**Writing the End: Wilfred Thesiger, Freya Stark**

**and the ‘Arabist tradition’**

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**Abstract**

Freya Stark’s *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (1936) and Wilfred

Thesiger’s *Arabian Sands* (1959) are commonly viewed as

representing the last of the ‘Arabist tradition’. Consequently, *The*

*Southern Gates of Arabia* and *Arabian Sands* provide an opportunity

to examine the Arabist tradition at a genealogical point of transition.

Taking as its starting point the representational strategies deployed in

each book, this paper will examine the extent to which these strategies

are characteristic of Arabist travel writing and consider how Stark and

Thesiger might be located in the context of the tradition’s demise.

**Keywords:** Arabist tradition, travel writing, Freya Stark, Wilfred

Thesiger, Orientalism.

Freya Stark’s *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (1936) and Wilfred

Thesiger’s *Arabian Sands* (1959) are based on journeys undertaken in

1935 and 1945 respectively. They are accounts of travels, which, due to

the rapid modernisation of the Arabian peninsula, were no longer

possible even a few years after they were written.

As such, these works are commonly viewed as representing the last of

the ‘Arabist tradition’– a British tradition of travel writing on Arabia. As

writings about journeys that were becoming increasingly difficult to

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doi: 10.3167/jys.2007.08010204 ISSN 1465-2609 (print), ISSN 1752-2358 (online)

undertake, *The Southern Gates of Arabia* and *Arabian Sands* provide an

opportunity to examine the Arabist tradition at a genealogical point of

transition. They also provide an opportunity to evaluate Stark’s and

Thesiger’s contribution to this shift in the representational frames of

reference for the Arabian peninsula. In particular, to assess how both

authors move away from these representational registers in the final

chapters of their books.

As well as geographical location and historical context, what

characterises the Arabist tradition is its use of two specific

representational motifs: the desert landscape and the Bedouin people

(Melman 2002: 112–119). The origins of these motifs lie in early travel

accounts of the region, such as d’Arvieux’s *Voyage en Palestine* (first

published in English in 1718) and Carsten Niebuhr’s *Travels in Arabia*

(first published in English in 1792) (Tidrick 1989: 8–13) . However, in the

nineteenth century, as more accounts began to emerge and as the region

became more established in the public’s imagination, variations of the

same representational strategies for addressing the desert landscapes and

their people came to be refracted from text to text. In this sense, ‘the

Arabist tradition’, emerged in the 1870s, cohering around the publication

of Richard Burton’s *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and*

*Meccah* (1856), Anne Noel King Blunt’s *A Pilgrimage to Nedj, the Cradle*

*of the Arab Race* (1879) and Charles Montagu Doughty’s *Arabia Deserta*

(1888) (Melman 2002: 113; Tidrick 1989: 31). Across these works a

distinct representational register emerged and evolved, becoming the

means by which British travel writing of this period portrayed Arabia.

Following the Second World War and the hastening demise of

colonialism, socio-political circumstances changed dramatically in the

peninsula leading to a significant transformation in the nature of British

travel writing on the region. It was during this period – just before and

immediately after the Second World War – that Freya Stark and Wilfred

Thesiger made significant journeys to Arabia. *The Southern Gates of*

*Arabia* is an account of Stark’s travels through the Hadramaut region in

south Arabia. Her journey began at the sea port of Makalla; from here she

travelled inland following the incense trade routes with the intention of

becoming the first European to reach the town of Shabwa (1936: 7).

Unfortunately, illness prevented her from achieving this ambition and she

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called upon the RAF to airlift her to safety. Described by *The Times* as a

work of ‘discerning brilliance’, *The Southern Gates of Arabia* led to Stark

receiving the Royal Scottish Geographical Society award, the Mungo Park

medal for her contribution to travel literature, and established her

reputation as the leading female travel writer of her generation.1

Born in Paris in 1893, Stark spent most of her formative years in Asolo,

northern Italy. In her childhood, as in later life, she was plagued by

illness. During a period of convalescence in 1921, Stark decided to learn

Arabic on the premise that ‘… the most interesting things in the world

were likely to happen in the neighbourhood of oil’ (1983: 276). Travelling

to the Middle East for the first time in 1927, she went on to undertake

journeys in Persia, Iraq and southern Arabia. She continued to travel

throughout her life, publishing seventeen travel texts in all. As a keen

photographer and cartographer, she illustrated all her travel texts with

maps and photographs of the people and places she visited. Stark also

published four autobiographies, as well as privately publishing eight

volumes of letters and correspondences (Izzard 1983: 17).

Like *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, Thesiger’s *Arabian Sands* is a

narrative built around a singular aim; in this case, crossing the Empty

Quarter. In fact, Thesiger crossed the desert twice from different directions,

becoming the third European, after St John Philby and Bertram Thomas, to

do so.2 Accompanied by a small group of Bedu tribesmen, Thesiger’s route

across the Empty Quarter was the more difficult, leading him to traverse

the Uruq al Shaiba, a vast range of dunes which no other European had

attempted. Born in 1910, Thesiger was the eldest son of the British

Minister in Addis Ababa, the first British child to be born in what was then

Abyssinia, where he lived prior to being schooled at Rottingdean and,

later, Eton. As a young child he witnessed Ras Tafari’s victory parade

following battle with Emperor Lij Yasu – an incredible spectacle, to which

Thesiger was able to attribute the beliefs and pursuits that informed his

later life: ‘I believe that day implanted in me a life-long craving for barbaric

splendour, for savagery and colour and the throb of drums’ (1992: 56).

Following graduation from Oxford, Thesiger returned to Ethiopia and

embarked on a journey along the Awash river with the aim of finding its

source. It proved to be a particularly difficult objective, taking four

attempts to reach the source of the Awash, revealing a mark of the tenacity

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which characterised much of his later travels. These formative adventures

led him to seek out ‘un-travelled’ parts of the world, and ultimately,

Arabia. Although his interest in travel outweighed his desire to commit to

the process of writing, he was finally persuaded by Graham Watson and

Mark Longman (of Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd) to write of his Empty

Quarter journeys. Published in 1959, *Arabian Sands* was an immediate

critical success, with *The Times* describing it as being ‘so strong a runner,

even in a class where Doughty, Palgrave and Burton have set the pace …’

(22 October, 1959: 17).

**Theorising Arabist Writings**

As Melman, amongst others, has noted, ‘one of the truisms of the

scholarship on travel to, and travel writing on, the Middle East is that

both were indices to Western and especially British political and military

superiority’ (Melman 2002: 106; see also Said 1991: 23). Certainly, it is

clear that Arabist travel writing, as a genealogical tradition, was a

constitutive element of this production of cultural imperialism. In this

sense, the study of Arabist travel writing lends itself to an approach

similar to that taken by Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Like Orientalism,

Arabist travel writing can be viewed as a discursive production of

knowledge. Indeed, as Said notes, Victorian travel writing on Arabia – and

the East more generally – was a significant source for the production of

Orientalist discourse. For Said, travel writing amounted to one productive

element (amongst many) of Orientalist discourse. Nevertheless, others,

such as Melman (2002) and Behdad (1994), have sought to explore the

specificities of late Victorian travel writing on the Middle East in more

detail. They share Said’s view that Arabist travellers/writers such as

Burton, Blunt and Doughty typify this period of travel writing’s

acquisition of Orientalist knowledge. However, for them, the later

Victorian travellers’ position as producer of an ‘Arabist’ discourse (itself

an element of the much broader Orientalist discourse) is dependent on

them sharing in a series of representational possibilities; not, in contrast

to Said’s view of Orientalism and its discursive signifiers, a homogonous

adherence to an essentialist set of representational conventions (Behdad

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1994: 12–14; Melman 2002: 116). Whilst Said conceived of Orientalist

discourse in terms of homogenous unity, it is clear that the discursive

production of Arabist travel writing was subject to a much greater degree

of variation and homogeneity. Indeed, as Behdad notes, the

representational strategies of the late Victorian traveller reveal a

simultaneous reiteration of, and distancing from, what has gone before in

terms of the acquisition of knowledge about the Orient:

On the one hand, these texts identify themselves differently against

the encyclopaedic *tableau raisonné* and truth claims of official

Orientalism by expressing an unease with classification and

‘objectivity.’ On the other, they find it impossible to avoid the ‘baggage’

of orientalist knowledge that has mediated the desire to produce an

other discourse on the Orient. (1994: 15)

Late Arabists such as Bell, Lawrence, Philby and Thomas, as well as Stark

and Thesiger, reveal this fission in their representations of the Bedouin

and the landscape; a simultaneous adherence to, and departure from,

earlier modes of representation. In one sense, late Arabists were engaged

in the project of authenticating the Bedouin; in documenting their lives

and giving them a voice, and, in so doing, aligning themselves with the

representational conventions which earlier travellers, such as Niebuhr

and d’Arvieux, had established. However, at the same time, what they

sought to authenticate, particularly, as far as Stark and Thesiger were

concerned, was itself in the process of disappearing due to the inevitable

influence and impact of Western imperialism and modernity.

The deployment of a ‘genealogical understanding’ (Behdad 1994: 13)

is apposite to this paper’s examination of *Arabian Sands* and *The*

*Southern Gates of Arabia*. As texts produced at a point of genealogical

transition these works will be attributed the status of a ‘micropractice’, a

crucial point in the ‘dispersed network of representations that include

strategic irregularities, historical discontinuities, and discursive

heterogeneity’ of the Arabist tradition (1994: 12).

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**The Bedouin and the Arabian Landscape**

There are many examples in *Arabian Sands* and *The Southern Gates of*

*Arabia* where Stark and Thesiger deploy representational motifs in ways

that are characteristic of the Arabist tradition. However, in each text, these

motifs are cast rather differently. In this sense, *Arabian Sands* and *The*

*Southern Gates of Arabia* typify the discursive heterogeneity of the

tradition, particularly in terms of the gender division of Arabist writings.

Thesiger’s writing typifies the ‘male Arabist’; he writes of the Bedouin as

co-travellers, guides and protectors, figures upon whom he depends

absolutely (1959: 107). Clearly, Thesiger, as the dedication to bin Kabina

and bin Ghabaisha in *Arabian Sands* indicates, found both friendship and

companionship among the Bedouin of the Rashid and Bait Kathir tribes.

His travelling party is presented in terms of a familial relationship, taking

the form of both a paternal and fraternal bond in which his companions are

praised and admired for ‘their dignity and the regard which they have for

the dignity of others as fellow human beings’ (1959: 59). Something of this

dignity is captured in the photographs, ‘bin Anauf, a fifteen-year-old boy

of the Bait Kathir (Thesiger, 1959: 85) and ‘bin Ghabaisha’ (Thesiger 1959:

176). Both photographs have an intimate quality to them, emphasising the

physicality and vitality of their subjects as they stare across the sands with

somewhat melancholic expressions. Photographs such as these have been

cited as ‘strong evidence of [Thesiger’s] homosexual longings’.3 Whilst

there is no documented evidence to support such an assertion, what does

emerge from the text and photographs of *Arabian Sands* is a strong

emphasis on the supposed ethnic purity and noble character of the

Bedouin – qualities that are presented as part of the physicality of the

Bedouin male.4 Thesiger’s first introduction to bin Ghabaisha is one of a

number of accounts in the book that frame the Bedouin male in the context

of ethnic purity: ‘He had a face of classic beauty, pensive and rather sad in

repose, but which lit up when he smiled, like a pool touched by the sun.

Antinous must have looked like this, I thought, when Hadrian first saw

him in the Phrygian woods’ (1959: 172).

Motivated by an admiration for the physicality and manliness of the

Bedouin male, Thesiger describes them as: ‘… lean and hard, trained to

incredible endurance. Looking at them, I realized that they were very

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much alive, tense with nervous energy, vigorously controlled’ (Thesiger

1959: 53). These qualities are used as a benchmark against which Thesiger

competes, celebrating with the reader an ability to do so under such harsh

and extreme circumstances.5 This is particularly apparent during

Thesiger’s account of his first crossing of the Empty Quarter. According to

Thesiger’s version of events, the particular route across the Empty Quarter

that he had chosen to pursue was of such severity that it became a source

of considerable tension amongst his party. After several days of travelling

into the Empty Quarter, one group of tribesman decided that it was too

dangerous and turned back; the other group continued on with Thesiger.

Thesiger frames this incident in terms of the superiority of the Rashid

tribe over the Bait Kathir, whose leader Sultan is presented as having lost

his nerve:

He had always been the undisputed leader, with a reputation for

daring. It was a reputation not easily acquired among the Bedu; but he

had lived all his life in the mountains and on the steppes. In the Sands

he was confused and bewildered ... He looked an old and broken man

... (1959: 116).

The incident illustrates the way in which Thesiger’s perspective on the

Bedouin tribes accords with the traditional Arabist view of the Bedouin

as ‘noble’ and ethnically pure, a view in itself derived from colonialist

endeavours to identify supposedly ‘pure’ races (Young 2001: 33). It is an

appreciation of the Bedouin, more precisely the Rashid tribe, as an ‘asil,

that is of pure Arab blood and therefore apparently the upper-class

Englishman’s equal’ (Melman 2002: 117). This view was popularised in

the work of earlier travellers to Arabia such as Bertram Thomas and T.E.

Lawrence, both of whom also travelled with the Rashid tribe.

In contrast to Thesiger, who, from the outset, seeks to assimilate with

his Bedouin travelling companions, Stark’s work reveals a progression

from a position of relative detachment in the introductory chapters of *The*

*Southern Gates of Arabia* towards one of greater assimilation in the latter

stages of the narrative. At the beginning of the book, in the chapter, *Life*

*in the City*, Stark explores the city of Makalla. Upon arrival, she

undertakes an initial exploration of the seaport by car, driven by ‘an

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Afghan chauffeur whom the Governor had kindly placed at my service’

(Stark 1936: 37). It is clear from Stark’s account of this initial tour of

Makalla that it was conducted in a somewhat superficial manner: the

chauffeur is asked to slow ‘ ... to let me look into dark doors of shops, their

wares exposed against the outer wall’ (ibid.). Moreover, the sight of a

European woman being driven around the city in a car was such that

whenever Stark left the ‘defences of the car … a way had to be cleared’ so

that she could see ‘beyond their hot tumultuous faces’ (1936: 40).

Here the car acts both as the site of engagement and as a barrier against

it. There is a sense in Stark’s description of anxiety, fear, even.

Nonetheless, as the narrative progresses, the account of her journey

increasingly illustrates her interaction with the people amongst whom

she travels. As with *Arabian Sands*, it is the crossing of the landscape that

reveals greater insight into the author’s engagement with the Bedouin.

Like Thesiger, Stark extols the virtue of their social codes and hardiness,

representing them as a simple, honourable people of unerring loyalty:

‘One is then accepted into a rough but cordial brotherhood … and realizes

how the society of the wilderness has its social disciplines and restraints

…’ (1936: 96). Stark makes references to the characteristics traditionally

associated with the Arabist writings, but her tone is more light-hearted

than Thesiger’s, revealing some amusement, if not bewilderment:

The beduin and the soldier behind me were joining in a war song.

They trotted lightly with grasped weapons, two of them sang half a

line and the other two completed it with a fierce guttural ending; they

repeated this over and over again, answering each other, running all

the while; I began to count, after a time, and there were 130 repetitions

between them before they stopped with a yell. (1936: 93)

Whilst Thesiger consistently frames the Bedouin in terms of assimilation

and a desire for companionship, Stark’s portrayal is, by comparison,

marked by a degree of detachment. The Bedouin tend to be referred to as

‘*one’s* fellows’ or ‘*my* beduin’ [my emphasis] (1936: 75). In this sense,

whilst broadly commensurate with the Arabist practices of assimilation,

there is an element of the traditional colonial relationship between paid

guides and the adventurer/administrator here.

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A sense of greater integration builds in the later chapters of *The*

*Southern Gates of Arabia.* These chapters are also significant in revealing

the social codes and status of women, as well as being indicative of the

kinds of social interaction Stark was able to garner as a female traveller.

This is particularly apparent in the chapter *Life in Do’an* where Stark, as

a guest of the town’s governor, stays in his harem. Although *Arabian*

*Sands* is insightful on the social codes of the Bedouin in the desert,

conveying a strong sense of admiration and respect, it is an account

largely devoid of any references to women or any acknowledgement of

gender power relations.6 Stark, as a female traveller was able, however, to

convey a sense of this aspect of Arabian life. For example, in writing

about the children of the harem she comments: ‘The babies were the

playthings of the harim, and suffered, I thought, from overwrought nerves

due to the constant avalanche of caresses …’ (1936: 139). Nonetheless, in

doing so, she tends to follow the Arabist practice of emphasising the other

worldliness of Arabian cultural practices. For example, she describes

meeting Atiya, a young woman who has travelled from a neighbouring

village in search of medicine for an unknown ailment that made it

difficult for her to stand. She comments:

… Mahmud the doorkeeper took her to an upper room, and there

branded the soles of her feet with a hot iron: when I woke up, she came

down to me, apparently perfectly restored and cheerful. (ibid.)

In contrast to Thesiger’s almost obsessive pursuit of the finest, hardiest

and most noble Bedouin in the desolate sands of the Empty Quarter, Stark

moves, at times, uncritically, between different forms of social interaction.

As a single British woman, her cultural status is such that she is able to

mix with both the women of the harem as well as with men of important

social standing (1936: 114). Such social mobility was something that was

not accessible to either the women of the Hadhramaut nor, indeed, to male

travellers such as Thesiger.

Female Arabists such as Stark, and her predecessor, Gertrude Bell,

sought to represent themselves as independent travellers, ‘taking on the

masculine world of empire and expanding the boundaries of traditional

female participation’ (Tuson 2003: 230). Stark had access to the family, the

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home, as well as the harem, and could reveal to her readership aspects of

Arabian life that were impenetrable to male counterparts (as well as

modes of engagement deemed too ‘playful’ or too ‘feminine’ to warrant

the attention of male travellers). In this respect, Stark follows other female

Arabists such as Bell and Blunt, who, whilst still very much writing

within the tradition, were able to ‘semanticize cultural and geographical

border crossings’ differently from male Arabists (Lawrence 1994: xii).

The differences gender brought to bear on the significatory registers of

the Arabist tradition are also apparent in the representations of landscape

in *Arabian Sands* and *The Southern Gates of Arabia*. Thesiger adheres to

the male Arabist convention of portraying the desert largely in terms of a

conquest, overcoming the extremes the Empty Quarter presents to him

and his companions (Melman 2002: 11; Pratt 1992: 213–216). A powerful

representational motif throughout the book, it is particularly apparent in

the chapters, ‘On the Edge of the Empty Quarter’ and ‘The First Crossing

of the Empty Quarter’. At this stage in the narrative, Thesiger and his

party traverse a particularly difficult range of dunes, known as the Uruq

al Shaiba. He asks his guide, al Auf, if there is any way around this range

of dunes. Al Auf, an experienced guide of the Rashid tribe, replies, ‘No,

only if we went far to the west by Dakaka, where Thomas crossed. There,

the sands are easy’ (Thesiger 1959: 103).

The comparison that al Auf makes between Thesiger’s route and that

of Thomas serves to further emphasise the difficulty of what Thesiger is

undertaking. Moreover, presented through the voice of al Auf, the

comparison is afforded greater authority and objectivity. The magnitude

of traversing the Uruq al Shaiba is further heightened by the way in which

the obstacle it represents has been well established through earlier

accounts in the narrative of formidable, though smaller, ranges of dunes.

Thesiger describes the Uruq al Shaiba as a range of ‘a very big whalebacked

massifs, rising above white plains of powdery gypsum’ (Thesiger

1959: 112). The motif of a ‘voyage’ – one that has been associated with the

Arabist tradition (Cocker 1992: 70; Melman 2002: 114) – is particularly

apposite here. By using this representational strategy, Thesiger aligns

himself with earlier travellers to the region and, in so doing, contributes

to the self-referential nature of the Arabist genealogy. Several earlier

writers, such as Thomas and Philby also had their big ranges of dunes to

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cross, just as they also tended to seek out the noblest and purest Bedouin

guides.

In a similar way to Thesiger’s presentation of the Empty Quarter, Stark

describes her crossing of the Jol as the ‘unmarked’ (Behdad 1994: 92). This

section of Stark’s journey is presented as a move away from the familiarity

of the Arabian coast, (which occupies the first few chapters of the book),

towards the little known valleys and plateaux of the Jol. The first full

description of its landscape appears in the chapter *The Jol* and is redolent

of similar signifiers used by Thesiger to represent the Empty Quarter. For

example, Stark’s description of the Jol refers to it as holding for the

traveller:

… the fascination and the terror of vastness not only in space, but in

time. As one rises to its sunbathed level, the human world is lost;

Nature alone is at work, carving geography in her millennial periods,

her temporal abysses made visible in stone. (Stark 1936: 87)

Like the sands of the Empty Quarter, the Jol is represented as bleak and

desolate, but wondrously so. Indeed, it is indicative of the Arabist

representational strategy in which the landscape is ‘associated with

emptiness and stands for the infinity of the universe and the human

condition within it’ (Melman 2002: 114). As with the Empty Quarter, the

Jol’s vastness presents a fascination, but also threatens to overwhelm

Stark, creating the impression that this too is a landscape to overcome.

In contrast to Thesiger’s sparse prose, Stark’s description of the Jol is

characterised by the aesthetic qualities she assigns to it. She describes the

Jol in rich, semantically dense prose. In effect, the Jol is conquered through

description – every aspect of it is described and, by implication, framed

and contained. In this way, the power dynamics of the representational

strategies Stark uses are similar to those which Pratt refers to as the

‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ trope (interestingly a trope Pratt deems

‘masculine’) in that the landscape is conquered by a process in which ‘the

aesthetic qualities of [it] constitute the social and material value of [its] …

discovery to the explorers’ home culture …’ (Pratt 1992: 205)

In addition to the use of strategies that represent the landscape as a

conquest to be won and, in common with Stark’s more varied approach,

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it is also possible to find instances where the landscape is subject to a

process of ‘domestication’, a mode of representation more typically

associated with female travel writing. Significantly, whereas the

‘masculine’ representational motif of conquest is largely applied to the

natural wilderness of landscapes like the Jol, the strategy of domestication

tends to be applied to the urbanised landscapes of the cities and villages

of the Hadramaut. For example, in the chapter ‘Life in Do’an’, Stark stays

in the fortress of Masna’a. Whilst one might reasonably imagine this to be

an imposing, forbidding building -–and indeed, the photograph of this

building included in *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (titled *The Fortress of*

*Masna’a in Do’an*, opposite p.136.) – presents it as such, Stark’s account

of her stay seems to humanise and domesticate it:

It took me some days to disentangle the inhabitants of the fortress of

Masna’a, for it was a big place, like a warren, several stories high and

with several houses built inside its encircling wall and gate, and the

numbers of people who had been divorced and married other relatives

made the line between one family and another almost impossible to

follow. (Stark 1936: 119)

Here, Stark uses the characteristically ‘female’ strategy of ordering and

containing the places of Arabia by framing them in domestic details. It is

a strategy that is common to other women travel writers in Arabia,

particularly in the work of Anne Blunt, as well as women travel writers

writing outside the Arabist tradition. In contrast to the conquest of a

landscape, this strategy of domestication is premised on separating

‘mastery from domination, [and] knowledge from control’ (Pratt 1992:

215). Here, the fortress is mastered, not through rhetorical or aesthetic

conquest, but through the presentation of rhetorical knowledge.

**Writing the End**

In both cases, the final chapters of *Arabian Sands* and *The Southern Gates*

*of Arabia* signal a break with the representational registers of the Arabist

tradition. However, in keeping with the representational variance

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witnessed in their portrayals of the Bedouin and the landscapes of Arabia,

it is perhaps not surprising to find that these breaks with the tradition

manifest themselves rather differently. Stark and Thesiger both make use

of the impact of modernity on Arabia as a means of introducing a

disconnection with the past. However, in *Arabian Sands* this is presented

in terms of the influence of modernity on the Bedouin, particularly

Thesiger’s favoured travelling companions, bin Kabina and bin

Ghabaisha. The impact of modernity for Stark is brought to bear through

a more personalised lament for the loss of the undiscovered: the object of

her journey, Shabwa, has now – like much of Arabia – been discovered by

another traveller.

The final chapter of *Arabian Sands* is titled ‘The closing door’. It is a

very apt title for a chapter in which Thesiger writes of the disappearance

of the Bedouin’s traditional means of existence, a symptom of the impact

of Western modernity. The chapter opens with Thesiger and his party of

Rashid tribesmen negotiating with a group of Duru tribesman to cross

their territory in order to explore the Jabal al Akhadar mountain range in

Oman. The increasing in-fighting amongst the Sheikhs is presented as the

result of Western development and intervention surrounding oil

exploration. It was apparent to Thesiger that it was extremely unlikely

that he would get another opportunity to travel in this region again (1959:

308–309). Indeed, in this sense, the narrative signals the end of the

journey, not in a celebration of the achievement of crossing the Empty

Quarter, but rather through sadness and regret at the loss of opportunities

for further forays:

I was disappointed that I had been turned back when I had so nearly

reached the Jabal al Akhadar, for I would have given much to have

explored this mountain. I knew, however, that it would be useless to

return and try again the following year. (Thesiger 1959: 306)

There is also a sense that the traditional Bedouin way of life is drawing to

an end. Referring to bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha, in particular, but also

the Bedouin in general, Thesiger writes ‘I realized that the Bedu … were

doomed. Some people maintain that they will be better off when they

have exchanged the hardship and poverty of the desert for the security of

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a materialistic world. This I do not believe’ (1959: 310). Such a

perspective is typical of the nostalgic Arabist; a lament for the passing of

an era in which a vision of the Bedouin as an ancient and unchanged

people remained, to some extent, a reality.

The final chapter of *Arabian Sands* also includes an account of an

incident involving bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha which signals a break

from the Arabist representational register. Staying in Dubai with Thesiger,

bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha learn that a kinsman of theirs has been

arrested by the Sheikh of Sharja (Thesiger 1959: 307). Neither bin Kabina

nor bin Ghabaisha knew the man directly, nor his name, yet they felt

compelled to act. Thesiger asks how they intend to travel to Sharja, given

that they do not have their camels with them in Dubai. Bin Ghabaisha

answers: ‘We will hire a car; give us some money; you know how much a

car will cost’ (1959: 307). Perhaps this is again another aspect of the

Bedouin’s social codes of giving their all to help a kinsman. However, it

is significant to note which power relations prevail. Thesiger does not

give bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha money to hire a car; instead, he

arranges their passage on a lorry bound for Sharja, leaving later in the day.

Though it is likely that there was always a financial element to Thesiger’s

relationship with bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha, it is at this point in the

narrative that it is made explicit.vii As such, the incident signals a break

from the earlier Arabist frames of reference in which relations between

the author and the Bedouin are framed by companionship and admiration

for their ancient modes of existence.

Thesiger describes how, on his last night before flying back to Britain,

bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha were tying up their few belongings into two

small bundles. Looking on, Thesiger’s friend, Ronald Codrai, comments

that it was ‘… rather pathetic that this is all they have’ given the harsh

desert environment in which they live (1959: 310). It was a sentiment

which, Thesiger notes, had often occurred to him and yet, for him, the

fragility of their desert existence in which they continually struggled to

ensure life persevered over death, was nothing compared to the

inevitability of the death of this way of life itself:

… I knew that for them the danger lay, not in the hardship of their lives,

but in the boredom and frustration they would feel when they

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renounced it. The tragedy was that the choice would not be theirs;

economic forces beyond their control would eventually drive them into

the towns to hang about street-corners as ‘unskilled labour’… (ibid.)

This prophecy has undoubtedly become a reality. The Bedouin tribes of

the Arabian peninsula have gravitated towards the cities and towns,

unable to live and roam as they used to. It is, indeed, difficult to travel

through the Empty Quarter today by camel as Thesiger did. However, the

representation at the end of *Arabian Sands* of Arabia as a place

undergoing extremely rapid transformation implies that Thesiger was,

and will, remain the last to do so: ‘Here in the desert I had found all that

I asked for; I knew I should never find it again’ (1959: 310). Whether this

is simply a by-product of his lament for the passing of an age – the closing

of a door – or whether this is an aspect of Thesiger’s competitive desire to

‘win distinction as a traveller’ is a matter of speculation (1959: 4).

Nonetheless, the concluding chapter leaves no doubt that the journeys of

*Arabian Sands* will not be surpassed, and, in breaking from the

representational strategies associated with the Arabist tradition,

Thesiger’s work leaves no point of reference for this representational

lineage to continue.

The final chapters of *The Southern Gates of Arabia* have a similarly

significant relationship to the book as that of the final chapter of *Arabian*

*Sands*. However, whereas in *Arabian Sands* there is a lament for the

passing of an age and the end of the traditional Bedouin way of life, the

final chapter of *The Southern Gates of Arabia* reveals Stark’s

disappointment at not being the first European to reach Shabwa. It is

apparent from Stark’s text that not only is Shabwa no longer

undiscovered, but that the era in which it was possible to seek out places

that were still ‘undiscovered’ is drawing to a close. Whilst by no means as

overt as Thesiger’s, Stark’s lament suggests a negative view of modernity,

the practices of which had ‘transformed the exotic referent into the

familiar sign of Western hegemony’ (Behdad 1994: 13).

In the preceding chapter, ‘Breakdown in Shibam’, Stark is taken ill,

with the objective of her travels – Shabwa – almost in sight (1936: 269).

Her illness was of such severity that Stark wrote to friends in Aden and

asked for a doctor to be sent on the next RAF flight to Shibam. Whilst

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resting in Shibam, she learnt of a young German, Hans Helfritz, travelling

in the area and sharing her desire to be the first European to reach the city

of Shabwa (1936: 273). Stark’s account of this incident reveals her strong

competitive spirit. Hans Helfritz’s account of his travels is dismissed as

fanciful, inaccurate, and, by implication, a wholly inappropriate way of

conducting the business of travel in Arabia (ibid.).

At the moment when it becomes clear that the narrative will not reach

its ultimate purpose (to be the first European to enter Shabwa), Stark’s

competitiveness and her sense of travel etiquette emerge clearly. This is

in significant contrast to the narrative’s opening chapter where Shabwa is

not ascribed with the status of being the object of Stark’s desire for the

unknown. Indeed, in the opening chapter this desire barely seems to

emerge through the richly romantic historical account of the Arabian

coastline; Shabwa is referred to briefly: ‘Shabwa, last year, was still

unvisited’ (1936: 7). In the final chapter, as Stark is stretchered aboard the

RAF plane, there is a sense of resignation – the journey is over. There is

also a sense of relief: ‘We rose: the walls of the wadi, that lime and

sandstone prison, dropped away …’ (Stark, 1936: 287). In this sense the

status of Shabwa as somewhere ‘undiscovered’, and any notion by which

Helfritz might be attributed with its ‘discovery’ are undone by this

account of Stark’s departure. Indeed, the very fact that she was able to call

upon the services of the RAF and get such a prompt response undermines

the impression made earlier in the narrative that Shabwa was beyond the

interventions of Western modernity. Moreover, the inclusion of these

details at the end of the narrative signals a significant break with the

earlier deployment of Arabist modes of representation in which the

landscape is framed as ancient and unchanging.

However, in contrast to Thesiger, Stark’s sadness over the passing of

this era does not manifest itself in an explicit stance against modernity.

On the contrary, she does not appear to be averse to making use of

technology, such as travelling by car, in a way that Thesiger would not

have attempted. Nonetheless, Stark, like Thesiger, laments the passing of

the ancient and traditional cultural practices of Arabia, which she notes

have not escaped Western modernity:

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The cleverest workers of Do’an and Hadhramaut can use mud as

delicately as stucco, and indeed nothing can be more dignified and

decorative than the old fashion of their houses, which, unfortunately,

they begin to despise in favour of bad showy things from Europe.

(1936: 117)

Furthermore, in stating that the opportunities for discovery in Arabia

have now passed, Stark, like Thesiger, breaks away in the closing chapters

of her book from the largely Arabist representational strategies deployed

earlier in the narrative. In a manner that is not dissimilar to Thesiger,

Stark alludes to the fact there is no point in attempting a journey like the

one she has undertaken for the simple reason that its object is no longer

undiscovered: ‘I lay helpless, my journey crumbling like cardhouses

around me …’ (1936: 275). In doing so, Stark is also, by implication,

indicating the redundancy of the representational strategies she deploys

in the earlier parts of *The Southern Gates of Arabia*.

**Conclusion**

What is particularly significant about Stark’s and Thesiger’s deployment

of Arabist representational strategies is that, in writing at the end of the

genealogy, as modernity, oil and political change conspire against the

forms of travel they practised, both move away from these

representational strategies in the closing chapters of their work. Looking

beyond the demise of the Arabist tradition, it is significant to note the

growing focus in more recent travel writing on the cities of the Arabian

peninsula. Most notable perhaps is Jonathan Raban’s *Arabia Through the*

*Looking Glass* (1979). It is the dynamic nature of modernity that drives

Raban’s narrative: it is no longer the desert that is unexplored but the

cities of the peninsula (Melman 2002: 118). The earlier modes of

representation used to portray the Bedouin and the desert landscape are

supplanted by the search for new conventions to describe the

‘international’ hotels, advanced road networks and the immense wealth of

oil-moneyed Arabs. Even in works, like Michael Asher’s *The Last of the*

*Bedu* (1997), which focus specifically on searching out Bedouin still

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living by traditional means, the emphasis is not on rekindling the

representational strategies of Arabist tradition, but on dispelling them as

rich, romantic half-truths. Asher concludes ‘in my search for the last of

the Bedu, I had been hunting the snark’ (Asher 1996: 284).

In making use of the use representational strategies which, for the most

part, echo those practised by their predecessors, Stark and Thesiger, share

in the production of a ‘schizoid discourse that simultaneously affirms and

exposes the ideological discrepancies and political predicaments of

colonial hegemony’ (Behdad 1994: 14). However, the ‘displacement in

time and space’, which Behdad finds characteristic of earlier Arabists

such as Richard Burton and Wilfrid and Anne Blunt, must ultimately be

premised on a degree of commensuration between space and time (1994:

13). Whilst certain aspects, such as the colonial realities of the Middle

East, were displaced from these earlier accounts, it was still possible to

travel in ways and to places that bore out a reasonably objective

relationship to the Arabist modes of representation used to describe them.

In this respect *The Southern Gates of Arabia* and *Arabian Sands* are

indicative of a period in time when it was no longer possible to maintain

the displaced relationship between the realities of travel in Arabia and the

Arabist modes of representation. Consequently, Stark’s and Thesiger’s

works can be read as closing up the displacement in space and time

experienced by their predecessors, breaking with the past and creating the

possibility of the emergence of new representational registers.

**Notes**

1. *The Times*, 26 May, 1936, p. 10.

2. St John Philby and Bertram Thomas crossed the Empty Quarter within months of

each other in 1932. For discussion of their routes, see Thesiger 1959: 106.

3. See ‘Arab boy was the secret love of Thesiger’s life’ in *The Observer*, 31 August

2003.

4. In conversation with Michael Asher, Thesiger commented: ‘It’s not the people as a

whole that draw me back. I don’t feel I must be back with the Turkana or the Rashid.

It’s the individuals who draw me back. There might be four or five of them or there

might be more – with whom I want to spend my life. I don’t know why I feel

attached to certain people. Why does anyone feel attracted to someone else? Why

does a man choose a wife? I am not saying there is anything sexual in it, but

certainly you have this feeling of love for them and there you are.’ (1995: 277)

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5. Behdad discusses this point in relation to Palgrave and the Blunts (1994: 100–101).

The exception to this was the inclusion of the photograph titled ‘Drawing water at

Manwakh well: the girl from the Saar’ (1959: 192). The woman is briefly mentioned

in the text; described as ‘a very lovely girl … her hair was braided, except where it

was cut in a fringe across her forehead …’ (p.190).

6. In an interview with Michael Asher, bin Ghabaisha admitted: ‘I wanted to go with

him because he gave the Bedu rifles and camels and money … and those were

things I was interested in. Also a lot of people talked about his journeys and I

wanted to become famous among the tribes like the ones who went with him’.

(1995: 324)

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