A Journey in North-Western Arabia: Discussion

Mr. Hogarth; Colonel Maunsell; Dr. Stein; Captain Slack; Douglas Carruthers


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the tents of the Beni Sakhr, and thence by way of the Jordan valley to Damascus.

The President (before the paper): Mr. Douglas Carruthers, who has kindly undertaken to lecture to us to-night, has obviously many years' good work before him, though having already done some admirable scientific work. His first exploration of which I have any knowledge was that to Mount Ruwenzori, undertaken under the auspices of the British Museum. After that he went with Mr. Rickmer Rickmers to Turkestan, and we may hope to hear later on some of his experiences in those regions. Then he proceeded to Asia Minor, and he will to-night tell us something about his journeys in the lesser-known parts of Arabia. Subsequently he did some excellent work in the Dead sea region. He is, I understand, about to proceed on other journeys with some well-tried companions, and we may therefore look forward to a great deal more useful work coming from this explorer.

Mr. Hogarth: If I must begin the discussion, I shall avail myself of the opportunity to congratulate Mr. Carruthers on having made an exceedingly interesting journey, and on having come safely back. I think you will all agree with me that he has spoken with rare sympathy and insight about that most interesting people, the nomadic people of Arabia. It is the people of romance par excellence, wandering for ever in the most God-forsaken country in the world. The Beduins on the west side of the delta have a story that the Creator actually forgot them in the creation. At the same time, as I think Mr. Carruthers has shown you, they are a very highly chivalrous people among whom it is not really difficult to travel if you observe their ways and keep the rules. Arabs appear to live by robbing one another, but that practice is carried on according to certain rules, which make it really very like playing a game—a great rough game like football, perhaps not even so rough as football after the American fashion. It is but rarely that many are killed at it, and I am glad to hear Mr. Carruthers bear his witness that the raider does not go out in the first instance to kill. There is one interesting feature of the game—that, in the case of battle near an encampment, it is a recognized thing that neither party enters the camp. The fight is carried on according to certain rules well away from the camp, and does not endanger the lives of the women and children, who are left behind to look after the camels.

Mr. Carruthers has been exceedingly modest about what he achieved, and it is of course true that he only got a very short way into Arabia; but he travelled over a road which has not been travelled before, so far as I know, and only one man (whom he mentioned), the Italian Guarmani, who was one time a consul in Jerusalem, has travelled over a tract of country near that which he took. Guarmani’s account of his journey is extremely short and unsatisfactory, and, perhaps I might add, there has always been a certain doubt as to whether he took that journey at all. Mr. Doughty, at any rate, who has every reason to be heard with the deepest respect, has always refused to accept the fact of Guarmani’s visit to Kheibar. I must congratulate the company on having been present to-night, when these photographs of one of the interior oases of Arabia have been put for the first time on the screen. They were very admirable photographs, and, indeed, I have not seen better of nomadic Beduins before. They seem to represent the life as really and as intimately as Mr. Carruthers’ own account shows he had seen it. If he was not in any great danger in passing through the Beduin tribes, his dangers, as you see, began when he got into the first of the oases. That has always been the case in Arabia. It is perfectly true, as he said, that the oasis peoples are much more
fanatical, and, indeed, it is not difficult to understand. The Beduin knows perfectly well that nobody wants to take his land from him; but the oasis inhabitants are so rich, in comparison with the land about them, that they get an exaggerated idea of the value of what they possess, and they naturally expect that any traveller will be envious of them, and means to organize an expedition which will take their country from them. There is, of course, also the great fact of the slave-trade, which especially affects the oasis dwellers. The latter are well enough acquainted with the outside world to know that the Western nations have set themselves against the trade on which they are dependent for their own well-being and life, and they naturally fear that any European will sooner or later subvert the basis of their existence. Teima is a very interesting place, which has retained its name from the most primitive antiquity which we know anything about, and has been made famous by the inscription now in the Louvre at Paris, which was found built into one of the lining walls of that great well of which Mr. Carruthers spoke. It has been visited, as Mr. Carruthers said, by more than one European, but Euting, who is now Professor at Strassburg, is perhaps the only other European who has been there. His companion, Huber, was murdered some time after he had been at Teima, but not, as perhaps Mr. Carruthers may have led you to suppose, as the result of his having visited that particular oasis, for he had got right down to the coast, and was about to start again into the interior of Arabia when he was murdered somewhere near the coast of the Red sea. I do not know that I need detain you more, except to express, in common with every one else who takes any interest in Arabia, the hope that this will not be the last journey Mr. Carruthers will attempt in that country. He must now be known to several of the most important people in the tribes of North-Western Arabia, and he will start on the second occasion with a very great advantage. Everything depends upon your being known and being passed on by one important person to another, and I hope that when things are a little quieter Mr. Carruthers will repeat his attempt.

Colonel MAUNSELL: I must congratulate Mr. Carruthers on a most interesting and instructive lecture. I cannot claim to have penetrated far into Arabia, still I have made a journey on the Mecca railway as far as Tebuk, and have been able to note some of the charms of the desert which he has described. The photographs naturally cannot convey all the brilliance of the desert scheme of colour, which is the great beauty of this part of what has been described as the "Garden of Allah." The general elevation is from 3000 to 4000 feet, and the air is extremely clear, dry, and bracing, so that long marches can be supported without fatigue.

The Batn-el-Ghurul station on the railway may be termed the "gate of Arabia Petraea," as it stands on the edge of a long depression which extends south for nearly 150 miles, the view being over a waste of hill and plain, reflecting the most brilliant colours, from the light yellow of the sand to the bright red and violet of the nearer hills and black and purple of the serrated ridges towards the Red sea coast. On the horizon possibly there will be a beautiful mirage clear-cut against the intense blue of the sky. I think we may deduce from this splendid desert air a considerable influence of climate upon the character of the Arab inhabitants; their thin wiry frame, nervous, high-strung disposition and imaginative temperament are direct consequences of living always in such air, and explains why the true Beduin pines away when removed to another climate and is shut up in a house.

As regards rivers in Arabia, there are of course none except broad dry wadis, which seldom contain water. The rainfall may be taken as triennial, and is usually very heavy for a short period. The water drains into large shallow depressions, one of which is near Tebuk, another near Jebel Itbaik on Mr. Carruthers' route, and a third the wide basin of the Wadi Sirhan. The underground river at Teima
is probably part of the considerable flow which moves underground in a mysterious manner towards the head of the Persian gulf, and is probably a tributary of the great Wadi Ermek, which joins the Shatt-el-Arab near Busra. The discovery of the ruined Khan on a route between Maan and Jauf is of great geographical interest, as it proves the existence of a communication on the shortest line between Egypt and Baghdad. Such a communication may well be restored by rail in the future.

I must again thank Mr. Carruthers for a most interesting lecture, and for a considerable addition to our knowledge of unknown Arabia.

Dr. Stein: I have had the good fortune of spending some of the happiest time of my life in certain deserts, and I believe those who have shared such pleasures can understand why one cannot help feeling a deep interest in any other desert. Central Asia is a long way from Arabia, but I felt almost at home when some of those fine lantern-slides recalled to my mind scenes I had witnessed far away in the centre of Asia. When Mr. Carruthers spoke of the many weeks which he had spent travelling with the Arabs which afforded him protection, I confess I felt a sort of hearty envy. I believe that is the only way in which an extensive tract of country, offering such uniform features, can really be studied. I think, also, that the remarks which he made as regards the extent of vegetation, both along the sandy tracts of desert and among the dunes, will be appreciated by all those who have had problems of a similar kind to face in Central Asia. I have not been surprised at what he mentioned about the considerable amount of vegetation to be met with, even among the extensive tracts of dunes. We see the same, though on a smaller scale, in the Takla Makan; in fact, in most of the great sandy areas of Central Asia. I cannot go into the suggestions which might explain the occurrence of such vegetation; I believe it will be found that the formation of the ground is one of the chief factors which determine it. I was particularly struck by the great number of camels which these tribes are able to maintain in their wanderings. It is evident that Arabia receives great benefits from its vicinity to sea areas. It would be quite impossible anywhere in Central Asia to think even of hundreds of camels being taken about in this fashion by relatively large tribes; there would be neither water nor adequate grazing for them. I have not had the good fortune ever of travelling with a "fast train" of camels; it was my lot to pilot "goods trains" of camels through the desert, consequently I cannot claim such experience, as Mr. Carruthers no doubt gained, of the finer type of camel, but I can entirely support what his personal experience has shown as regards the length of time camels can work altogether without water. If in Arabia camels can be used for riding, without getting wasted, for seven or eight days without water, it is not much to be wondered at that those "goods trains" of camels in Chinese Turkestan can march along for more than two or three weeks, carrying heavy loads, without replenishing their water-supply. I have had myself the pleasant experience of taking such a "goods train" of camels for sixteen days through heavy dunes, and I am entirely convinced that the statements which are heard from men who have managed camel caravans, that their animals have maintained themselves for over three and four weeks during the winter, are correct. It is very largely, I believe, a question of the heat to which the animals are exposed. I can only conclude these remarks by an expression of my great pleasure in hearing of the interesting archaeological discovery which Mr. Carruthers made towards the end of his journey. It was indeed a lucky raid which enabled him to find the old caravanserai along what evidently looks like a route from Egypt towards the Persian gulf. With regard to the remark that he made that this would be likely to indicate a better physical condition of the region, I must venture to make a historical observation. Where
human factors are concerned, we cannot entirely go without direct historical evidence. I have too often noticed that just at periods when apparently prosperity was low, yet such periods were marked by special measures for the protection of thoroughfares to facilitate progress. It is just at times when traffic is difficult that human ingenuity makes great efforts to overcome the difficulties of nature. I wish to express again my hearty admiration for the power of endurance which evidently enabled Mr. Carruthers to perform this long arduous journey.

Captain Slack: The lecturer has referred to the Austrian dollar, the Maria Teresa. I should like to know something as to its value, which is, I think, about 3s. 6d., but I should be glad to know whether that is so, and also where Mr. Carruthers changed his money to carry out his expedition. I believe the Maria Teresa dollar is used down the Red sea, and also as far as Zanzibar. He might also tell us whether there is any idea of carrying the railway down south. I think he also said that there were not so many secrets now to be extracted from Arabia, but I hope he will do us the pleasure of affording some of his experiences in further expeditions he may take in that direction. I think there are a very great many secrets to be extracted from Arabia, and very little is known of its southern interior.

The President: I also want to ask the lecturer one question before proposing the vote of thanks to him. I notice that he speaks of the sand-dunes beginning quite suddenly—that you could almost step from the desert land on to the sand-dunes. The other day we had a very interesting paper from Mr. Beadnell on the sand-dunes of the Libyan desert, who mentioned the same thing, and described how sand remains drawn together in as it were long strips stretching for miles across the country. Has Mr. Carruthers ever considered what makes the sand remain in distinct patches, or why in some valleys it looks almost like water, its edges are so well defined? I venture to suggest the following explanation as possible. The sand, either because it contains air in its interstices, or possibly because of its physical conditions, may hold the heat better than the surrounding desert. Now, if this be so, during the night there will be an up-rush of air from the sand-dunes and an in-rush from the desert, and the result will be that any loose particles of sand on the desert will be as it were swept on to the sand-dunes, and a tidy edge will thus be given to this formation. I hope Mr. Carruthers, when he again visits such regions, will take the trouble to measure the temperature during the night-time of the sand-dunes, and of the desert near it, in order to see if this theory is likely to be correct. In conclusion, in your name I have to thank Mr. Carruthers for the very interesting and valuable description of this wild region.

Mr. Carruthers: As to the rate of exchange of the Maria Teresa dollar, I cannot remember off-hand exactly what it was, but they are to be procured in Damascus only through the Arabian merchants. You cannot buy them up in the deserts, nor exchange them at the ordinary money changers. I obtained mine privately. The dollar, by the way, is used all over Arabia, not only on the Red sea-ports, it is current all over Central Arabia. The natives won’t take Turkish money of any kind except the gold lira. As to the railway extension, I do not think it will be carried much further than Medina for some time. The tribes between Medina and Mecca will not allow it at all. I think Major Darwin’s explanation of the distribution of the sand very sound indeed, and I hope the next time I go I shall be able, perhaps, to find out a better explanation.