

Arabian Sands

W. Thesiger

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I craved for the past, resented the present, and dreaded the future. Those are the introductory words by the author and explains most of the exploits which were to dominate his long life.

Thesiger was born in Abyssinia and was present when Haile Selassie was crowned King in a ceremony that was easy to imagine as being part of a tradition going back unbrokenly to Salomon and the Queen of Shaba. He was educated in England, and he hated it. The whole modern civilization with its machines, its wireless, its unbridled materialism, earned his lasting resentment. Globalization, firmly established during the authors lifetime, was if anything anathema to his view of life. Many people can sympathize with this attitude, but few would have the consistency to make it the theme of their lives, comfort and laziness and above all social pressures would be bound to check it. And also, moral scruples, because the philosophy of Thesiger is not only reactionary, but ethically dubious. It is a philosophy based on aesthetics and nostalgia, and can only be tolerated as the poetry of an eccentric individual, not as a basis for political action. But as poetry it is beautiful and engaging. It blends facts with fiction and makes out of reality a world of phantasy.

In the 20th century it is hard to find regions of the world unsullied by modern civilization. Thesiger in his youth had explored some of Abyssinia, treading parts where no white man should have trodden would his life been dear to him. He had been stationed in Sudan before the war, been horrified by the suburban character of Khartoum, been moved to the provinces, and had went on personal explorations in the deserts of Sudan and neighboring Libya. He was old enough to have experienced the abundance of African Wild Life, seen herds of thousands of elephants along the shores of the Nile, shot seventy lions just for the heck of it. He had had his share of the colonial game of Africa.

After the War the Arabian Peninsula was still a stronghold of medieval barbarity. In many ways one can argue it still is, but now without the charm, that enticed Thesiger. Oil prospectors had just arrived on the scene, nibbling at the coastal areas. But the interior of the peninsula was still terra incognita to infidels. It was nominally ruled by powerful Sultans and Imans, but even those had not the means of consolidating their power over warring Beduin tribes, involved in blood feuds and raiding. Thesiger managed to get official backing for his travels, the ostensible object of his foray being locust control, i.e. identifying unknown areas in the south which might be breeding grounds. This was of course just an excuse and Thesiger would just make some token observations to satisfy his sponsors.

Thesiger travelled in Arab garb, except when he recuperated from his ventures among his compatriots. He was no linguist, as he fully admitted, and his Arabic was always to remain halting and awkward, although his understanding of the language eventually improved to the level that he was no longer able to shut off the chatter of his ever voluble companions and seek sanctuary in his own thoughts. But as far as appearance goes, clothes

go a long way, and the picture of him that adorns the inside of the book, could as well have been of any Arab, Thus he was able to be passed off as one of them, as long as he kept a low profile (a bit hard due to his excessive length, towering over his companions) and kept his mouth shut. But of course, he was never one of them, unlike many others in similar circumstances, he would steadily refuse to give up his infidel status and convert to Islam, an action that no doubt would have opened many a door. This refusal to yield to pragmatism, to fully realize and accept his status as an outsider, renders him our respect. As he soon realized, the price he would have to pay for his personal ventures, would be that of the outcast, not only among his adopted circles, but also among his fellow Westerners.

The landscape, but above all the culture, that so charms Thesiger, is a deeply flawed one. He is intrigued by the Empty Quarter, the expanses of sands that occupy the interior of the southern Arabian Peninsula. In an age in which there were no longer any white parts on the map, this was in the 40's as close you could come to the edge of the world. He traversed it by camel and in the company of Beduins¹ whose respect he had won and who were willing to submit to his authority, even when it threatened to endanger their lives. He claims that he could not have crossed it by car, this is something that needs to be qualified as such crossing had actually been made by car by his predecessor Philby in the 30's, (Philby incidentally was one of those old Arabian hands who had converted to Islam), but it is quite probable that the actual untrodden paths he had chosen would not at the time have allowed motorized locomotion. He admits that this was fortunate, because otherwise his trip by camel would have been reduced to that of a mere stunt, as so much of modern exploration had become after the end of its heroic age. Not surprisingly he speaks approvingly about Scott, whose incompetence at the Pole seems to have made little impact on British admiration. It is not the goal itself that is important, the author reminds us of, but the road it necessitates. The goal itself is of less importance than the achievement of it. A sentiment that has often been proclaimed and repeated.

In the extremity of the empty sand dunes, he is entirely at the mercy of his companions, and those are at the mercy of their camels, whom they treat tenderly but unsentimentally. He is completely shut off from any intrusion of modern technology and civilization, with the exception of the ubiquitous rifles and partridge belt without which no Beduin consider himself fully clothed. He suffers hardships. The desert is either chillingly cold or sweltering hot, and wears hard on he bare foot. The unleavened bread baked is almost inedible, of sandy dates he soon gets his feed and can no longer stand them. And most crucial of all, the water retrieved form the depths of the intermittent well is often brackish and would be absolutely undrinkable, be it not for camels milk which may sweeten it. To ride a camel is not easy, even if he has had plenty of experience, and he suffers from chafing and posture. But most of all he suffers continually from thirst, rations by necessity being small, in order to save the camels. But whenever things appears unbearable, he asks himself whether he really would prefer to be somewhere else, say in the comfort of London, and invariably the answer is no, and he feels better.

He admires the Beduins. They are invariably very poor, in the sense of having few material possessions. They are after all nomads, living in tents, and owing nothing but the clothes on their bodies, their rifles and above all their camels. On the other hand they

¹ Thesiger consistently refers to them as 'Bedu' this being the plural Arabic form of the designation.

possess striking mental qualities, apart from their fortitude, patience, fearlessness and modesty, also uncanny abilities to read the ground and assess the lay of the land. Camels are individuals, not only their own, but also those of their friends and acquaintances. They can usually recognize a camel from afar before they can identify the owner. From their tracks in the sands they can usually infer what kind of camels left them, which ones were males or females, or if female, which were with calf. They are, like most people dependent by the land for survival, incredibly adept at reconstructing from fragmented traces the past history, just like a forensic detective or a scientist. I believe that the human curiosity, as far as it has an evolutionary basis, stems from this compelling need of self-sufficiency and survival. Natural abilities which modern man no longer is in need of due to the blessings of civilization. I would also tend to believe that this 'cleverness' also characterizes other higher mammals, which in that sense are 'smarter' than most men. This makes for an alienation of man from his biological roots, and one may charitably view Thesiger's professed nostalgia as ultimately based on the occurrence of this rift, which poetically can be seen as the expulsion from paradise².

But not everything is well. Thesiger is often irritated by his companions. He finds their volubility and unceasing chatter grating on his nerves, all that gossiping, all those petty quarrels, all that avarice and obsession with money, of which they are almost always out of. Why should they always scream so loud, even when stalking animals? And of course he is not charmed by the hatred he is often viewed with, once his true identity is being revealed. On the other hand he is more than willing to make allowances. They may be obsessed with money, and how easy would it not be for them to kill him and dump his body in the sands, and make off with all his possessions and money, being assured that the crime would never be revealed. Their gossip shows that they can entertain themselves without having to go to the movies or listen to the wireless. And those bitter quarrels, which pit them at each other, going at their throats, only to have inexplicable resolutions and speedy restorations of amicable relations once other interests diverts them, he realizes are only strategies to pass the time.

But trivial pettiness aside there are features of their lives which are much harder to reconcile with our own moral standards. There is violence and blood feuds. A murder must be revenged on principle, just as honor has to be upheld. You kill someone not out of enmity but out of duty, just as you may kill the sister you love, because she is conceived to have cast dishonor on her family. The tribes are at war with each other and uneasy truces are held. A common sport is to raid and take off with the camels, something we might find slightly comic, except at those raids people are killed, as well as during consequent engagements, when pursuing parties catch up with the culprits, avenging what they have just suffered. Hostile encounters with enemies are nevertheless conducted under formal politeness. You may travel unscathed during enemy territory provided you

² This is an abstract rendering of this parable. The more accurate reading of this myth, is rather that life once was carefree and paradisaical, but men defied authority, and as a consequence were driven out in the wilderness to lead lives of immense hardship. Thus the irony is that modern civilization, is the outcome from a prolonged struggle to regain the paradise which once was lost, while we who have already come in possession of it as a birthright, instead look upon the state of expulsion as the true paradise, and not the kind of exile it was meant to be.

are accompanied with a *rabia* of the tribe of your adversary, because in a party you are morally obliged to stand up for your traveling companions, even if it means standing up to your own flesh and blood. Inconsistencies are legion. The hospitality of the Arab is legendary, especially when strangers are concerned. The host is liable to condemn himself to starvation in order to be able to entertain lavishly. And of course there is no way to refuse such offers without incurring resentment. This means that you also can be beset by freeloaders who like locusts devour every scrap of food you happen to have. Thus Thesiger sees with alarm whenever other parties temporarily join his own, depleting the scant resources.

Then there is of course cruel punishments routinely meted out. Such as the cutting off hands. Or cruel rituals, such as circumcision, heroically to be endured by young boys. Then slavery is still a common practice in those backwards societies, Maybe not so much among the Nomadic Beduins, who can hardly afford them. but among more settled Arabs on the coast. On the other hand in a family the slaves are considered part of the family, and treated as such. (A kind of social ambiguity which becomes prevalent in many slave societies, including that of the American South). And as is well known, in the Ottoman empire, slaves could reach high positions. In fact the only ceiling capping their advancement was of the highest power itself. To return to more mundane matters: during travel everyone is more or less on equal terms, including slaves. Many of the slaves are indigenous, but there are of course also Negro slaves. The remarkable thing is that although that custom is very old, it must have been in effect a thousand years at least, there is, unlike in the American South, no large black population in Arabia. I wonder whether this could be a sign of mistreatment, more intrusive than even that of the Americans? Or simply that the practice was much more limited in scope.

The end of the traditional life is inevitable. Thesiger knows this and is profoundly saddened by the fact. The way of life he has sampled is doomed, and by it a long continuous tradition of humanity going back at least a thousand years, in fact even longer well before Muhammad, is for ever severed. And it is in the nature of traditions, that once they are severed, they cannot be reinstated. What we are witnessing are the last traces of the Biblical tribes. Jews, many of those Arabs have not heard of, their knowledge of the external world is limited. Are Jews another kind of Arab tribes they wonder. In ignorance there is often profound wisdom. In the description of his companions and the various Arabs he encounters, one easily recognizes the modern terrorist variety. The intellectual looking young man with a big black beard fueled with a passionate resentment and stubborn defiance, so easily seduced by fanatical views. Terrorism is the only weapon of the powerless, and its prevalence in the traditional Muslim world is hardly a source of surprise. What may be surprising is that it is not more prevalent than it is. It is truly the last desperate stance against an engulfing globalization. The Arabic civilization having been the only serious rival to Western hegemony. Would Thesiger have approved? Probably not. Arab society has changed profoundly after the corruption caused by the discovery of oil and the easy money which comes with it. What those terrorists try to preserve is by now only a phantom of what once was. Anyway Thesiger lived until 2003 and would have had plenty of opportunity to comment.

In 1950 his continued presence in Arabia became untenable and he left almost for

good. The five years between 1945 and 1950 he considered the happiest of his life. In 1977 he returned and was able to meet up with his young companions, being shocked to seeing them turned into old grey-bearded man with adult sons. They had adopted to modern Arabian life, having of course no other option, but still, as most Arabs, clinging to the mere appearances of their lost lifestyles, such as keeping tents and camels for fun. Thesiger then realized that the old bond between them was forever gone.

What bonds? It is tempting to suspect Thesiger of homosexuality, why should he otherwise have found the companionship with those young men, with whom he seriously could not have too much in common, if there were no carnal attraction? Thesiger brings up the issue of homosexuality and makes a point that it is very rare in Arab society and that he himself never saw any traces of it, despite having had plenty of opportunity. Is he being disingenuous and knowingly duplicitous, or simply very innocent, having sublimated his physical passions to the point of making them invisible even to himself? He certainly writes about the teenage Salim bin Kamina³ with great tenderness. Once he refers to having touched him in the neck provoking a revolted reaction from his charge (not because of the physical intimacy per se, but the form of it only applicable to a slave.). And when bin Kamina once has a collapse and he fears for his life, he professes to no longer finding any point in his own. The crises passes quickly a day later and has a happy ending. And bin Kamina, lived on for at least another thirty years. It is hard to believe that in his fascination for the country and its inhabitants there were not present any direct personal tie. Without such a romantic attachment, the entire exercise of five years of travel seems inexplicably barren. But of course there is sublimation, which is a catch-all and can easily be made to explain most things.

The book is long, or at least feels so. It is also in a sense very tedious, as the same kind of things are happening over and over again, and in memory they all blend together, as they no doubt did in the mind of Thesiger himself. He claims that he kept no diary and at the time he journeyed had no thought of writing a book, that was only something that occurred to hi ten years later. Nevertheless there are references to a personal diary in the book itself, and some kind of documentation must have been going on, after all he was supposed to report on possible breeding grounds for locusts and also to try to make some maps of previously uncharted territory. There are attempts to evoke the sense of the desert, the dramatic landscape of majestic dunes. But everything is not just sands, there are also barren flats devoid of sands, and there is also vegetation. The presence of vegetation outside the intermittent oasis is a mystery. But rains do occur, if rarely, A rainfall is a blessing, and if vigorous or sustained enough, it can penetrate several feet into the ground, and as a result there will be some sparse vegetation for years to come. Those rare grazing pastures are a godsend, and whenever encountered the march stops to allow the camels to graze. The needs of the camels come first with the Beduin. As we have already notes, his life depends on it.

Otherwise the various depictions of travels are confusing, and the contrast between the mountainous inhabited country and the deserted Sands is not always very clear. Even where people are more residential, and where there are villages, the landscape is unrelent-

³ almost always referred to with the last name 'bin Kamina' with 'bin' meaning son of, a convention of naming running in many diverse cultures

ingly dry and arid. The sands themselves should be seen as the sea. on which you cross as if by boat.

Thesiger never gets to really explore the interior of Oman, in particular he is denied scaling the impressive peak of Jabal al Akhadar. Animosity against the presence of an infidel is too strong. And of course Thesiger can understand, soon people like him will come and shatter their way of life. It would be too much to hope that they would understand that he is different, that he is no oil prospector.

The book is long, but it grows on you. It may appear that details are just piled on top of each other, but in doing so by sheer accumulation it mimics the way our own real experiences are laid on top of each other, each almost imperceptibly different from the other, but taken in bulk it provides depth.

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