

## ***CHAPTER 1: "THE DEVIL DRIVES!"***

"Starting in a hollowed log of wood—some thousand miles up a river, with an infinitesimal prospect of returning! I ask myself 'Why?' and the only answer is 'damned fool ... the Devil drives!'"  
(Sir Richard Burton to Monckton Milnes, the Lord Houghton, May 31, 1863, as quoted in Browdie, p. 15.)

As the fire died, the gurgling of the camels drifted through an otherwise silent darkness. I leaned back on my sleeping bag, gazing at the Milky Way splashed across a moonless sky, its luminescence outlining the dune across from where I lay.

Staring at the vastness above me, I mused over my obsession with the Negev and its measureless emptiness. This was the third year in which I would pit myself against it. It would be the longest and most demanding of my journeys. Why, I pondered, is this quest so compelling? Why am I so willing to endure the discomfort and danger?

I thought of the handful of others who had been drawn to this emptiness. Some, like Tomer, had come to find their souls. Others, spoken of by the guides but unknown to me, had come to escape them. They had traversed the terrain. Perhaps they had calmed their demons through physical exhaustion. But, without confronting those demons, they would never master them.

And what of those, like myself, for whom the desert had become a physical and spiritual quest? Were we more able to exorcise those demons—the buried shards of childhood trauma that manifest themselves in adult obsessions?

My mind wandered to the phalanx of British Arabists—among them Charles Doughty, Sir Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence, and Sir Wilfred Thesiger. It was Thesiger, author of *Arabian Sands*, with whom I felt the greatest affinity, perhaps because, unlike the others, he had challenged the desert during my lifetime.

Thesiger's grandfather, Lord Chelmsford, broke the Zulu Nation at the Battle of Ulundi in 1879, thus securing Britain's rule of South Africa. Thirty years later, as the British Empire stood at its peak, his father served as Minister to the Court of Abyssinia. It was there that Thesiger was born in 1910 and, following the Great World War, first tasted the lion's blood and came to know the desert tribes for whom he formed a lifelong affinity. A graduate of Oxford, he was the only

European ever to spend five years in the *Rub al Kahli*, “The Empty Quarter” of Saudi Arabia—a place so desolate that even the *Bedu* avoided it—and to have twice crossed it on foot. In his own words,

"I was perhaps the last explorer in the tradition of the past. I was happiest when I had no communication with the outside world, when I was utterly dependent on my tribal companions."

Yet, beyond that veiled admission of alienation from his aristocratic roots, Thesiger, in common with most other English Arabists, refused to look inward at what drove his quests. He was the last of that epoch, a brooding hulk who, into the final years of the 20th century, haunted the halls of Lowther Lodge, the London seat of the Royal Geographical Society—itself an anachronism of that time.

My thoughts skipped to Lady Margaret Hall, the first women's college at Oxford University. Founded in 1878 to inculcate in Victorian daughters the Doctrine of the Church of England, it had long since fallen from such chaste heights to become a co-educational seat of liberal arts.

I had ventured there every summer since 1991, along with English colleagues, to present a one-week residential course in wireless telecommunications business and technology. It was there that I comprehended that as an American, I could "never do things quite properly." And, having acknowledged that innate limitation, I had become peculiarly esteemed by the porters, the steward, and the dining hall staff.

That hall is a grand room marked by a high mansard ceiling adorned with skylights. Four rows of long wooden tables, with straight-backed wooden chairs closely placed on each side, run its length. At the front, near the entry, is a raised dais, reserved for the fellows of the college. The chairs on the dais have higher backs than those on the floor below. It is at this most aristocratic of institutions, during the most communal of activities, that the distinctions of class hierarchy are most maintained.

Portraits of the early principals glare from the walls—Victorian Englishwomen, indefatigable in purpose and certain of the righteousness of their Empire, Church, and class. Painted in gray upon dark gray upon black, only one displays the trace of a smile. These were

the icons who set Victorian standards—tyrannical conviction melded with oppressive gloom.

I recalled the Welshman who joined our course and sat next to me on his first visit to the dining hall. Gazing in bewilderment at the portraits, he reflexively exclaimed, "By Jesus, you wouldn't want to bed any of those bitches would you?" I grinned at his reaction. My English colleagues would have been appalled.

Sitting day after day beneath such visages, it took little imagination to surmise what drove the English Arabists. These were the guardian matriarchs—nay, the sculptors, of Victorian principles and practices: obsessing with adolescent sexuality, repressing masturbation, associating such "self abuse" with mental and physical deterioration, founding male chastity leagues, championing the doctrine of humoral medicine—that the more painful a remedy, the more curative its effect.

That Victorian mind-set, whether fostered by mother, father, or both, surely crushed any behavior, action, or even whisper that dared to transgress the fetters of convention. How many English youth who outwardly adhered to those obligatory forms lived an inward hell? No wonder that some fled to the farthest reaches of the Empire. Lawrence hinted at this in a remark to Lowell Thomas, "Perhaps that is ... why I am so fond of Arabia. So far as I know, it is the only country left where men rule!"

But escaping repression told only part of the story. Such young men felt not only driven from England, but also pulled toward Arabia. There, *Bedu* warriors roamed freely through a vast and hostile emptiness, each day pitting themselves against it. They epitomized romance. The *Bedu*, in the minds of the Victorians, were the knights-errant of their time.

As we view the 21st century, so the Victorians viewed the 19th—a new epoch marked by continuing scientific, engineering, and industrial progress. Advances in sanitation were wiping out infectious diseases. The railroads were construction marvels, unleashing the country's industrial might. The telegraph, like the Internet of today, facilitated almost instantaneous communications with every corner of the earth. The British navy ruled the waves. These—and the Gatling Gun—enabled the Victorians to forge the most powerful empire history has known.

Yet, a dark side shadowed that progress. The forces of the Industrial Revolution blighted once bucolic landscapes. They spawned an urban underclass racked with destitution, disease, and social chaos. Within that chaos festered the specter of socialism and revolution, threatening the fabric of middle- and upper-class life. More than one writer viewed the social and sexual

repression of the Victorian establishment as an effort to control the working classes in hopes of muting their revolutionary threat.

In the face of that chaos, Victorian poets, writers, and statesmen looked back to an understandable age of nobility and chivalry. In that idealized time, Good and Evil were tied to individuals, not incomprehensible and uncontrollable economic and social forces. The noble and chivalrous knight set forth to battle a personified evil. Through personal valor, that virtuous warrior overcame all obstacles to conquer in glory.

But escape from Victorian repression and the alluring romance of the desert still did not tell the whole story. There was yet a third element—safety in the anonymity that the desert promised.

The ethos of the desert differs from that of the Victorian clubs and drawing rooms—or modern cocktail parties and living rooms. Death hovers, always nearby. The imperative centers on physical survival. In the searing heat of summer, Death may be no more than a burst water bag away—a cliché, but even today true. Few live in the desert and few visit. All sit equally around the communal plate and share equally from it—even the condemned man before his execution. Men are judged by their physical and mental stamina—to share equally in tasks, food, and water, heedless of discomfort or self-deprivation. By self-selection, the desert is the exclusive, intense, and intimate company of a handful of men. For the Victorians, and those later, the *Bedu* were the romantic epitome of aristocratic nobility.

In the intimacy of shared deprivation, hermetically isolated from one's "normal" world, a man can reveal his innermost thoughts. Even if he chooses to remain silent, his companions, should they wish, can adduce those thoughts. But, if he speaks, and his companions are only the *Bedu*, he can reveal his darkest secrets. For the *Bedu* will never return to the clubs of London to divulge them.

And what are those secrets? Pivotal must be a shame imbued by a world of Victorian moralists. How could a youth, never able to meet the perfection demanded by such men and women, not become enmeshed in the self-loathing that lies in the darkest corners of the human soul? To what better place could he flee the stifling confines of convention than in the vast emptiness of the desert? And if one were self-loathing, in what more trying environment could he enact self-punishment than in the deprivation and pain of a self-imposed journey through that searing desolation? Did this differ so much from the medieval flagellants wandering through

Europe trying to appease the agony of their souls? Burton voiced such sentiment in trying to understand himself, concluding, "the devil [within me] drives!"

Nor is the desert the sole refuge of those driven. Sir Edmund Hillary who conquered Mount Everest, Thor Heyerdahl who aboard the raft *Kon Tiki* mastered the Pacific, and Jacques Costeau who vanquished the world beneath the seas, surely were equally as driven.

My thoughts returned to my own drive—to pit myself against this environment, to endure its hardship, to meet its mental and physical challenges. Constraints of time aside, that is why I chose the desert in August, its most inhospitable time. The traumas of childhood, real or imagined, compelled me to the desert as they compelled the Victorians.

But, unlike the Victorians, mine was a different quest, albeit no less romantic. They sought escape from convention and saw in the desert an idealized freedom. Most, if not all, denied that they pursued knowledge of the Almighty—and their writings are remarkable in the scant references to Him. In contrast, knowledge of the Almighty and His tie to this land formed the core of my journey. As I lay gazing at the Milky Way, I wondered whether or not I might succeed in grasping it. The words of the *Bedu* drifted through my mind. *Ensha'Allah*. "May it be the will of God."