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Introduction

'Sir Wilfred, how did it feel when you first killed a man?'

'Killed a man? I've never killed a man.'

'But in your book . . .'

'Oh, I see – well of course I've killed men from long distance with a rifle . . .'

'Sir Wilfred,' another student asked, 'what did it feel like to go alone into the terrifying Danikil country and meet the young ruler who was celebrating by hanging the testicles of his dead enemies around his neck?'

'He seemed very pleased.' Thesiger paused, apparently searching for an analogy. 'As though he had just been awarded his First Field Colours.'

This was my first meeting with Wilfred Thesiger. He was six foot two, broad-shouldered, with a deeply lined face, a large nose broken three times in a boxing ring, and he was as tough as he looked. In 1932 he was the first European to make it alive through the country of the notoriously violent Danikil in Ethiopia, recording in the process the direction of a major river system. He travelled astonishing distances through the Sahara and in the Sudan, he hunted lions, standing his ground as they charged – one got close enough to knock him over before he killed it. He developed a reputation for courage while serving with Wingate's Gideon Force in Ethiopia and won the DSO for capturing a fort together with 2,500 Italian soldiers. He was then recruited into two of the most famous wartime units: first SOE, where he was trained to be a secret agent in Cairo, and then the SAS, with whom he fought behind enemy lines in the desert.

When I first met him, however, he was wearing a three-piece tweed suit and lecturing to students in an old-fashioned upper-class growl. Many in the audience who had apparently come expecting to meet a deeply sensitive mystic, a second Lawrence of Arabia, were shocked by his apparent pomposity. One whispered to me disapprovingly that he 'was a product of his age and class', as though an English gentleman born in 1910 was predestined to be an aristocratic fop or a colonial nabob. In fact, of course, the modernist revolutions in art, science and politics were underway before his birth. Picasso, Proust, Einstein, James Joyce and Mao were all old enough to be his father. While Thesiger was lion-hunting in the Sudan, his fellow Etonian George Orwell was fighting in the Spanish Civil War. When Thesiger was living with the Marsh Arabs, another fellow Etonian, Aldous Huxley, was experimenting with gurus and LSD in California.

If Thesiger seemed old fashioned this was in part his conscious choice. His answers to the students were deliberately camp and provocative. He was aware that most of the audience had no idea what First Field Colours were (they are awarded to the best performers in the Field Game – a sport played only at Eton). These comments, like his clothes, were part humorous, part nervous, part pompous, and sat awkwardly alongside his real achievements. They have always filtered our impressions of him. It is impossible, however, to doubt his physical courage.

As *Arabian Sands* records, between 1946 and 1948, while the world struggled with genocide, colonialism, revolution and modernity, Wilfred Thesiger crossed and recrossed the 250,000 square miles of the Empty Quarter, the largest sand desert in the world, in the area of modern Yemen, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman. The routes he chose were threatened by warring tribes and so desolate that many Arabs refused to accompany him. He was in his late thirties and had worn shoes all his life but he walked barefoot so that every step in the desert burned or cut his soles. On one part of this journey, he travelled 2,000 miles over seven months, rationing himself and his companions to only two pints of water a day and eight pounds of flour a month, about a third of a normal diet. They were thirsty and hungry almost all the time and they were pursued by raiding parties determined to kill them.

Thesiger called the Empty Quarter 'the final and greatest prize of Arabian exploration'. It had been crossed twice before him: first by Bertram Thomas in 1931, and then by Harry St John Philby in 1932, on a physically more taxing journey that involved one leg of 400 miles between water supplies. Thesiger's journeys of 1947 and 1948 opened two new and even tougher routes, the first from Mughshin to Liwa across the eastern sands, and the second across the western sands from Manwakh, via Laila, to Abu Dhabi.

Arabian Sands describes these and six other journeys undertaken in five successive years with twenty-eight different companions in four different countries. The landscape is largely barren, there are no monuments to admire, the days are repetitive, his Arabic is not entirely fluent and his illiterate companions frequently have little of interest to say. Yet, Thesiger turns this confusing and potentially alienating journey into a unified and compelling narrative. It is engaging without being over-simplified, exciting without being over-dramatic and strikingly truthful.

Thesiger's talents as a writer are a surprise. *Arabian Sands* was his first book and he finished it when he was almost fifty. He had little interest in serious literature, got a poor degree as the Oxford University boxing champion and did not enjoy writing. As Alexander Maitland's excellent biography makes clear, it took him ten years to get round to writing *Arabian Sands* at all, and the process left him 'bored stiff'. But the result was an immediate success.

His previous writing had been directed at audiences he knew well: warm and sentimental letters to his mother, and confident understated lectures to fellow explorers. In these contexts he had learned to be a chronicler of specific events, a keen observer of men's clothes (he was dressy himself) and of how they were greeted by other men. He wrote naturally in short sentences with few metaphors. He revealed little about why he undertook these extraordinary journeys and he rarely drew historical or literary parallels. His writing, therefore, often echoed the reports of nineteenth-century British travellers on the North-west frontier: matter of fact, understated, replete with precise information, useful for Imperial projects.

When *Arabian Sands* was published, however, travel-writing was dominated by writers in the tradition of Robert Byron. Such writers rarely spoke local languages or spent extended times in rural areas or engaged in dangerous journeys. They presented themselves either as libraries of historic allusion or as figures of fun. Their books were filled with comic dialogue, ornate descriptions and exotic incidents typically involving public-school maharajahs, colourful crowded bus rides and reveries on ancient monuments.

One of the leading exponents of the new style was Eric Newby, whose book *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* was published in the same year as *Arabian Sands*. Newby was a decorated Special Forces veteran, who had escaped from a prisoner of war camp, spent eighteen months doing backbreaking work while hiding on an Apennine farm, and had just attempted a very difficult mountain ascent when he met Thesiger in Afghanistan in 1956. Newby chose to present himself for comic effect as a timid incompetent dilettante with a background in the London fashion industry, and Thesiger as 'a great, long-striding crag of a man, with an outcrop for a nose and bushy eyebrows, forty-five years old and hard as nails, in an old tweed jacket of the sort worn by Eton boys, a pair of thin grey cotton trousers, rope-soled Persian slippers and a woollen cap-comforter'. Thesiger returned the compliment, calling Newby and his companion 'a couple of pansies'.

Thesiger hated most contemporary travel-writing, saying of James Morris's book on the Oman that 'if people want that sort of chatty rubbish, I hope they will never get it from me'. He was equally dismissive of the journeys of Freya Stark, who he said, with a characteristically old-fashioned reference, had 'done nothing which could not be done by a second secretary from a legation on home leave'.

Thesiger by contrast is not a comic writer. Nor is he an erudite guide. He has little interest in archaeology ('meaningless holes and trenches'), or architecture ('bloody buildings') or even history and politics. He says very little about his reactions to events. He rarely embroiders an anecdote to make it more appealing. He acknowledges the frequent boredom and repetition of travel. He

shows that he himself is often confused or uncertain about what is happening.

This reticence partly reflected Thesiger's experience of travel. Unlike many other contemporary British travellers, who had barely left Britain until they were adults, Thesiger was born and lived the first years of his life in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. This made him both more comfortable abroad and less liable to be impressed by the superficially exotic. He had spent more time than his contemporaries living alongside tribal peoples. He was painfully aware of how different they were, how difficult to understand and how often exoticised or misrepresented. He was convinced that they (and not his own personality, erudition or prose) should be the centre of the story.

Thesiger's writing, like his photographs, can be precise, artful and elegant. His careful descriptions of how hundreds of different individuals dress or greet each other allow the reader cautiously to judge the subtle differences between men. We share in Thesiger's efforts, as a stranger, to judge the virtue of those he meets. This concern with moral character and reputation makes his encounters into parables:

> Two days later an old man came into our camp. He was limping, and even by Bedu standards he looked poor. He wore a torn loincloth, thin and grey with age, and carried an ancient rifle . . . In his belt were two full and six empty cartridge cases, and a dagger in a broken sheath. The Rashid pressed forward to greet him: 'Welcome Bakhit. Long life to you, uncle. Welcome – welcome a hundred times.' I wondered at the warmth of their greetings. The old man lowered himself upon the rug they had spread for him, and ate the dates they set before him, while they hurried to blow up a fire and to make coffee . . . I thought, 'He looks a proper old beggar. I bet he asks for something.' Later in the evening he did and I gave him five riyals, but by then I had changed my opinion. Bin Kabina said to me: '. . . Once he was one of the richest men in the tribe, now he has nothing except a few goats.' I asked: 'What happened to his camels? Did raiders take them, or did they die of disease?' and bin Kabina answered, 'No. His generosity ruined him. No one ever came to his tents but he killed a camel to feed them. By God, he is generous!' I could hear the envy in his voice.

Thesiger's reticence as a writer also partly reflects his own controlled personality. He chose to bind himself by the conventions of a British ruling class, which had largely disappeared even at the time of his birth. He was much more repressed personally and intellectually than his hero, T. E. Lawrence, who was over twenty years his senior. Thesiger, for instance, reduced even his sexuality to his ideas of gentlemanly behaviour, claiming that 'I might have been homosexual if I was born in a different age but as it was I remained asexual.' His literary agent observed that he was 'far too frightened of letting himself go', far too frightened that people might say 'this man is shooting a line', 'is overemphasising the dangers of the trip'.

Thesiger, however, was not the only anomaly: he embodies a quite separate tradition of British writing. He measured himself against British colonial officials who were immersed in local culture and regularly undertook journeys that were dangerous and physically demanding. His first hero of this type had been his first boss, Guy Moore, who like almost all the men Thesiger referred to obsessively had served in Iraq during the First World War.

When Thesiger died in 2003, I was working as a British Administrator in the Marshes region of southern Iraq. I sent the condolences of the local sheikhs, who remembered him fondly, to his memorial service. Yet he was not the only name still recalled in the area. My predecessor in Amara in 1916 had been Harry St John Philby, the second man to cross the Empty Quarter. I was then posted to Dhi Qar, whose two political officers in 1920 had been Bertram Thomas, the first man to cross the Empty Quarter, and Harold Dickson, who teased Thomas by pretending to cross the Empty Quarter before him. These were competitive men. Thesiger often quoted Thomas's reply to Dixon: 'I have every intention of being the first man to cross the Empty Quarter and to live the rest of my life on the proceeds.' St John Philby was 'bitterly disappointed' to be beaten. Thesiger not only followed these men across the Empty Quarter, but then followed them further by moving to the Marshes of southern Iraq. By that time, Dickson was the de facto prime minister of modern Kuwait, Thomas of Oman, and Philby of Saudi Arabia. Thesiger thought for one moment that he would be offered the

chance to succeed Thomas as the chief advisor to the Sultan of Oman. Thesiger, however, was never quite one of these men and he was never offered the job.

Although Thesiger was descended from one of the most distinguished imperial families (he was the grandson of the general commanding the British forces in the Zulu wars and the nephew of a viceroy of India), he had little sympathy for imperial bureaucracy. He hated paperwork and politics, failed his exams and resigned his full-time position in the Sudan Political Service after only two years. He hated all the values of progress, commerce and law and order that the British Colonial Service promoted. He chose as his companions some of the most dangerous outlaws in the desert and volunteered to go on raids with them. He had finally to stop his travels in the Empty Quarter because the Saudi, Omani and even British governments saw him and his companions as a dangerous threat to stability and order.

Thesiger's overriding interest was in travel for its own sake. Unlike Charles Doughty or T. E. Lawrence, who returned to Britain to work on their literary memoirs, Thesiger never ceased to travel. He continued to demonstrate his commitment to a punishing life among alien cultures even when he had nothing left to prove and long after he had ceased to pioneer routes. He moved from the Empty Quarter to live for seven years among the Marsh Arabs of Iraq on floating beds of reeds, with buffaloes, hunting alongside men who fished naked with tridents, then to the Hindu Kush and finally to a remote region of northern Kenya, where he remained till he was in his mid-eighties.

He was perhaps the first to make punishing travel itself rather than government, exploration, knowledge or writing his entire vocation. He disguised this by taking on the title of the 'last explorer' and insisting that after him there was nothing left to explore. He emphasised that he travelled on foot and by camel only because there were no cars available and that he usually did so in order to draw up a map. He was dismissive of people undertaking unnecessarily punishing journeys as stunts. He claimed to be the last to see a wild world. In reality, however, Nuristan and the Iraqi Marshes remain wilder and more dangerous for foreigners today than when he saw them forty years ago.

He continued to travel on foot and by camel, long after cars were introduced, to sleep on rocks, long after the introduction of mattresses, and to press into areas that had already been fully mapped. He did not have a regular job or income for the last fifty years of his life. He wandered in this way for almost forty years because he found that these journeys gave a meaning and comfort to his life, which he could not convincingly articulate. Rather than being the last Victorian he was closer to being the first hippie on the overland trail.

Thesiger's physical endurance makes *Arabian Sands* a unique and final witness of a particular aspect of Arabic nomadic life. Charles Doughty had lived in the midst of Beduin communities and experienced the slow progress of the Bedu herds, wives and children to and from the oases, their cuisine, their trading and the formal *majlis* (or administration) of the sheikhs in their tents. In the journeys described in this book, Thesiger paid men from a very small and isolated tribe to accompany him on highly unnatural ventures into the very harshest parts of the desert. They left their families behind, they followed a route where there was no pasture or trading opportunity, and where they were under imminent threat from hostile tribes.

There was a disadvantage to this: Thesiger had almost no exposure to the normal migrations of Arabic families, he saw very few women and almost no children, and his experience was of the most extreme aspects of life and landscape. He had little contact with vulnerable groups, who might have benefited most from historical change. His love of the freebooting life of the raiders encouraged him to believe that all modern development was for the worst and that modern cities were 'an Arabian nightmare, the final disappointment'. He can be naive, superficial and even offensive, such as when (in his autobiography) he praises the Ethiopian race because 'they had not been mongrelized'. It is not surprising, therefore, that another Etonian explorer, Robin Hanbury-Tenison, seeing Thesiger's prejudices, aristocratic manner and suits, should conclude on their first meeting, like many others, that Thesiger was 'an archaic figure, caught in a time warp, with excessively reactionary views'.

Nevertheless, Thesiger's painful participation in such eccen-

tric environments is valuable. He gains a unique insight into the Bedu's struggle with the desert at its worst, their resilience, their survival skills. And his own contempt for settled civilization and the love of warfare makes him particularly open to their dignity, honour, pride and joy in raiding. No one before or since has managed to capture with such sympathy the life of a nomadic bandit leader such as bin Duailan (the cat). Thesiger is able to capture what is both admirable and disturbing in bin Duailan's disorienting combination of honour and cruelty, murder, theft and nobility.

Many Europeans and Americans, then and now, find traditional societies difficult to understand and even more difficult to respect. 'State-building' projects in many of the countries where Thesiger travelled – from Sudan, through Iraq to Afghanistan – now strive to replace traditional structures with the apparatus of a 'modern state': the rule of law, civil society, independent and accountable governance. Such projects are based on admirable intentions and are almost inevitable. Thesiger, however, saw and could communicate how strong, meaningful and consoling the previous culture had often been.

He saw the Beduin not as 'savages but the lineal heirs of a very ancient civilization, who found within the framework of their society the personal freedom and self-discipline for which they craved'. He loved them because he believed that they, like him, could at any time have settled in a richer country but had instead chosen for the sake of their freedom to renounce almost everything. The virtues that they celebrated – courage, strength, generosity – were also the virtues he strove for in his own life.

His companions in Arabia repaid the compliment. They did not remember him for *Arabian Sands*, which they could not read, and they did not remember Thesiger's clothes because he dressed like them. But when bin Ghabaisha was asked to describe Thesiger fifty years after the trip he said: 'He was loyal, generous, and afraid of nothing.'

A few years after my first meeting with Thesiger, I also walked 6,000 miles, often in places where Thesiger had walked. He captured much of what matters most about this kind of travel. First, he suggests that there is no satisfying answer to the question of

why we undertake these journeys; second, that living humans are of more interest than landscape, architecture or history; third, that the real challenge is to describe how a landscape appears not to the visitor but to people who have lived in that landscape all their lives. Finally, he shows that the greatest prize is to be, however partially, accepted and respected by your companions. The foreign traveller can never hope to have the same life experience as those he travels with. He remains always a stranger with a different home. But, at certain moments, particularly at the end of months of travel together you can sense a shared experience of courage and generosity. You can feel, if only for an instant, a sense of equality with those with whom you travel. This is, I think, what Thesiger meant when he said he travelled for 'comradeship'. It is troubling that he, perhaps like many of us, could find such equality more easily away from home.

Thesiger misjudged the future of the Beduin: contrary to his belief, his companions did not deliberately reject all material comfort but instead would embrace generators and pick-up trucks cheerfully. His tact, concern and patient observation, however, is humane and revealing. In the fine grain of his account are remarkable insights not only into an alien society, but into minds, modernity and a gradual modest revelation of how he believed a human life should best be lived. In Chapter 8, for example, the group have been travelling for more than a month, close to starvation, when Musallim catches a hare. They throw all their remaining flour into the pot and are all sitting ravenously waiting for it to cook, when suddenly three Arabs appear on the horizon. It is difficult not to admire the ethics and the self-awareness that underlie Thesiger's description:

> We greeted them, asked the news, made coffee for them, and then Musallim and bin Kabina dished up the hare and the bread and set it before them, saying with every appearance of sincerity that they were our guests, that God had brought them, that today was a blessed day, and a number of similar remarks. They asked us to join them but we refused, repeating that they were our guests. I hoped that I did not look as murderous as I felt while I joined the others in assuring them that God had brought them on his auspicious occasion.

It is in these moments that we see, notwithstanding his prejudices and limitations, that Thesiger matters, both as a writer and a man.

Rory Stewart, 2007