concluding chapter responds to the overarching theme of 'barren legacy'. In a region about which so much has been written by white Western writers for so many centuries, it is reasonable to consider whether the Arabian desert genre has, in itself, become redundant – a weary trope over-invested with literary allusion. But even as travellers grapple with the modern dilemma of meaning in their journeys, and as the desert becomes ever more accessible to the casual tourist, elaborate expeditions are still planned and executed in the Arabian desert, resulting in at least three major new desert texts in the period between 2015 and 2020.

This final chapter has summarised how the desert writers of the current decade have taken an old theme and forged something new from it – in texts that explore extenuated forms of the sublime through extreme desert adventure or that describe the journey inwards, through personal pilgrimage. The chapter now concludes with a return to the three research questions underpinning this thesis and an estimation of the extent to which the opening premise – namely that even for modern writers the Arabian desert remains a *tabula rasa* upon which to project relevant contemporary discussions – remains valid. It finds that in the place of confident projects that describe self, other and the land left behind, where nostalgia was once used largely as a tool for self-congratulation, a growing doubt is expressed by the modern writers considered in this study – doubt about

[81] Dyer, 'Is Travel Writing Dead?'. As part of a series of '2 minute reads' this article in *Granta* could almost belong to the accelerated sublime that it appears to disdain. See Pico Iyer's rebuttal in the same journal in which he describes a different travelling demographic from the 'somewhat colonial interaction' of former travel writing.

individual capability, about the ability to represent the Other and about the hitherto unquestioned supposed superiority not just of a dominant culture but also in terms of human domination over the natural world. The study finds, if the habit of self-evaluation betrays a growing maturation in the individual, then it may also evidence an optimistic development within the genre of desert writing too, allowing for the experience of travel to be revived in its capacity to educate, and to enhance inter-cultural understanding.

The title of this thesis, *A Barren Legacy? The Arabian Desert as Trope in English Travel Writing, Post-Thesiger,* was chosen to reflect not just a recognition that travel in the region has changed dramatically since Wilfred Thesiger's travels, triggering a crisis of confidence in the modern desert journey, but also to reflect a weariness among today's critics and commentators with modes of representation that appear only to recycle insupportable tropes. The desert as empty and vacant, open to Western delineation and penetration; the desert as a place of unchanging landscape and free, primitive cultures – all these familiar tropes have over the centuries offered a gratifying other, or imaginative alternative to the claustrophobic, urban complexities of life back home. As shown throughout this study, they have also contributed to a presumed general engagement with the East conceptualised in Said's *Orientalism*. As Said famously showed, the impact of both manifest and latent Orientalism has resulted in material consequences, encouraging (if not facilitating) exploration and resource exploitation and resulting in tangible benefits for Western nations. From the perspective of postcolonial agency, then, desert literature that continues to resurrect latent Orientalism appears dispiritingly retrogressive and contributes to the notion of barren legacy.

But if the recycling of outmoded tropes continues in *some* of today's desert literature, it is not ubiquitous in *all* such travel texts, at least not all of the time. Indeed, as this study has endeavoured to show, desert writing is no more of a homogenous project than any other that contributes to the general legacy of Orientalist texts. Nor is it a dying project and the usefulness of the study may be considered not just in the way it has found desert literature to be continuing 'in rude health',[82] but also in finding prognoses within that literature for self-rejuvenation. Encouraged by the work of postcolonial critics, an attempt has been made herein to look beyond the stereotypes and, through the lens of postcolonialism, feminism and ecocriticism, to investigate moments of what Fred

[82] Anshuman A. Mondal reviewing Jenni Ramone, ed., *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), back cover.

Dallmayr calls 'post-Orientalism', or attempts to 'rupture or transgress the traditional Orientalist paradigm'.[83] In chapter one's emphasis on presentations of self, for example, the discussion considered how, in evidencing an awareness of the complexities of representing 'Arab' and 'desert' in a postcolonial, postmodern and increasingly globalised context, footstep travellers are able to arrive at more holistic and inclusive modes of representation. Similarly chapter two's exploration of the Other through Eurocentric notions of nostalgia (particularly in reference to writing about the Bedu and in relation to the urban experience), concluded that a backward glance is not necessarily the same as a negative gaze: in recognising the educative potential invested in traditional ways of being while also showing how history is embraced by the modern lived experience in Arabian countries, desert writing can help to reveal rather than obfuscate today's Arab modernities. The way in which the past impinges on the present and inversely the present mediates perspectives on the past has been shown by this study to be an inherent feature of desert literature in as much as it is expressed in the dominant discourse. For reasons examined herein, this discourse has tended to be white and male. By looking, in chapter three, at how the Arabian desert is not just written about by Western women but also how it is gendered by Western men, the study has shown that opportunities are being taken to represent the marginalised in a more convincing manner. That discussion was developed, in chapter four's focus on nature rather than the human, by showing how, in moments when scientists express wonderment in the desert landscape, a more equitable balance between subject and object is restored.

As shown throughout this thesis, the socio-historical context is continually referenced in Arabian desert writing and intertextuality is a recurring feature of the genre. If, as Heather Henderson writes, travel literature is 'so highly intertextual that at times texts are actually substituted for experience itself', this is particularly the case with desert writing and the result of this is an archive of work that reveals as much about the country left behind as the region of scrutiny.[84] It is this archive of material that continues to provoke visits to the Arabian desert, even as prospective authors suspect they are too late to experience anything 'authentic'. The subtitle of this thesis (*The Arabian Desert as Trope in English Travel Writing, Post-Thesiger*) suggests the way in which primarily

[83] Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays in Cross-Cultural Encounter* (New York: State University Press, 1996), p.115.

[84] Heather Henderson, 'The Travel Writer and the Text: My Giant Goes with Me Wherever I Go', in *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp.230-248 (p.246).

Western preoccupations have always been projected onto the Arabian desert – part of the metaphysical blank sheet that Mark Cocker recognises in the term 'abroad' – that shifts as decisively over time as the region under scrutiny and the modes of travel available to explore it.[85] Far from a 'barren legacy', therefore, the Arabian desert continues, as has been shown in this concluding chapter, to be a zone of imaginative relevance to Western quest, albeit reconstructed to reflect today's cultural and environmental concerns. It acts, in other words, as a microcosmic projection of the broader discourses taking place 'at home'.

In summary, then, this thesis has shown how the imaginative geography of the region continues within desert literature to be charted along familiar axes but tends towards new and more promising destinations. But this is no cause for complacency. Looming over the entire discussion has been the spectre of globalisation and a general anxiety about what this signifies in the modern quest. Benita Parry similarly reminds us that imperialism has 'survived its formal ending', and continues to some extent under the new guise of globalisation.[86] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri see globalisation as a new empire that sets up 'its own relationships of power based on exploitation that are in many respects more brutal than those it destroyed'.[87] While an era of postcolonialism has helped not just identify but also mitigate against irresponsible othering, there is, as Jenni Ramone reminds us, still more to be done,[88] and it is important to continue to provide, in the words of Graham Huggan, 'more socially and ecologically responsible attitudes towards environment and place'.[89] Some critics argue that postcolonialism may be less potent as a critique of the global present because globalisation exploits the politics of difference (the key tool in challenging old binaries) albeit for a new agenda. This in fact is something that Said himself predicted in *Orientalism* when he wrote: 'One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardised moulds'.[90] In recognising and analysing some of that stereotyping tendency in the works of Arabian modern desert literature,

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85 Mark Cocker, *Loneliness and Time: The Story of British Travel Writing* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p.18.

86 Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.18.

87 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.43.

88 Ramone, *The Bloomsbury Introduction*, p.2.

89 Graham Huggan, *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University press, 2008), p.15.

90 Said, *Orientalism*, p.26.

while also revealing ways in which writers grapple with new tools to contest those tendencies, this thesis has endeavoured to add, albeit modestly, to the 'planes of activities and praxis' that ensure that the gains made by postcolonial, feminist and ecocritical critiques are maintained in an era of post-orientalism, and in the age of the Anthropocene.[91]

[91] Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', in *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference, 1976-84* [1986], ed. by Francis Barker et al (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.210-29 (p.228).

Appendices

This thesis includes references to interview material with some of today's Arabian desert travellers that I have gathered for a separate project intended for publication under the title 'Desert Conversations'. Interviewees for this project include (alphabetically) **Jamie Bowden**, former British Ambassador to Oman who walked in T.E. Lawrence's footsteps; **Sir Simon Bryant**, former Commander of Britain's Royal Air Force; **Mark Evans** OBE, who crossed the Empty Quarter in 2016 in the footsteps of Bertram Thomas; **General Charles Fattorini**, former Head of the British Loan Services in Oman; **Harriet Griffey**, travel writer who proposed a journey in the footsteps of James (now Jan) Morris that has yet to transpire; **Anthony Ham**, writer and contributor to many Middle East titles for Lonely Planet; travel writer **Tim Mackintosh-Smith**, long-term resident in Yemen; **General Rupert Smith**, Commander of the Allied Forces during the first Gulf War; **Tony Wheeler**, co-founder of Lonely Planet Publications; geographer **Nigel Winser**, former RGS Deputy Director and Executive Director (Earthwatch Europe); the broadcaster **Levison Wood** who walked around Arabia in 2017, and **Mohamed Al-Zadjali**, who traced the journey of Bertram Thomas's Omani guide, Sheikh Saleh Bin Kalut Al-Rashidi Al-Kathiri, in an Empty Quarter expedition in 2016. Five of these interviews are reproduced here with the interviewee's kind permission.

Appendix A: Author's Interview with Jamie Bowden, 18 March 2014

I interviewed Jamie Bowden in Muscat, while he was Her Majesty's Ambassador to Oman, to enquire about his motivations for undertaking a desert journey in the footsteps of T.E. Lawrence in the 1980s in the company of three fellow British soldiers and three Bedouin of the Howeitat tribe in Jordan. References to Blackmore in the transcript of the interview below are to the leader of the expedition, Charles Blackmore, who wrote an account of the journey entitled: *In the Footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia*,[1] discussed at length in this study.

1. Motivation for the Trip

JO: What were your personal motivations for undertaking the journey in Lawrence's footsteps?[2]

JB: My primary motive was the excitement of the trip but I was also bitten by the Middle East bug after reading *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which I roared through. I also spent time in the Sinai in Egypt, so that was a contributory factor as well.[3]

2. Looking for the Past or Interested in the Present

JO: Charles Blackmore writes that the journey for him started out by trying to follow in Lawrence's footsteps as the title of his book suggests, but quickly realises the value of the journey is in the present, rather than the past (p.7). To what extent was this true for you?

JB: For me, I was always more interested in the present. I read three or four books on Lawrence before leaving and I enjoyed sitting down each evening of the journey to read *Seven Pillars*. But my primary interest remained the Bedu with whom we travelled and whom we encountered en route.

3. Contrast between Stereotypical Expectations and the Reality on the Ground

JO: Blackmore writes of the disjunction between the stereotypical expectation of the desert and the reality of the experience once the journey was underway: 'The meeting place is not a large Bedouin tent, piled deep with silks and rugs, brass coffee pots over the centre hearth, with the faces of desert warriors lit by the dancing firelight. Instead it is a schoolroom with wooden chairs on a cement floor, dirty walls with metal framed windows and military school teachers in uniform' (p.78). What were your expectations of the desert and its inhabitants before leaving and how were those expectations confounded by the experience?

JB: I had already spent a bit of time in the desert in Sinai in the military and therefore I already had experience from which to oppose received stereotypes of both the desert and of Middle Eastern culture. Before going out to Egypt, I read up on the history of the Middle East in the library of the barracks and I was surprised at how closely bound the history of Europe was with the Middle East (beyond the Crusades) and how intertwined their relationship remains. I was still surprised by the cold in the desert, though, and surprised too to be quoted English literature from one of the Jordanian teachers we met along the route!

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1 Charles Blackmore, *In the Footsteps of Lawrence Arabia* (London: Harrap Limited, 1986).
2 Jenny Owen ('JO' hereafter).
3 Jamie Bowden ('JB' hereafter).

4. Pleasure in Hardship of the Desert

JO: It has been observed by one critic, Kathryn Tidrick, that there is an element of empathy between the public school experience and the vaguely masochistic relish of hardship in the desert,[4] and Blackmore suggests this is true: 'There is no escape from these exposures [breathless air and intense sun] ... It is a degree of hardship in which each of us finds enjoyment, in different ways' (p.73). Does he speak for you as well in defining the pleasure of hardship and if so, do you view that as part of your culture or is it universal?

JB: I did go to Eton but this was not what I would call a hardship – on the contrary, it was a comfortable experience; I had my own room from the age of thirteen; there wasn't a lot of pressure and in fact students were left to their own devices to learn or not as we wished. As I remember, the journey itself wasn't that difficult either, especially in comparison with military marches and other travels I've done. The main challenge was the tedium and dullness of endless gravel plains – and feeling cold, the frugal diet – and being perpetually hungry. I fantasised about a hot bath and Mars bars and about being plucked out of the desert by military necessity – but then I would have felt disappointed not to have completed the journey.

5. Western Indulgence and Bedu Necessity

JO: Blackmore is surprised by the lack of fitness of the camels and the fact that the Bedu didn't share the same sense of motivation in the venture (p.7). Was that your memory of the experience too and if so, what do you think the Bedu made of the journey?

JB: Money was the Bedouin's primary motivation. Abullah, the youngster who dropped out of the journey, didn't like the nomadic life but for the older Bedu the journey awakened memories of their younger lives, of going back to their roots. I don't think there could have been any doubt about the lack of common motivation: it was clear that money was the Bedu's primary concern from the outset. In my opinion, the Bedu are hard wired not to waste energy and they joked with us about the purpose of the whole venture and the unnecessary waste of effort it represented.

6. Interaction with the Bedu

JO: For many explorers, travelling with the Bedu has proved a mixed blessing. Blackmore writes, for example, that 'to date the problem – for me at least – has not been the physical exertion of living in the desert so much as the mental strain of coping with the Bedouin. I remember that this was one of Wilfred Thesiger's observations in *Arabian Sands*' (p.82). What did you learn of the Bedu and from the Bedu, or did they remain inscrutable?

JB: For as long as we were in Howeitat country, Mohammed knew every stone but he was out of his comfort zone when we moved into the next tribal area and became more dependent on Charles's [Blackmore] leadership. I remember a night drive to Wadi Rum some years later; we discovered that our chief guide, Mohammed, had been killed in a traffic accident and his eldest son, who was still a teenager, had assumed the role of head of family. He drove in full beam in a two-wheel drive in a straight line across the desert exactly to where his mother's tent was located, as

[4] Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* [1990] (London: Tauris Parke, 2010).

if he had an inherited or natural navigation instinct – there's no other way to explain the extraordinary precision in a blind drive.

We bonded with the Bedouin four to five days into the journey and formed a close friendship; we got to know the individuals very well in a relaxed relationship and had lovely chats at night. This is how we formed a reasonable idea of their values – and the centrality of camels to their lives. They were also extremely open and basic in their views about sex, which was expressed more in the form of physical need than romantic intimacy. Money was also very important to them; they would con their neighbour if they had the chance! The desire for money was more about the sustaining of patronage and the maintaining of status within their community, though, rather than the material items it potentially represented.

7. Desert Isolation

JO: I gather at one point you bought the company Mars bars! Yet in the text, Blackmore writes: 'Despite the kindness of people, we treasure our insular, isolated life in the desert. Frequent contacts threaten to erode it to the point where James even objects if an old vehicle track is seen in the sand. Again I know we must be realistic and accept it. But I am trying to find something in this desert ... only I am not sure what it is' (p.89). What were you trying to find in the desert? What did the desert represent for you? Did it leave an indelible trace on the soul or, as Thesiger famously wrote in his preface, 'no man can live this life and emerge unchanged'?[5]

JB: I can't say the desert journey changed me. It was journey that was very different from that of Thesiger – his was much harder and undertaken as a lone individual in the company of Southern Bedouin – a very different experience to travelling with the Northern Arabian Bedouin who were quite like us. They had alternative lifestyles but they chose to take the desert life and were very proud to be Bedouin. They were quite unlike the Southern Arabian tribes who live a very alien, nomadic existence. The journey did allow for a huge amount of thinking because the marching and camel-leading isn't conducive to conversation. But the thinking wasn't necessarily of a life-changing nature – more of fantasy and escapism from the travail of the journey. A journey through Central America with its evident poverty and complex cityscapes is much more instructive and life-changing.

8. On Reflection

JO: Thesiger wrote: 'If anyone goes there now looking for the life I led they will not find it' and Blackmore similarly laments the encroachment of modernity on the desert when he writes: 'what of the Toyota pick-ups parked beside the camels and goats behind the tents? Should I turn a blind eye to them in order to maintain the impressions I formed in my mind during the planning of the expedition, impressions of a desert unchanged by encroaching technology' (p.20)? Was Thesiger right and if so, how did this make you feel?

JB: We were lucky. We caught the tail end of the traditional Bedouin lifestyle – a migratory lifestyle. Half the Howeitat were still living in tents and were identifiably Bedouin.

JO: Lucky in what way?

[5] Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* [1959] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), Prologue, p.15.

JB: The more other it is, the more fascinating; in fact, it was encountering the traditional communities that offered that contrast and made the journey so special.

9. Going Native

JO: Did you feel with Blackmore that by the end of the journey: 'Our habits and actions are akin to the Bedouin's and we have become skilled riders of camels. Our integration is total and our wish now is to ride for Saudi Arabia' (p.151), or were you pleased the journey was concluded and it was time to rejoin your own world?

JB: We all felt torn at the end of the journey – the weather was a delight after the cold of the previous months – but at the same time we were all tremendously keen to get to Aqaba –especially to go swimming and soak in a hot bath! Nonetheless, we dreaded leaving Mohammed and Hamed.

10. In the Footsteps of…

JO: Blackmore writes: 'My thoughts are of the 700 miles we have ridden in the steps of Lawrence of Arabia, and the reward of an adventure shared with the Bedouin, the profits of their company, the sharing of a simple and traditional life. These are the investments of memory for the future. It is impossible not to be deeply moved. I wonder sadly how much longer the Bedu will continue to survive as we have known them' (p.157). After the trip, did you feel you had learnt more about Lawrence, the Bedu, your companions or yourself?

JB: I already knew Charles well and we all learnt a lot about each other; I didn't learn much about myself because I was used to constant changes in the military. I did learn a little about Lawrence, though. But to answer your question, I probably learnt most about the Bedu.

11. On Lawrence

JO: In a letter sometime after the writing *of Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (the first edition of which he allegedly lost on a train to Reading) when contested about the truth of the journey, Lawrence wrote that 'history isn't made up of the truth anyhow, so why worry'.[6] Did Lawrence make better sense to you after the journey and do you agree with him that the truth in a travel account is insignificant? Expressing the importance of truth in a travel account, Blackmore raised the suspicion that Thesiger lied about the reasons he was excluded from Nizwa (on the grounds that he was Christian) and that this is potentially damaging and 'unfairly critical of a society'.

JB: I feel it is important to be honest about what you see. I think that Charles painted a very fair picture of Mohammed and Hamad.

12. And Finally…

JO: Do you feel Blackmore did justice to your shared journey?

JB: Charles was an excellent leader.

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[6] T.E. Lawrence quoted in A.W. Lawrence ed., *T.E. Lawrence by his Friends* [1937] (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p.175.

Appendix B: Author's Interview with Mark Evans, 19 March 2016

I first interviewed Mark Evans OBE, the founder and director of Outward Bound in Oman and awardee of the coveted RGS Geographical Award for encouraging young people to explore the Middle East, in October 2014, a year before his 1300km journey across the Empty Quarter from Salalah to Doha in the footsteps of Bertram Thomas. The permanent team of two Omanis (Mohamed Al-Zadjali, whom I also interviewed, and Amur Al-Wahaibi) and Mark Evans left the capital of Dhofar on 12th December 2015 in a journey marking the forty-fifth anniversary of the reign of Sultan Qaboos. They reached the capital of Qatar on 27th January, 2016. I interviewed Evans again after the journey to ascertain to what extent the reality of the journey matched up to the expectations recorded in a pre-trip interview I conducted with him during the planning stage. The post-journey interview appears below.

1. Primitivism

JO: 'Physical harshness, alien landscapes, dissolved identities', writes Peter Whitfield, 'these things add up to what we might think of as a new primitivism in travel writing, paralleling the psychological void that lurks below the surface … the sense of flight from the conventional canons of western art and thought'.[7] It's possible to set your journey in the context of a new primitivism – a desire to escape to wild places. When I asked you what were your personal motivations for undertaking the journey in Thomas's footsteps and how you saw your own endeavour in relation to your predecessors, you mentioned 'having numerous motivations' one strand of which is wilderness: 'I have a fantastic curiosity to see what's round the next corner; [in the wilderness] there are no Google maps'. After you left Shisr and entered the sands, did you find the wilderness you were looking for or has its mapping and charting and your own social media connectedness eroded the sense of remoteness?

ME: Inevitably the wilderness has been eroded by two things. The connectivity we had, albeit limited to an hour a day, affected the feeling or remoteness – satellite phone and laptop in the Arctic didn't impinge because the coms was one-way. In the expedition, it was jolly hard work communicating as this was one key aim of the journey. Physically we were cut off but mentally we weren't. That said, it's still an extraordinary wilderness out there – no light pollution, no planes, stars down to the horizon. I was not so moved this time, though, the inner journey was not so profound as it would have been for a new comer.

The other impact eroding the wilderness is the human footprint – there are tracks made by two groups, the Empty Quarter border control (Harras Al Adoud) and those made by oil and gas exploration, seismic testing and flares. We were totally self-contained, though, and didn't even need water from wells, making the Empty Quarter just that.[8]

2. Highlighting Thomas

JO: In your blog, you wrote of using Thomas's account of his own crossing as solace and encouragement to keep going. Indeed, a key motivation for your trip was a desire to throw a spot light on a somewhat forgotten hero whose endeavour you

[7] Peter Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2011), p.251.
[8] Mark Evans ('ME' hereafter).

greatly admired and you generously acknowledged that his undertaking was perhaps the harder as he braved the unknown. On Day 35, for example, you write:

> What quickly becomes evident is that despite the difficulties we have faced, their journey in 1930/31 was simply awe inspiring in terms of the constant uncertainty, hunger, thirst and threat to life they faced, yet despite all of those things, Thomas retained a meticulously detailed and enquiring eye for science and discovery; without doubt we are truly humbled by what those remarkable people achieved.

It seems clear that your respect for the former explorer and his Bedu companions grew with the journey but to what extent did you question what either he or you were undertaking the journey for – or is it a mountain thing, you crossed the desert because it was there.

ME: I did the journey primarily because I enjoy doing things like that. There's nothing burning that comes next. I realised after the journey just how much my mind was preoccupied in the preparation of the journey over the past few months, years. Now I feel blissfully at peace. The fact that the same journey hadn't been done for the 85 years is significant for me: almost 12 have stood on the moon, 5000 on top of Everest, but only two have walked from Salalah to Doha. The journey gave the opportunity to showcase the desert. Also, I'm still rereading Thomas' book. I am so much in awe of his mental tenacity – failure for him was a constant issue. He was incredibly talented and fortunate. At no point did I think we wouldn't make it. For us, there was no race. There was a problem with deadlines – we were effectively running a business in the desert, meeting the obligations of our sponsors. Thomas, on the other hand, was self-funded.

3. Social Dimension

JO: One primary motivation for your journey was to draw attention to the objectives of Outward Bound (OB): as you said, 'The journey in Thomas's footsteps is a great opportunity to do something for society and to make Omanis proud of what they achieve today and respectful of the capabilities of their forefathers.' Watching Mohamed, Amur and you at Shisr in the heart of a group of Omani dignitaries and well-wishers, it seemed as if this aspect of the journey was achieved even from an early point in the journey. Is this your perception too having spent 49 days in the company of your two Omani companions?

ME: Yes, this aspect has been achieved but what happens after is what counts. We were met by over 1000 people during the journey – all unplanned. I was always brought to the front and was seated next to the chief guest – I tried to bring Mohamed up with me but this was difficult as I was seen as the leader. One hundred and sixty-eight (168) million people followed this journey! This was a truly global audience, thanks to the BBC, and it raised awareness of Oman outside the country, but oddly not inside. The lecture tour will do that, as it tours around Oman. The tour will focus on what lessons there are to be learnt about overcoming challenges through hard work and endeavour. My focus is now on how to gain international recognition, a gong, for the two Omanis on the journey.

4. Companions

JO: Commenting on Amur's motivation for the trip before leaving you mentioned that he 'shares Mohamed's sense of national and personal pride in his heritage but there's a commercial side to the journey for him as he will be paid for his services and this is partly the motivation for his participation'. As the trip unfolded and you became better acquainted with your fellow travellers, to what extent do you feel that they shifted in their perspective towards the journey – for example, did the nightly readings of Thomas make them feel more engaged with the journey for its own sake?

ME: Everyone became more engaged with Thomas as the journey went on as he was a constant source of discussion. We read extracts in the book that matched our experience, and looked for the wells he mentioned. We tried to ignore Thesiger but that's difficult! Of the 1000 people we met, several people claimed to remember Thesiger and some few claimed their fathers had met Thomas too. Our route was determined by Thomas and we referred to his work as encouragement.

5. Any Surprises?

JO: 'The Empty Quarter', you predicted before the trip, 'is emptier now than ever before because the Bedu have migrated towards the edge of the desert to make the most of the opportunities there.' As a seasoned wilderness explorer, you were no stranger to the desert before you left and were not expecting to be surprised by it; you were expecting, however, to be surprised by 'people and Bertram Thomas himself'. You didn't take goat skins but you did take camels which challenged you as anticipated by their lack of endurance. Was there anything else 'out there' that came as a surprise – any modern impingements, any surprise encounters, or were you right, the Empty Quarter really is empty?

ME: The Empty Quarter really is empty! I didn't appreciate at the outset just how rich Oman is – the fourteen days we spent in Oman was full of abundant wild life – we saw evidence of hyena, rock art 5000 years old, archaeological remains, herds of gazelle, dozens strong – they have all disappeared from Saudi. There is very littler there now. The terrain change is partly the reason but mostly the wildlife is all hunted out in Saudi while it is still strictly controlled in Oman.

6. Physical Hardship

JO: You have always stated how important it is to live within the environment and be respectful of the exacting harshness of the climate: as you stated, 'there are no old bold explorers'. From your blogs, it appears you made light weather of the physical hardships involved but about two thirds of the way through, after a very hot day and persistent sand storms, you gave a brief inkling that the experience may have been far tougher than you were letting on. You perhaps didn't want to show how much pain was involved, or was it an easier physical endeavour than you anticipated? Sorry to ask a difficult question but in your answer, are you conscious of any literary need to project it as one or the other?

ME: Tribalism is still very strong in Oman; gatherings of over 150 people were waiting for us in Salalah, wanting to know why we hadn't involved them in the journey when their predecessors had been part of the original trip. We were travelling through Al Khathiri country but Mohamed, who translated at each gathering, was keen to point out that it's all one Oman now. This is Sultan Qaboos' heritage. It

took ministers by surprise in Muscat to learn how strong this sense of tribalism still is in Dhofar. We encountered so many guns among the tribes, from the latest M16s to antique pieces. Guns remain a great source of tribal pride.

7. Commercialisation and the Journey

JO: Some beautiful images were captured of your journey by John Smith and Sim Davies, the photographers who comprised your support team; these were sent via almost nightly blogs to those of us eager to have news of you. On arrival in Doha you were met by the world media. You were worried before you left about the balance between the journey for its own sake, and the journey as a means to an end – a conflict that characterises Robyn Davidson's Tracks. To what extent did all the modern paraphernalia, and the commercial needs of your sponsors, bring the stress of deadline, and indeed modern life, into the privacy of a journey that you stated you didn't want to rush? In other words, your words, 'did the tail wag the dog' or was there plenty of space for Koviashuvik moments?

ME: I keep saying to the others, don't underplay the mental and physical challenge of the journey. When it got tough, I would say to myself: 'You chose to be here.' I would think of it like a marathon. The first five miles you don't know you're walking, then you get in your stride. Only once did we have to stop because we were very tired. I got spasms in my back because of having to drag the camels but we still did 35km that day. We all lost about seven to eight kilos and got hungrier and hungrier. You burn up a lot of calories. Our Everest was the big dunes but we were super fit by then. We slowly extended the mileage every day. It wasn't hard, but it wasn't easy either. Keeping the right mindset is the tough one. I've done harder things. But it was hard getting up at 5.30 am every day and entertaining visitors and writing blogs – that was really hard. It was a bit like doing a marathon a day, every day for 49 days.

8. Inner Journey

JO: The blogs you wrote each night were characteristically modest about your own accomplishment and generous in highlighting the strengths, kindnesses and achievements of others but we didn't learn too much about the inner journey except perhaps on Day 35, 16th January 2016, when you reflected on the psychological strains of the journey and wrote: 'Questions start to niggle at the back of your mind; 'will we make it? Will the camels cope?', and on the worst day of all, when temperatures were at their highest, the sand was soft and steep and the camels had sunk to their knees, bellowing in protest, 'why do I choose to do these ridiculous things when I could be at home doing a 'normal' job'.' Did you find answers to your own questions?

ME: There were still plenty of Koviashuvik moments but that is because we controlled the intrusions. Communication with the outside world is part of a modern expedition. The contribution to science of a modern expedition is minimal these days but there are opportunities instead to communicate values – this is what counts. I could have had unlimited airspace if I wanted but I suck to the routine and took only the hour for communications. It was an intrusion but it had to be done. I couldn't sit around the fire in the evening because I was working while the others were on coffee and dates – that was hard, missing the part I most looked forward to.

Through experience I had the ability to answer my own questions. I never thought I wouldn't make it. I thought we can't fail – the camels may have to be abandoned but I had zero tolerance towards negative thinking. I did feel a sense of responsibility towards the camels – we moved one out early on as it was misbehaving. You have to be almost militaristic in your response to problems, to find solutions to problems en route. As the leader, I was aware that this was the hardest thing the others have ever had to do in their lives and we formed a mantra: 'Do nothing, go nowhere'. We had to keep on going, keep chipping away at it. I'd dangle the carrot of the flat plains (the 'Northward Dash') to get us through the worst parts. I broke it up into smaller legs, the plains, the Qatar border, the last stretch into Doha.

9. Writing the Book

JO: In rereading Fiennes after meeting up in Shisr, I was struck by this passage in which he reflects on the challenge of writing a narrative on a landscape (in his case the Antarctic) devoid of physical features and without human or much animal life to describe:

> The only interesting matter would be the internal relationships between the individuals struggling to survive against such a grey backdrop. If by bad luck, all the people involved liked one another and there were no *en route* dramatics, the resulting 'expedition book' would be virtually unwritable, and certainly unreadable'.[9]

Given your harmonious team and the only occasional rabbit spotted on your journey, what challenges does writing your forthcoming book represent?

ME: Finding time! Prince Charles is opening the book launch in November. I agree with Fiennes; and reflect on Thesiger who had a fascination with 'people not place'. Skimmed over in the accounts of both Thesiger and Thomas is the drudgery of the daily journey – the tedium of it. People rather than place – but there's always something to comment on. There was bad news from home, this affected the mindset. This is something new with technology – you are no longer insulated from the world, from news from home.

The journey, the website will disappear but the book endures. The book provides the only evidence of Thomas's journey except that he was captured in memories of very old men, and in some photos, but ultimately it is the book that endures. The book is the lasting contribution to Bertram Thomas's image – in Arabic translation it reaches out. My book will provide a full stop on the journey's objective to bring a spotlight on Oman.

10. Travel Versus Tourism

JO: Is it possible that the journey you have just undertaken could become a tourist route and if so, is this to be lamented?

ME: There's a reason why this journey hasn't been done for 85 years! It's only been possible because of being able to bring four very powerful people into alignment. Several have wanted to do this journey but they couldn't because they couldn't get

[9] Ranulph Fiennes, *Atlantis of the Sands: The Search for the Lost City of Ubar* [1992] (London: Signet, 1993), p.91.

that permission. We still didn't have permission in writing to cross the Saudi border when we left but I the alignment of the four powerful figures was there. Tourists will never do this route. I remember my tent being unzipped by tourists in Svalbard in Northern Norway by Lycra-wearing tourists. Attenborough said that people are much more likely to feel passionate about something they've experienced so there are benefits to be had, then, in tourists travelling this route but the numbers, if it ever happens which seems unlikely, will be very, very small.

11. Value of the Journey

JO: Before leaving you stated of the journey's value that 'Twenty-five percent is about learning lessons from the past, fifty percent of the journey is about the present but twenty-five per cent of our journey is also about creating opportunities for the future.' What opportunities are there to use the journey to reconnect young people with their heritage, as stated, or in hindsight was the essential purpose of the journey more about nostalgia for the past and a desire to leave something for posterity in terms of your own physical endeavour and accomplishment?

ME: It was an incredibly rich experience, culturally, emotionally, physically. There's tremendous pride in attracting such a large amount of interest – over 1000 people coming to meet us shows strong interest in what we were doing. Seeing three generations of one family is proof of the power of the journey to reconnect, to stop and think, especially for Mohamed. That journey will affect his and Amur's lives hugely in terms of self-confidence and self-belief.

12. Legacy

JO: In the post you wrote on the last day in Doha you said it was odd being in a bed, and hard to sleep. For it all its challenges and hardships, would you do this journey again and if not, why not?

ME: No – there's so much else I want to do. The physical journey is over but the whole project rolls on for another 18 months. I want to reflect and prioritise. Politically, Oman is a wonderful country – I want to formalise the University of the Desert concept and connect it to Oman's foreign policy as a way to promote Sultan Qaboos' nomination for a Nobel peace prize for his role in lots of projects. I'm really happy I've done this journey after many, many years of wanting to, and I feel at peace.

Appendix C: Author's Interview with Nigel Winser, 2 June 2016

I interviewed Nigel Winser, geographer, zoologist, former Expedition Officer of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) of the United Kingdom (until 1988), former Deputy Director of RGS and Executive Director (Earthwatch Europe), on 2nd June 2016 on one of his frequent visits to Muscat. During the interview, I was keen to ask him to reflect on the outcomes of the Wahiba Sands project of the 1980s which still represents one of the most complete surveys of any desert in the world.

1. Geography: A Science or an Art?

JO: To what extent do you feel that 'coming to terms with' the desert, or indeed any wilderness for that matter, means in some ways losing part of its magic?

NW: Nature is so complex, you'll never understand it completely. There are three things I believe help in the process of a deeper understanding of the wilds: be as close as possible to nature, for as long as possible and from the earliest age. I have been fortunate in this regard, as I was brought up in East Africa – a large landscape world – and then conducted my first expedition as an undergraduate in a crossing of the Sahara. I have always been drawn to wild places but I fear that modern life is robbing these places of their diversity and this is a source of deep concern.[10] It was a privilege to work and explore the Sands and the Wahiba experience fixed my deep passion for the desert and a desire to understand it in its entirety. The Sands project focused on a uniquely compact sand sea, one of the very few sand seas in the world and offered the chance to gain the views of an entire team of scientists from a wide range of disciplines. But that said, you can never know the Sands completely because they are always changing due to climate, weather, economics, oil wealth and now climate change. During the project I felt I had a responsibility to catch the honesty of the science and hoped the Sands would be seen for what they were – as a pristine environment that had never been previously been under scientific scrutiny. The Wahiba Project formed part of my journey as a scientist, and manager of science scrutiny, and it has been a privilege to do this at the RGS for thirty years even though science is not given the resources to preserve natural habitats as required.

2. Wilderness as Escape

JO: Were you solely motivated to mount an expedition in the region for scientific purposes or was there also an element of escape into wild places? In the Sea of Sands and Mists, you write that towards the end of that particular project, and the dismantlement of Taylorbase,[11] your 'maps and satellite photographs on the wall bore many fingermarks and were now covered in felt-tip lines to represent our travels' (p.137). Did the mapping and charting erode the ability of the Wahiba to satisfy Whitfield's 'psychological void'?

NW: I've never wanted to escape! For me, the driver for exploration is the scientist wanting to understand. It is like being a musician – wanting to hear the whole symphony, not just phrases of it. I was drawn to a career as a field scientist because I wanted to collect geographical knowledge and I enjoy the *wusta* of working with other kindred spirits. I get great enjoyment in the sharing of surprises and I believe

[10] Nigel Winser ('NW' hereafter).
[11] This was the hub of the Wahiba Project – referred to by Winser as their 'field university'.

in what Robin Hodgkin describes as the wilds only coming to life if they are shared.[12] The process of sharing is an important part of science, through professional photography and the published results of reports. Is there an element of escapism in my career? I don't know the true answer – yet! I suppose there's an element of escape in that I'm still looking for my roots in East Africa.

3. The Competitive Edge

JO: Are you conscious of the pioneering impulse of your expeditions and to what extent do literary forebears prompt the next step? In the case of this expedition, for example, did meeting with Thesiger set up a competitive edge to be the first in these particular Sands or was your prime motivation good, old-fashioned curiosity?

NW: The five-day trip I made into the Sands was a special experience and yes, there was definitely a competitive edge to describe the Sands in its entirety. We wanted to report in science as much geographical information that we could in six months and predict outcomes for the future. All credit to Roderic Dutton, the Scientific Coordinator for his choice of teams and for ensuring that the data was collected with and for our Omani hosts. Within that, using new technologies, new science, everyday having discussions among the forty scientists – the concept of a field base, or 'science hotel', was at that time was very unusual. We saw it as a distinct body – our Mars! When we came back with new species, this felt pioneering. If we had been a decade earlier, the Sands would have been even more pristine; as it was, we witnessed modernity creeping in, quite literally, if you consider the camels in the back of pickup trucks.

It was important to be contributing to the tradition of desert travel at that time. And of course I worked for the RGS which wanted to contribute to arid area research. I was asked to lead the expedition because of my passion for arid areas, my current knowledge of the Middle East, my experience in the Sahara and of course my interaction with Thesiger. I knew him and met him many times and was hugely influenced by him. His fear was for the loss of the traditions that have shaped the behaviour of the Bedu and their culture and their respect for God's land. I look at Bedu hospitality and see a connection with their past but much of their nomadic way of life has now gone.

Where did my passion for arid lands come from? This was without doubt due to my upbringing in Northern Kenya and my undergraduate research where I led a party of ten people across the Sahara to survey the flora and fauna of the desert. I've always felt very at home in the desert.

4. Women and the Wild

JO: You similarly describe the desert in terms of the female form – albeit of a more benign nature.[13] Is that how you see the desert and in that context, could science and exploration be a way 'to control it' (p.140), or in some way make it into a male space? Of course then, it may lose some of its attraction?

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[12] Robin Hodgkin in *Playing and Exploring:* 'These [unknown] worlds will only come to life if someone acts on them, plays with and explores them and then shares the resulting surprises.'

[13] 'The next morning the smoothness and the rounded contours are perfect, the prints of all living things elided. The dunes are like the rounded parts of the human body, shoulders, thighs, the ridge of the collar bone, buttocks, curve of the back, the shallow parabola of the stomach. All these parts, welded together in fleshy tones of tan, apricot or white' (p85).

NW: Women were an essential part of the project because they were taken behind the scenes and were vital to the exploration of all areas of the Sands. I think female scientists see things with a different level of emotional intelligence. In forty plus years of working with mixed teams, I've come to realise you need both sides to understand the landscape in its entirety. The landscape has all forms of intensity and season, and encompasses the calm and the tempest but as for whether it has a gender, I have never really thought about it. Do I think of the desert as feminine? I think of them as beautiful – and for me men are never beautiful! Perhaps it's the softness of the dunes, their shapes. There's the soft sand and the hard aeolianite, and a fantastic range of colours, but gender? I've really never thought about it in those terms.

5. Desert but not Deserted

JO: Is it possible that the explorer's wilderness is located in someone else's back garden or does the Wild have to be empty?

NW: The true wilderness is not empty but goes back a very long time. An unchanged community living within wilderness is as important as the landscape itself. Communities that evolve over generations within a wild landscape are coming to a halt because of modernity. True wilderness has guardians who share generations of knowledge but this handing down of knowledge is happening less and less and certainly for the Sands, they are on the cusp of ending as a true wilderness.

6. Nostalgia

JO: What aspects of the nomadic life do you find most worthy of preservation and how do you balance advocating husbandry of the Sands (through selective agriculture and control of livestock) with their right to define their own evolution in the modern world?

NW: The ability to be nomadic and move for rains is remarkable because it is sustainable. The numbers in the Sands were not huge so the Bedu could afford to move to find new grazing. Families were reliant on each other and fostered a close relationship with their camels; they worked together to spread out or come close according to the ability of the landscape to support them. In this way, they made the most of the limited resources. This is in contrast to the coastal Bedu who were settled at a particular fishing community although they too knew how to manage fish stocks. I regret that the traditional knowledge connected with these ways of life is being lost (for instance, we've lost the sense of navigation at night) and I was invited back by His Majesty, the Sultan, to help preserve some of this knowledge. To understand the future, to manage all these complex ecosystems in the future, we have to understand the past. If we leave our heritage behind there is a very real danger that in future the world will be robbed of its diversity – it will become nothing more than a vast shopping mall.

7. Physical Hardship

JO: To what personal gain are you referring and to what extent is pain a necessary part of the wilderness or desert experience?

NW: Personal gain? The opportunity of stepping into the past. I wanted to be a bit of a kindred spirit to Wilfred. I wanted to live the history while being committed to collecting knowledge in order to make a better planet. As for pain, yes, I did want

to experience thirst and to get closer to the Bedu experience. You have to spend 40 days and 40 nights in the wilds to really understand them, unencumbered by modern transport. I haven't really done that and I suppose I am jealous of Wilfred. To do a big journey you have to put a lot of money into it – and I didn't want to be, wasn't able to be, a travel writer.

8. The Quest and its Dangers

JO: Who, in your mind, is a real desert traveller (given that the Bedu as you rightly diagnose travel these days by pickup and were disposed to have a chuckle at your 'European Romantic view of the desert')? What for you did 'doing it properly' mean?

NW: Doing it properly is not possible in the Sands today – too much has changed. Maybe you could be a real traveller among the Tuareg in the Sahara, or with some fishing communities in Asia, or with Innuit hunters in northern Canada. There are still lots of journeys possible where the inhabitants are still masters of the landscape and where you can share the journey on an equal footing.

JO: Later you described feeling the dunes as 'friends' (p.137) and that by the end of the project they 'did not now seem so frightening' (p.137). Did this mean they lost their power for you as a wilderness experience? In other words, is encountering danger a necessary and integral part of the wilderness experience for you?

NW: There isn't a day I haven't thought about the Sands – we made friendship with the landscape and with all friends you respect them, and miss them, and want to go back to see them. The Sands are not a tamed space – nature is very unforgiving. The desert can be angry, as when sand storms come or sudden floods flash through causing destruction.

9. Inner Journey

JO: How did being in the Sands change you? Was there an element of inner journey about this experience or indeed any other subsequent desert experiences?

NW: The inner space has changed throughout my life, influenced by the enormity of this planet, how little we know about it and how fast it is changing. This is what has made me a committed conservationist. It's like music, you can't experience it from afar. I can tell you about a performance at the Royal Opera House in Muscat, but it's not until you enter that magical space that you can sense it, hear it, smell it – it's the same with the desert. You can't experience it through watching a programme on TV. My inner journey, then, has moved from friendship to love and that's why I keep coming back. I suppose it's a case of 'you like what you know' as opposed to 'you know what you like'. I'm not at home in mountains or on the sea. I am at home in the heat – the hotter the better!

10. The Sublime

JO: What is it about the desert that evokes an emotional response – that makes writers out of scientists?

NW: I'm not a travel writer but when you are close to nature you have a spiritual response. The work of Prof Andrew Goudie at Oxford University, a leading authority on deserts, comes to mind and I think also of Bagnold, who commented

on the 'immensity' of the desert.[14] My word for it is 'enormity'. During the Wahiba project, we knew we were only tapping into a small part of the space. We published the findings in the *Journal of Oman Studies* at Sultan Qaboos University, and it was important for us to publish there first, but we also realised how little we knew, especially of the changes that were happening to the Bedu life and how fast those changes were occurring. You can't be a true ambassador for the desert, or any wilderness area, if you've only been there for a month – it takes time to understand it in its entirety. This is why the field centre approach worked so well; it allowed detailed information to be collected as a benchmark for future comparison. The quality of the integrated information we were able to provide has laid down an important benchmark, important in gauging the pace of change.

11. Writing the Book

JO: From a conservation perspective, how did you square the fact that the project inevitably contributed to making the Sands more accessible to casual visitors? Did this dilemma concern you as you wrote your account of the expedition (and as a writer of guidebooks I can relate to this concern)?

NW: Yes, this worried me and now I deeply regret the image of us driving over the sands – now I would ban all off-road driving there; people driving at speed over fox holes, for example – it's obviously not good for the foxes. We had no idea that things would move so fast in people wanting to visit. But where do you draw the line as an explorer? If you don't map information that lasts forever and you don't share that information, you fail in your responsibility to leave a legacy.

12. Travel versus Tourism

JO: One could argue that the awe experienced in wild places is a result of the hardship experienced through exploration and expedition; in contrast it is assumed that tourism, in looking for instant gratification, does not lend itself to travel as epiphany. Would you agree with that distinction?

NW: My views have changed over the years. You can collect data as a tourist that still counts and Evans's work with young people is important in encouraging respect for the desert.[15] People need to be exposed to raw nature, far from the trappings of modern life. Tourists today can become better explorers and explorers can become better at exploiting the role of tourists in collecting data in future.

13. Desert: A Problem Needing a Solution?

JO: Would it be fair to say that this points to a central dilemma in your approach to wilderness? On the one hand, as a scientist, you see the value in reversing the tide of desertification (the subtitle of your book) in a world where arid areas occupy a third of the earth's surface (p.xix).[16] On the other hand, as a writer, you revel in the

[14] See Goudie, Andrew S, *Great Warm Deserts of the World: Landscapes and Evolution* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

[15] The reference is to Mark Evans, founder of Outward Bound in Oman, the first such centre connecting young people with their environment in the Middle East.

[16] See p18, for example, where a reference is made to the United nations Conference on Desertification in Nairobi in 1977 and estimates a decade later suggest that 'some 60,000 square kilometres of productive land are lost to desert each year and there is little hope for the future'.

desert being an 'apparently inhospitable and barren wilderness that exerts a fascination, as it has for generations of first-time visitors to Arabia Felix' (p.5)?

NW: I admit there was a clash of interests between the scientist and the writer in this book. I was only 34 when I was asked to lead this expedition by the RGS and it was my first book. It was not a bestseller because it falls between two stools – although a lot of people to this day write to express their appreciation of the book. And it acts as a benchmark. The editor played a role in the shape of the book too, saying it needed brining to life with some personal account but then suggesting a subtitle I would have preferred to leave out. I must admit I really enjoyed putting some of my personal life into it but to be a travel writer you have to embark on a journey for yourself, not for scientific enquiry. I have huge respect for travel writers and I have been urged to write my biography, reflecting on a lifetime of expeditions.

14. Legacy

JO: Mindful that 'Seeking Solutions' is the subtitle of The Sea of Sands and Mists and also the title of its concluding chapter, do you see the desert as a problem and would you really want to see all the deserts of the world one day turn green?

NW: Desertification was a hot topic in the late 1980s but in fact, this hasn't happened because we have learnt how to control the process. That said, there were three United Nations Conventions arising out of the Rio summit, relating to climate change, biodiversity and desertification, all of which focus on the need to feed the world.[17] The risks of desertification may have been overestimated but the water table has still dropped significantly in places like the Sands and I regret what will happen to the desert ecosystems as a result. It would be a disaster if this results in a decreased biodiversity because the desert to me is not empty, it is an arid area full of life!

[17] See 'The three Rio Conventions – on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Desertification – derive directly from the 1992 Earth Summit' [online], Convention on Biological Diversity, available at: https://www.cbd.int/rio/ [accessed 12 July 2019].

Appendix D: Author's Interview with Levison Wood, 15 October 2017

During a presentation on his Arabian journey in Muscat (15th October 2017), the explorer and broadcaster, Levison Wood, described himself as having the explorers' gene (DRD4-7R) found in 20% of the population. He attributes to this gene his willingness to take risks and embrace change, both of which are the requirements of the kind of extreme travel in which he is involved. Wood's recent journey, walking or travelling through twelve Arabian countries including Syria and the Palestinian Territories. The basic mission of his journey, he says, is to challenge perception about the people he meets – in this case 'Arabs and the Middle East'. I had the opportunity to explore some of the theoretical ideas surrounding Wood's endeavours in an interview with him on 15th October 2017 when he paused in Muscat during his Arabian odyssey. We met in an informal setting and the interview was not recorded verbatim, hence the paraphrased responses (approved by Wood) recorded below.

1. The Competitive Edge

JO: You are currently undertaking an extraordinary journey around the Arabian Peninsula on foot and by other less-than-obvious means. To what extent are you motivated by the pioneering impulse of your travels, complete with the requisite frisson and indeed reality of danger, or is your prime motivation good, old-fashioned curiosity?

LW: Wood says he is inspired by his forebears and he allows himself to inherit their space completely. He has read Burckhardt and Thesiger but his main inspiration in the desert is 'not chasing their ghosts but looking for spiritual purity offered by the unsoiled landscape'. He is drawn, however, not so much by the wilderness per se as by the ancient communities along its fringe and is keen to 'crush the romance' of the 'alien, hostile, barren landscape' and see it in another way as a place not just of dunes but of tracks, roads and cities – a complex space'.[18]

2. Speaking to the Soul

JO: Given that you have made travelling your profession, you have of course encountered many deserts around the world and I'm interested in how you view this form of landscape. Do any particular desert locations come to mind as impressive to you and if so, what makes them memorable? In other words, does the desert landscape speak to your soul and if so how?

LW: Despite Wood's attempts to perceive the desert as a complex space, when asked about his inner journey, he comments that in the desert 'there's nothing out there' so you have to 'conjure up a parallel universe ... .There are few distractions in the desert which forces you to evaluate yourself.' This, he goes on to describe, is common to all journeys: 'All journeys have elements of introspection but there is no escape from yourself in the desert.'

3. Locus of Othering

JO: Given your clear love of wilderness, to what extent does travel, particularly in regions of desert, represent for you an alternative or 'otherness' to the life you lead back home?

[18] Levison Wood ('LW' hereafter).

LW: ‘Of course travelling in the desert is a form of escape – even Thesiger went home. You’re always a foreigner in the desert and a foreigner travelling in the desert is always less authentic.’ Wood chose to undertake this journey over others, as mentioned in the introduction, investing his own money in the project; indeed, he has been trying to accomplish this route since 2003 and felt that of all the journeys he has planned or undertaken, this is the one that spoke to him after his Nile adventure but he couldn’t convince television companies to take it seriously – ‘they weren’t convinced that there was anything to interest an audience in a desert journey.’ For Wood, the desert is exciting because of the thrill of danger. He is also attracted by the people of the region who live a kind of liminal existence: ‘I’m a historian and I want to know about how people interact with the landscape. It’s the fringes of the desert that fascinates me. We have the desert to thank for civilization and it appeals because of its purity, simplicity and freedom.’

4. The Accelerated Sublime

JO: What part did the prospect of encountering danger play in your own desire to undertake the current trip? Was the marketing potential of being among the few to undertake such a journey a further motivation?

LW: Wood was clear about the role of danger in modern expeditions: ‘If there’s no risk, there’s no expedition – without risk, it’s a holiday!’ Risks translate travel into an adventure: ‘People want stories – they have childhood dreams of being on an adventure’. He implied that the desert as landscape provides a shorthand for adventure – the danger of the journey does not have to be explained to an audience because it is inbuilt into the perception of the desert journey. Asked about the mode of his travels, Wood said it is ‘increasingly difficult to walk’ (given roads, traffic, borders, lack of facilities) and as such he is happy to take whatever form of transport the locals take instead of clichéd camel rides. He did not feel, however, that this would compromise or sanitise the extreme nature of his journey – the scope of which he felt would compensate.

Both during the interview and in his public presentation, Wood is at pains to point out that despite his chosen destinations, he is not reckless. He mitigates risk by taking years to plan the routes – in fact it took him two and a half years to plan his Nile journey during which he set out to walk the entire length of the river. ‘Diversity really struck a chord’, he said of his experience and felt that it was the people and friendships he met along the way that inspired him far more than the accomplishing of records or the dangers he faced. That said, his presentation shows him, machete at the hip, ploughing through papyrus and he describes various mishaps (including being driven off a cliff in a taxi) that happened to him along the way – the ‘occupational hazards’, as he calls it, of his profession as explorer. The promotional materials for Wood’s journey capture him staring out across desert wilderness, alone in the landscape. He says it is important to face peril alone sometimes (alone with the cameraman?), to ‘keep the authenticity’ of his venture intact.

5. Travel or Tourism

JO: How do you define the difference between travel and tourism and to what extent you feel that either term is descriptive of your own travelling and travel writing experience?

LW: ‘The lines between traveller and tourist are blurred’, Wood believes, and makes it clear that for him exploration is a profession, a job, and that job requires him to return with stories. He chose Arabia ‘with all its highs and lows’ but he is keen to admit that he is not a war correspondent and can only reflect on his own experiences. Nonetheless, clearly an important part of his desert journey to date has been the portion spent in Syria, and he feels that the opportunity to be embedded with a regiment in Syria in some way distinguishes his journey from mere tourism. This was particularly the case as the unit to which he was seconded was ambushed by ISIS – an event he described as ‘a privilege, to be a part of the mission, to see the regiment at work’.

6. Off the Beaten Track

JO: To what extent do you feel the off-the-beaten-track mantra established as a founding principle of LP is still relevant, in the context of greater global tourism, or has this ceased to offer a persuasive counter-culture? In other words, are we all backpackers now and is this to be regretted?

LW: Wood is an advocate of sustainable tourism and the way in which it brings benefits for local people: ‘It’s selfish to keep places to oneself. Travel encourages people to communicate – when you travel you become an advocate for your own country.’

7. Increase in Tourism

JO: What is your perspective on the increase in tourism – a democratising force for good and something to be celebrated, or, as the quoted passage suggests, something to be lamented – contributory, perhaps, to an unprecedented erosion of difference?[19]

LW: ‘I’ve been a guidebook writer – or at least I’ve contributed to one or two.’ For Wood the pleasure of the journey is in meeting other people, including fellow travellers. ‘Travel shouldn’t be an isolating experience’ he said and guidebooks, he felt, facilitate meaningful interaction.

8. Keeping the Balinese Dancing

JO: In the Arabian Peninsula today there is a tendency to marginalise the Bedu as part of the sideshow of a desert experience. To what extent do you think of such communities as vulnerable, given the greater volumes and access of tourists to wilderness areas, or do you continue to feel that tourism helps to sustain traditional cultures? Are they as able, as Michael Asher, the explorer and biographer of Thesiger contends, of looking after their own evolution as ably as any other?[20]

LW: Wood described wilderness as an ‘essential part of our psyche – we try and conquer the wilderness but nature always wins in the end.’ He visited an abandoned place (town?) in the UAE and found something both terrifying and reassuring about nature reclaiming the land from human interference. At the same time he is more interested in people and his conclusions are mostly about people. He feels that they are all basically the same with the same needs – a kind of homogenisation of the travel principle perhaps.

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[19] Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.184.

[20] Michael Asher, *The Last of the Bedu: In Search of the Myth* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1996).

Appendix E: Author's Interview with Mohamed Al-Zadjali, 26 April 2016

I interviewed Mohamed Al Zadjali, Training Manager at Outward Bound in Oman, after his 1300km journey across the Empty Quarter from Salalah to Doha in the footsteps of Bertram Thomas. He formed one of the permanent team of two Omanis and the expedition leader, Mark Evans, who left the capital of Dhofar on 12 December 2015 in a journey marking the forty-fifth anniversary of the reign of Sultan Qaboos. They reached Doha, the capital of Qatar on 27 January, 2016, a couple of days ahead of the original journey. I was interested to see to what extent Mohamed, as a native Omani but very competent English speaker, who acted as both translator and tribal fixer during the journey, shared some, if any, of the motivations and expectations of the journey as his British counterpart, and to ascertain what the journey meant to him in retrospect.

1. Motivations for the Journey

JO: For British adventurers, the motivation for a journey such as the one you have just completed can be defined in terms of a whole tradition of exploration in the region. That exploration brought news of a different land with an exotic culture and challenges landscapes. Modern British explorers, therefore, are often motivated to undertake similar journeys by tapping into this tradition. They may be searching for something they feel has been lost by urban society; they may be looking to recreate the physical challenge of entering wild places; they may be setting out on an inner quest to find meaning in their lives. The motivations are many and varied. For you, as a native of Oman, what were your motivations for undertaking this journey – was it just part of the job, a natural extension of your work at Outward Bound, or did it represent something more for you?

MZ: The idea for the journey wasn't at all connected with Outward Bound. Mark talked to me about it three years ago in secret and we both approached it as a personal journey requiring leave from work. Always in my life I had wanted to do something bigger than the three-week journeys I had already undertaken. In the previous journeys there were no messages to send but in a long expedition, you learn something about friends and you get to be outside. Also, I love to be a role model for young Omanis – they are good academically but not well prepared for the real world, no basic skills to solve a problem or communicate the rest of their team. For me, the journey was a chance to send a message to students and help them develop.[21]

2. Highlighting Thomas

JO: Your journey was built around an arcane book that is barely read, written by a largely forgotten explorer, across a region which he claimed to be the first to cross. These types of claims by European travellers are thankfully mediated now by the prefix 'Western' in acknowledgement of the fact that local people (in this case the Bedu) will have made similar journeys, albeit undocumented. What did you feel about Bertram Thomas before you left and did those feelings change by the end of the journey? Was he an irrelevance to you or did he come to represent a shared experience? And what about Sheikh Saleh – was he more of a role model for you?

[21] Mohamed Al-Zadjali ('MZ' hereafter).

MZ: I didn't know about Bertram Thomas but I did know about Mubarak Bin London [Thesiger]. I didn't find his book in Oman and then I found only a copy in English. Only at the start of the journey I found a copy in Arabic and read every page in each of the places he refers. I learnt many lessons from him: he spent so much time, effort and money from his own pocket to make his dream happen. I learnt patience from him; he waited patiently for two months to start his journey, not knowing if it would happen – I would have given up waiting after two weeks! I learnt trust – how do you trust people to take you to the middle of a lonely place when you do not know them! BT didn't know the way but he used the resources of Sheikh Saleh to get to his goal. He spoke Arabic, tried to travel barefoot, to be part of the Bedouin. I really admire how he did this – using the skills of others to achieve his own goal. He was also very determined: he knew he might be beaten to his goal to be the first person to cross the Empty Quarter (Philby was trying to do the same), but no matter what he didn't stop.

As for Sheikh Saleh, BT's companion and guide, I really admire him. He has retained the respect of the people in Dhofar today. He was a very diplomatic person – how can you convince all the tribes to let a non-Muslim cross their land at that time? It was a time of brother-kill-brother and it was not an easy job to get everyone to agree. Very few know about Sheikh Saleh today outside Dhofar but if BT was an educator who knew how to use the skills of others to achieve his goals, Sheikh Saleh was a facilitator able to make those goals a reality. Both are role models for me but I always talk about Sheikh Saleh first in a presentation to an Arab audience because he played such a big and important role in the journey's success and he has passed into our local history.[22]

3. Social Dimension

JO: You have expressed on occasions a strong sense of national and personal pride in your heritage. During the journey, you met with lots of people from many different tribes from across the whole of the Peninsula. What did you gain from interaction with these people – were they as you expected, were they living a life you recognised, and did they represent any core values that you can define as particularly Omani or Saudi, Bedu or Arab? Did you get a sense of commonality, of 'Pan-Arab'?

MZ: In the beginning, I had boundaries between me and the people we met and I'm quiet and shy while the Bedu are loud and straight forward. But I couldn't stay at the back for long because I had a role to play as translator and also as part of a new historical event. Most of the people we met in Dhofar knew about the old journey – this was really surprising because I thought only I, from fancy Muscat, would know about the journey, because of education and through reading obscure books. But they had much more information than me! They had passed stories from father to son. Everyone there had Snapchat and Instagram but they were very, very proud to be Bedouin. In Muscat this is not the case – people reject their own heritage. The Bedouin, on the other hand, haven't lost their sense of being Bedouin. I never saw in my life the kind of hospitality we were shown – slaughtering goats and camels that cost OR300 when they earn not very much. This made me realise I know nothing and I want to know more. In Dhofar, when we were there, no matter how busy they were, they dropped everything and called everyone to come out – for

[22] Sheikh Saleh has passed into local parlance: if you speak of someone being like 'Saleh' it suggests that they are attempting an impossible task requiring capabilities beyond that of ordinary people.

me! I enjoyed accompanying them at the beginning and then I started loving them and wanted to spend more and more time with them. Sometimes I was very tired but with 50 people all killing camels there was not going to be time for a break but this was the journey.

It's another world down there. Most of the people in Muscat want to be a minister or to work in a ministry but in the desert it's much more simple. The Bedouin say 'I have my farm and my camels' and they are proud in the work they do – and it makes them money! People think the Bedu do nothing and earn nothing but they are proud of their lives and their camels and they do make money as you can see from their Land Cruisers that they take into the desert.

As for commonality across the whole desert, I was surprised that the people we met knew the old well names and in Oman they recognised these places on either side of the border as if the border had no meaning for them. No matter how much they earn, they share the same sense of hospitality. There are also some tribes, Al Kathiri, Al Rashidi and another tribe I can't recall, who you find in all three countries (Oman, Saudi and Qatar) who refer to each other as 'my cousin' – I felt they are one family despite the border. There are distinctions, though, between the Bedouin life and the city life – this is a big difference.

4. Companions

JO: What did you make of your expedition leader and his motivations for undertaking the journey? Did his reasons for walking across wilderness make sense to you from the moment he suggested the journey or did it take a while to understand what the journey meant for him? What about for Amur? Would you have come to the same conclusions if you had not been part of the Outward Bound movement?

MZ: I work with Mark and he is one of my role models and he plans things really well. I don't think anyone could do this journey except Mark – it took all his time and effort to make this journey happen, and it only worked because of who he is and his connections. I don't think this journey will happen again. When we started the journey, the roles were carefully agreed. I didn't feel that Mark was the leader – he made us all feel part of the team and although he had things to do each evening, he didn't leave the social part of the expedition out. He was really good company.

As for Amur, I was very proud of him. We didn't think about it before the journey, but he had never walked on stone before and he did this in sandals! I really admired him for doing that because it was painful and he wasn't used to it. When he was asked about doing the journey I told him it wasn't to hire him and his camels, it was to include him as a team member and he said 'I can't say 'no' to this journey' and he taught us everything we know about camels. After His Majesty's blessing on the journey, many people said to him 'Why you? You can't do this, you're an old man of 45!' He was determined to prove them wrong. He had a hard time – we all had a hard time – but we didn't want to give up because it would let the others down.

When Mark first told me about the journey I didn't say 'Why?' I said 'Wow!' Mark said he really wanted me to be part of this journey and it was exactly the experience I was looking for. The British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia said it was impossible for us to get permission to cross the border from Oman and many others said the same, but we didn't give up even though we doubted it was possible and 30% thought it would collapse. I know how much went into making this work and you wouldn't imagine how much it took to make the journey happen.

5. Any Surprises?

JO: You are a seasoned traveller in the desert having undertaken many journeys with Outward Bound participants and you train those participants to look at the desert with a more sympathetic eye. To what extent did your perception of the desert change after crossing the Empty Quarter? Is the term 'Empty Quarter or Rub al Khali' one you recognise or does it seem like a space with history and legend, peopled by the Bedu even if they were not much in evidence during the journey? Did the desert render any surprises? Did it produce feelings of awe or did you end the journey feeling you had tamed a wild beast?

MZ: The heart of the desert is emptier than ever – people have left for an easier life. We didn't see a person for thirty days; it's hard to live there now because of climate change, no food for camels and most of the wells are dry, deep or salty. But still, when you're there, you feel it's rich in history and in wild life – you see thousands of tracks even if you don't see the animals: it's both empty and alive. How beautiful it is! How can 360 degrees of sand be both beautiful and empty! I walked and walked one day and then I looked at the map after walking and it seemed as if we had gone nowhere – it never ends, the sand. But it doesn't all look the same: sometimes the dunes are so high the camels were shocked and refused to go down the slopes. The shape and colour of the dunes changes with the wind – it is very beautiful. We had a fire every night as there's lots of wood around. We tried not to use too much, just enough. One day of rain can make the desert come alive for years.

I wasn't happy about one thing though: the oil and gas industry. It's fine, this is where we get money from and 90% of our economy is based on oil but most companies leave their rubbish behind. Why don't they clean up behind them? Flags every five meters for two-hundred kilometres spoil the desert long after they've taken their cable away. The culture is changing though but it is a long way to go to reach education of all Omanis to collect their rubbish. The Bedouin don't leave their rubbish any more: the plastic hurts their camels so they take it with them, but in Saudi they would come to greet us and leave their plastic bottles. We tried to educate them not to leave them but it's hard to explain.

There are not many places now left empty. It is very good for us as humans to have a place we can run away to from the fast life. I want to live a simple life and escape technology for a week. The desert is the only place for quiet time and it's very important to keep it untouched. Some animals have become extinct – there are no animals left in Saudi, they have shot them all. We should make the desert a reserve. I feel sorry for the Saudi young people who aren't going to see these things and proud of Oman that there are still animals like hyena and gazelle that are not shot because the local people want to save them for their children to see.

6. Physical and Psychological Hardship

JO: From Mark's blogs, it appears you made light weather of the physical hardships involved but about two thirds of the way through, after a very hot day and persistent sand storms, he gave a brief inkling that the experience may have been far tougher than described. You are young and at the prime of your physical fitness but the monotony of the journey, the solitude and the sense of obligation to fulfil the mission, did these have a psychological impact on you?

MZ: The journey felt very psychological. I was the youngest but not the strongest. Mark and Amur were fitter than me but I didn't know why – it wasn't about physical

fitness, it was about what was going on in here [touches chest]. Mark really wanted to beat BT! It was in his heart and I could see that determination in his eyes. Amur has eight kids and he wanted to prove to them and to the rest in his region why he was chosen for the journey and not them. Before I went to sleep – everyone slept at seven o'clock but I couldn't sleep until eleven. During that time the thoughts came to my mind all the time – how am I going to go further tomorrow, will it be hotter than today, will I be able to go faster – lots of questions were in my mind and I answered them the way that would make me feel happy and every day I tried to do better. It was a battle every day. Mark and Amur won't tell you this because it is a macho thing but for me it was a battle with my feet hurting every day like walking on nails. The first two weeks were easy with people and cameras and lots going on but it was slow and very painful on the feet. Then there were the dunes and it was really hard. I dreamt of Doha and kept thinking of after the journey, seeing my little son, wondering if he was walking yet or not.

7. Commercialisation and the Journey

JO: Did you welcome the multiple goats, sheep and camels, the huge largesse of those whom you met, the attention of the media, the welcoming parties and the military escort through Saudi or did you feel that was an impingement on the journey? When you were confronted with exhaustion, would you have minded taking the occasional ride in the support truck or would you have felt this was spoiling the endeavour?

MZ: We didn't want to hide the cars.[23] We always joked with the driver about taking a ride with them but I felt that if I rode the car or heard the music on the radio, it would be the end of the journey for me. We started at seven each morning and by 11:30 we had covered 20 kilometres: we are men and nobody showed it but I was *really* tired by that time so I rode a camel for half an hour (that's really painful too by the way and hard to walk afterwards) and then there was lunch for one hour by which time I was really exhausted. But after lunch the others were tired and I was full of energy – I guess I'm not a morning person unlike Mark and Amur. The blogging didn't affect us very much – it was just half an hour each day and our aim was to communicate the journey as widely as possible. We didn't hear news from the world, only spread our own message. My phone broke early in the journey so I couldn't keep the Arabic blogs going and spoke with no one from home for a month.

8. Inner Journey

JO: Mark wrote in one of the blogs: 'why do I choose to do these ridiculous things when I could be at home doing a 'normal' job'.' Did you ask the same question and if so, what was your answer?

MZ: I always asked this question but sometimes in a funny way when we were very tired but always I came to the same answer: 'This journey stretches my comfort zone and I get more and more comfortable in hard situations.' I knew that while I might not know the answer now, I would come to recognise the answer later. When

[23] The support vehicles were visible in a couple of the images in Mohamed's presentation about his journey at Airport Heights Campus at Caledonian College of Engineering where I invited him as our guest lecturer for Earth Day on 26th April 2016. One of the staff in the audience was disappointed that the journey had involved cars so I put this to Mohamed during the interview.

I started to do really tough expeditions, I became more and more independent and after reflection saw how I changed around the house, for example, doing the ironing, cooking and so on. This journey, I've learnt to speak more and it has given me confidence to speak in public. I'm not shy now to carry a point to the next person. So, I may not know what the journey has given me now, but I know I will recognise this later.

9. Writing the Book

JO: The expedition report will take the form of a book that Mark is responsible for writing. Have you any plans to write your own account and if so, how do you think it would differ from Mark's account of the journey?

MZ: I didn't think to write a book – no one would read it! I have notes from each day; some days it's just one word that makes me remember everything, other days I wrote several pages. Amur is writing an account in Arabic – at least someone is helping him as he doesn't read or write. I don't know if I'll write a book; perhaps when I get smarter! If I do write it will be a different book from Mark's. Mark will write things for others and nor about himself. He will highlight the lives of local people and the relationships between countries and between the team. If I write a book, I don't want it to be 'I did this, and I did that'; I don't like reading that kind of book because in the end it's self-serving. But I want to say what I feel and I need to mature in writing first.

10. Travel Versus Tourism

JO: Is it possible that the journey you have just undertaken could become a tourist route and if so, is this to be lamented?

MZ: I really wish the route we took stays the same and after one hundred years we go back and nothing has changed. I would love people to see what we have seen but wouldn't love the changes it brings – hotels, huts, roads, these will destroy the Empty Quarter. I don't want to see a train of people; I wish they will have to deserve to go there and put in the effort to see the desert as we have seen it.

11. Value of the Journey

JO: Before leaving Mark stated of the journey's value that 'Twenty-five per cent is about learning lessons from the past, 50% of the journey is about the present but 25% of our journey is also about creating opportunities for the future.' What opportunities are there to use the journey to reconnect young people with their heritage, as stated, or in hindsight was the essential purpose of the journey more about nostalgia for the past and a desire to leave something for posterity in terms of your own physical endeavour and accomplishment?

MZ: It was a big achievement and it won't happen again. It was a huge effort to make it happen and I'm really proud we did this. We wanted to highlight Sheikh Saleh and Bertram Thomas and to help people feel connected to their history through this second journey. The journey was only forty-nine days but the journey didn't finish in Doha: there is now lot of work to do to spread the message of the journey. I have spoken to more than four thousand people over the last two weeks and there are lecture tours lined up in UK and the USA and a documentary in Vox Cinema in September. All this will help to spread the messages of the journey to young people.

12. Legacy

JO: In the post Mark wrote on the last day in Doha he said it was odd being in a bed, and hard to sleep. Did you have any problems readjusting to life back in Muscat? For all its challenges and hardships, would you do this journey again and if not, why not?

MZ: Yes, it was difficult sleeping in a bed after sleeping for fifty days in the sand. The bed was comfortable but it didn't feel it was the right way to sleep. It took three days to get back to normal. And then there was the hygiene; it was odd returning to showers. I felt different about food too. On the journey we were snacking all the time but we still lost a lot of weight; in the hotel I couldn't eat breakfast, lunch and dinner – I was just too full. I couldn't stay indoors either. We were meant to be relaxing but I couldn't sit still and walked the eight kilometres along the corniche instead!

Seeing all those people who knew me and I did not know them in Doha was incredible. I would do something like this again but not exactly the same. It was very hard and I am proud that I can if I wanted to do this again, but now I want to do something else!

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