

Lucie Duff Gordon's "Letters from Egypt"

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LUCIE DUFF GORDON'S *Letters from Egypt* was one of a number of lively, personal books of travel to the East that delighted Victorian readers. If it is now largely unread, this is less because the writing is stale or unskilled than because the subject, nineteenth-century Egypt, is no longer topical. Yet picking up the book today, we find that as a travel account it embodies certain recurrent themes — or rather, certain ways of looking at the archetypal theme of the journey that belong particularly to writers of the British empire.

Letters from Egypt, containing letters Duff Gordon wrote to her family in England when she was forced by ill health to emigrate, was sufficiently popular in its day to go into three printings in the first year of its publication, 1865. It owed its success in part to the Victorian fascination with anything concerning the Orient, which then meant not only India and beyond but also Greece, Turkey, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Persia. These regions, it was becoming increasingly clear to British observers, would form the path of empire from the Mediterranean to India, and from this point of view public curiosity was natural.

But an equal incitement to curiosity was that the East formed a link to the classical past: the Greece and Troy of Homer; the Persia and Arabia of the *Arabian Nights*; the Egypt of Herodotus; and, chiefly, the lands of the Bible. Throughout the nineteenth century, the British looked to history to explain and dignify their own rapidly expanding civilization. Those who doubted the direction of material progress sought the lesson of history and a steadier view of truth by reading the ancient authors

or by travelling to the very scenes of ancient life, such as Egypt and the Holy Lands. They found in the East a place where time, in terms of European knowledge and progress, had stopped and where the ancient life went on in field, court, and bazaar. Though many Britons viewed the modern Eastern countries as graveyard civilizations where ignorant peoples lived unconscious of the former glories of their race (Kinglake 355), other British travellers thought that in the modern inhabitants they glimpsed human nature at a stage closer to its origins, before society strayed into newfangledness. As the Victorian traveller Charles Doughty writes in a preface to his prose epic, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888):

As for the nomad Arabs . . . we may see in them that desert life, which was followed by their ancestors, in the Bible tents of Kedar. . . . While the like phrases of their . . . speech, are sounding in our ears, and their like customs, come down from antiquity, are continued before our eyes; we almost feel ourselves carried back to the days of the nomad Hebrew Patriarchs. . . . (1:35)

In rapidly changing times, many Victorians felt the need to re-establish contact with that patriarchal world.

Fascinated by the East, then, British readers welcomed not only the scholarly tomes of great Orientalists like Sir Edward Lane and Sir Richard Burton but also the light-hearted memoirs of writers such as Alexander Kinglake, who made himself a name with the dashing travel book *Eothen* (1844), and even William Makepeace Thackeray, who did rather less well with *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1845). These writers, both friends of Lucie Duff Gordon, helped to prepare an audience for her intimate views of Egyptian life. Further, *Letters from Egypt* had an advantage in Duff Gordon's own popularity among certain circles in England. As a girl she had been ably educated by her parents, friends of the radical philosophers James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. In the natural course of things she became a translator of German works, including the histories of Leopold von Ranke — a talent that came in handy when she married the charming but indigent aristocrat Alexander Duff Gordon. The Duff Gordons collected a large circle of friends, people in

literature and parliament, who cherished Lucie's easy hospitality and good talk.

Lucie Duff Gordon, in fact, was a classic Victorian grand woman, one who powerfully impressed those around her by seeming to rise, almost supernaturally, above what was then the frankly limited intellectual condition of women. The powers Duff Gordon wielded were beauty, a sympathetic nature, and possession of what was admiringly known as "masculine" reason. She was the inspiration, Tennyson claimed, for *The Princess*, his long poem on the education of women (Duff Gordon 17).¹ George Meredith, in turn, modelled the sage Lady Jocelyn in *Evan Harrington* on "this most manfully-minded of women" (Duff Gordon 29; Meredith xv). And Alexander Kinglake, with characteristic teasing wit, described Duff Gordon as "so intellectual, so keen, so autocratic, sometimes even so impassioned in speech, that nobody feeling her powers could go on feebly comparing her to a . . . mere Queen or Empress" (Ross 7). Such friends, no doubt, helped to launch *Letters from Egypt*.

Our pleasure in the letters today will be less topical, more purely literary; and part of that pleasure will derive from the very form of the book. A collection of letters imposes a pattern on a life, especially if the letters are from abroad. Travel itself implies a motivation: an urge to escape, to seek, or to connect. But in tracing the pattern of Duff Gordon's travels we need to note that their original cause was a matter of circumstance. She went to Egypt to try to slow the consumption of which she in fact died after eight years' struggle. She began her self-exile at the age of thirty-nine on the aptly named Cape of Good Hope, but when she realized that she would never again be able to live in cold, damp England, she joined a daughter and son-in-law in Alexandria. There she took up the regimen that lasted until her death in Cairo in 1869: wintering in sunbaked Nubia, as the upper Nile was then called, and summering with members of her family in lower Egypt or, occasionally, England.

Yet Duff Gordon's consumption, seemingly a practical enough reason to travel, in fact places her among an almost symbolic category of British writers, those forced by the disease to flee bone-chilling England for a place nearer the sun. Often this

wasting but feverish illness has impelled its victims to seek not only physical ease but spiritual peace. We see the pattern in Laurence Sterne, Keats, and Katherine Mansfield embarking for southern Europe; Robert Louis Stevenson for the South Seas; D. H. Lawrence for the American Southwest. The reprieve in a sunny climate seems to offer a last chance to live simply and pleasurably, to re-enter an earthly Eden bounded by the consciousness of death.

What makes this category of writers symbolic is that, from the industrial revolution to the Second World War, dozens of other British writers sought the same remedy for spiritual rather than physical malaise. Shelley, Byron, Samuel Butler, W. H. Hudson, E. M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood — all took various routes south to escape what they saw as England's cold, inhibited social and emotional climate for a supposedly more whole and spontaneous life in the sun (Alcorn 42-59; Churchill 177; Fussell 137-41). That myth informs Duff Gordon's journey as it evolves from a mere search for health to the embrace of a new life, simpler but in the end more aesthetic and perhaps even more humane than that she had known in England.

Duff Gordon spent her first year in Egypt moving up and down the Nile in inverse relation to the temperature. In her second year she took a house, the old French consulate built over the ruined temple of Thebes in the village of Luxor on the upper Nile. The beauty of this situation was such that Gustave Flaubert, regarding it by moonlight some years earlier, complained of the "wretched poverty of language" to describe it (164). Duff Gordon lived there with her English maid, Sally Naldrett, her Alexandrian servant, Omar Abu Halawy, and assorted houseboys. Besides these, her society comprised the local elders and their wives, the peasants she doctored for cholera and other ailments, and occasional European travellers. The heat of upper Egypt was the only remedy for her cough, and much as she missed her family she soon dreaded the trip to meet them in Cairo, where she hacked and shivered in the damp.

From Esneh in upper Egypt, where she has escorted a visiting cousin, she writes:

Yesterday we had the thermometer at 110; I was the only person awake all day in the boat. Omar, after cooking, lay panting at my feet on the deck. Arthur went fairly to bed in the cabin; ditto Sally. All the crew slept on the deck. Omar cooked amphibiously, bathing between every meal. The silence of noon with the *white heat* glowing on the river which flowed like liquid tin, and the silent Nubian rough boats floating down without a ripple, was magnificent and really awful. (161)

Here as in so many European descriptions of the East, the sheer heat seems to reveal a mysterious presence, a *genus loci* nearly inexplicable to people in the remote North, consumed with the busy round of their affairs (Kinglake 242-43; Doughty 1:367-68).

The heat dictates an entirely foreign way of life, which Duff Gordon describes at first as an outsider:

Can you imagine a house without beds, chairs, tables, cups, glasses, knives — in short, with nothing but an oven, a few pipkins, and water-jars, and a couple of wooden spoons, and some mats to sleep on? And yet people are happy and quite civilized who live so. An Arab cook, with his fingers and one cooking-pot, will serve you an excellent dinner quite miraculously. The simplification of life possible in such a climate is not conceivable unless one has seen it. (153)

But it is not long before the climate and a restricted income convert Duff Gordon to this same simplicity. She writes to her husband from her sparsely-furnished, half-open "Theban palace":

I am now writing in the kitchen, which is the coolest place where there is any light at all. Omar is diligently spelling words of six letters, with the wooden spoon in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth, and Sally is lying on her back on the floor. I won't describe our costume. It is now two months since I have worn stockings, and I think you would wonder at the fellaha who "owns you," so deep a brown are my face, hands and feet. One of the sailors in Arthur's boat said: "See how the sun of the Arabs loves her; he has kissed her so hotly that she can't go home among English people." (175-76)

Here Duff Gordon has come far from the London life of bowler hats and stays, and far too from Victorian assumptions about the

proper distance between a lady and her servant, especially a male servant of colour. From the British point of view, of course, the Egyptian, with few exceptions, was a "native," a racial inferior to be kept in his place, ultimately to be ruled. This distinction, like the need for stockings, ceased to have meaning for Duff Gordon as the Arab sun and simple, direct mode of existence claimed her for their own.

In Egypt, in fact, Duff Gordon attained the privileged perspective of being able to see two cultures — the complicated European and the pastoral Egyptian — with detached amusement. Thus she is able to appreciate the astonishment of a villager who watches her prepare her houseboat to rent to English tourists. She writes:

I settled all accounts with my men, and made an inventory in Arabic, which Shaikh Yussuf wrote for me, which we laughed over hugely. How to express a sauce-boat, a pie-dish, etc. in Arabic, was a poser. A genteel Effendi, who sat by, at last burst out in uncontrollable amazement; "There is no God but God: is it possible that four or five Franks can use all these things to eat, drink and sleep on a journey?" (n.b. I fear the Franks will think the stock very scanty.) Whereupon master Ahmad, with the swagger of one who has seen cities and men, held forth. "Oh Effendim, that is nothing: Our lady is almost like the children of the Arabs. One dish or two, a piece of bread, a few dates, and Peace (as we say, there is an end of it). But thou shouldst see the merchants of Alexandria, three tablecloths, forty dishes, to each soul seven plates of all sorts, seven knives and seven forks and seven spoons, large and small, and seven different glasses for wine and beer and water." "It is the will of God," replied the Effendi, rather put down: "but," he added, "it must be a dreadful fatigue to them to eat their dinner." (285-86)

In leaving England for the upper Nile, at least Duff Gordon escaped the fatigue, common to cosmopolites of London and Cairo, of using multiple forks to dine.

On that magnificent location on the Nile, with the props of material progress removed, Duff Gordon glimpsed the paradisaical life, simple yet aesthetically and spiritually complete, for which her compatriots so often crossed continents. She writes to Alick Duff Gordon:

If I find Thebes too hot as summer advances I must drop down and return to Cairo. . . . But it is very tempting to stay here — a splendid cool house, food extremely cheap . . . no trouble, rest and civil neighbors. I feel very disinclined to move unless I am baked out, and it takes a good deal to bake me. . . . The weather has set in since five or six days quite like paradise. I sit on my lofty balcony and drink the sweet northerly breeze, and look at the glorious mountain opposite, and think if only you and the chicks were here it would be "the best o' life." (123)

Of course it would be foolish to suggest that in Egypt Duff Gordon attained the unattainable — complete harmony of being. She missed her family and she knew that she was dying. Yet the beauty she found there, in both the landscape and the people, was a gift — one that others in her family, she sometimes suggests, would be incapable of receiving even if they had come to live with her. Thoroughly creatures of European civilization, pursuing social and business interests, they had neither her motivations nor her resources to re-envision life.

Finding herself, then, an exile in paradise, Duff Gordon strove to fill the hollowness by reclaiming a cultural past which she had thus far known only through literature. This nineteenth-century search for roots, incidentally, did not cease with Victoria's reign; it merely shifted its definition. Where Doughty and Duff Gordon quested after the universals of human nature revealed in the great books, British travellers between the world wars sought a transfusion of psychic vitality: recall, for example, D. H. Lawrence's quest for "blood" knowledge among the Sardinians and Graham Greene's "journey without maps" through West Africa on the trail of the truly seedy, the pit of the Freudian self. Certainly Duff Gordon is on no such trail of risky initiations, but her recovery of the past does finally engage her in criticisms of British culture similar to those underlying the primitivist journeys of Lawrence and Greene.

According to contemporary accounts, Duff Gordon's nature was extraordinarily sympathetic, and perhaps that is why, in Egypt, she was so able to comprehend the truth to life of classical literature. She writes of the rural life of upper Egypt:

Nothing is more striking to me than the way in which one is constantly reminded of Herodotus. The Christianity and the Islam

of this country are full of the ancient worship, and the sacred animals have all taken service with Muslim saints. . . . This country is a palimpsest, in which the Bible is written over Herodotus, and the Koran over that. (65)

Yet her experience of Egypt is never coldly literary. She enters her new life — which is also the most ancient life — with her whole imagination. “Last evening,” she writes,

I went out to the threshing-floor to see the stately oxen treading out the corn . . . and saw the reapers take their wages, each a bundle of wheat according to the work he had done — the most lovely sight. The graceful, half-naked, brown figures loaded with sheaves; some had earned so much that their mothers or wives had to help to carry it, and little fawn-like, stark-naked boys trudged off, so proud of their little bundles of wheat. . . . The *sakka* (water-carrier), who has brought water for the men, gets a handful from each, and drives home his donkey with empty water-skins and a heavy load of wheat, and the barber who had shaved all these brown heads on credit this year past gets his pay, and everyone is cheerful and happy in their gentle, quiet way; here is no beer to make men sweaty and noisy and vulgar; the harvest is the most exquisite pastoral you can conceive. (151)

As I sat with Abdurrachman on the threshing-floor and ate roasted corn, I felt quite puzzled as to whether I were really alive or only existing in imagination in the Book of Ruth. (149)

Such an apprehension of oneself in the human continuum is what many travellers seek but probably few find.

From the point of view of her own Christian upbringing, Duff Gordon's rediscovery of history is revisionist. Not that she is ever disappointed by the truthfulness of the Bible, but that she is disillusioned with the use made of the Bible to teach dogma and, worse, intolerance of other faiths, particularly Islam. “Every act of life here is exactly like the early parts of the Bible and it seems totally new when one reads it here,” she writes.

Old Jacob's speech to Pharaoh really made me laugh (don't be shocked), because it is so exactly what a fellah says to a Pasha: “Few and evil have been the days,” etc. (Jacob being a most prosperous man); but it is manners to say all that, and I feel quite kindly to Jacob, whom I used to think ungrateful and discontented. . . . All the vulgarized associations with Puritanism

and abominable little “Scripture tales and pictures” peel off here, and the inimitably truthful representation of life and character — not a flattering one certainly — comes out, and it feels like Homer. (128)

The European reverence for the Bible and ironical contempt for the modern peoples that still live the Biblical life confront Duff Gordon with the hypocrisies of her own race. Her wider experience radicalizes her; her letters become filled with the defence of Moslem ways, pleas for customs to be understood in their cultural context. An example is the anecdote of the elderly Moslem who, having been teased for marrying more than one wife, asks a young Englishman how many women he has “seen” in his life, in the Eastern phrase. “The Englishmen could not count — of course not,” Duff Gordon comments; but of the old Moslem’s mistresses, those still living are comfortably installed in his house (101). The purpose of the anecdote is not to advocate harems, but to insist, more in the manner of a modern anthropologist than of an imperial Briton abroad, on the integrity of a culture removed from the mainstream of the West.

Duff Gordon, then, shifts from a historical interest in Egypt to a deep involvement with present life. Seeing villagers brutally exploited by an arbitrary government playing into the hands of Europeans, she writes to her mother:

You will think me a complete rebel — but I may say to you what most people would think “like my nonsense” — that one’s pity becomes a perfect passion, when one *sits among the people* — as I do, and sees it all; least of all can I forgive those among Europeans and Christians who can help to “break these bruised reeds.” (228)

She urged her family to publish her letters in order to inform the British of the bad conditions in Egypt, where they had rosy hopes of expanding trade. (Her own son-in-law, Henry Ross, was a director of a company that exported “ostrich feathers, bees-wax, oxhides and gold-dust” [84]. It collapsed when the Egyptian government went bankrupt.) Gradually, the greed and arrogance of Westerners who came to Egypt alienated Duff Gordon from her native culture and bound her to her adoptive one. In Cairo, having been insulted by Englishmen who see her exchanging

courtesies in the street with a black Nubian, she writes, "I hate the sight of a hat here now" (185).

One of Duff Gordon's twentieth-century appreciators was the novelist E. M. Forster, and it is interesting to think that she may have subtly influenced his ideas. It was Forster who encapsulated the ethos of the Bloomsbury group of writers, artists, and philosophers in his prescription, "only connect"; only connect, that is, to what is fundamentally decent and loving in others, regardless of apparent barriers of class and race. To make that connection, though, Forster realized, is more difficult than it sounds. It requires a deliberate passage, a journey across the borders prescribed by one's culture. Such is the theme of his greatest novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), where the gulf between would-be friends is specifically that between West and East. Forster's protagonist, Fielding, falls short: he retreats from Oriental muddle to European order, while his counterpart, Aziz, warns that it is too soon for an Indian to trust an Englishman. Yet it is a revolution that they come as close as they do.

Lucie Duff Gordon's passage is more complete than Fielding's: she gives up more of England and takes more of Egypt. In many letters she tries to prepare her family for this change. She describes, for example, a visit to provide medical care to the Shaikh Mohammed:

There he lay in a dark little den with bare mud walls, worse off, to our ideas, than any pauper; but these people do not feel the want of comforts, and one learns to think it quite natural to sit with perfect gentlemen in places inferior to our cattle-sheds. I pulled some blankets up against the wall, and put my arm behind Shaikh Mohammed's back to make him rest while the poultices were on him, whereupon he laid his green turban on my shoulder, and presently held up his delicate brown face for a kiss like an affectionate child. As I kissed him, a very pious old moollah said, "*Bismillah*" (In the name of God), with an approving nod, and Shaikh Mohammed's old father, a splendid old man in a green turban, thanked me with effusion, and prayed that my children might always find help and kindness.

I suppose if I confessed to kissing a "dirty Arab" in a "hovel" the English travellers would execrate me; but it shows how much there is in "Mussulman bigotry, unconquerable hatred, etc.," for

this family are Seyyids (descendents of the Prophet) and very pious. (118-19)

Duff Gordon usually addressed letters like this to her mother, whom she trusted to understand that she was bound by human laws deeper than those of English propriety and religious dogma.

One incident particularly tried Duff Gordon's loyalties, divided between her British past and Egyptian present. While the episode might have disillusioned her with her new life, however, it had the opposite effect of more firmly attaching her to an Egyptian friend while further straining old ties. The Egyptian friend was her servant Omar, with whom she had formed an almost filial bond. She writes to her husband of a night at Aswan:

... Omar woke, and came and sat at my feet, and rubbed them, and sang a song of a Turkish slave. I said, "Do not rub my feet, oh brother — that is not fit for thee" (because it is below the dignity of a free Muslim altogether to touch shoes or feet), but he sang in his song, "The slave of the Turk may be set free by money, but how shall one be ransomed who has been paid for by kind actions and sweet words?" (164)

This intimacy is threatened when, to Duff Gordon's consternation, Omar and her maid Sally produce a baby. One can understand her anger and sense of betrayal. Throughout her seven lonely years in Egypt, and despite plausible offers, she stuck to the Christian law against adultery; while here was Sally doing what she pleased. For it was Sally, not Omar, whom Duff Gordon blamed. "I find that these disasters are wonderfully common here," she writes acidly; "— is it the climate or the costume I wonder that makes the English maids ravish the Arab men so continually?" (187). Her harsh treatment of Sally, as her great-grandson Gordon Waterfield has pointed out, might have at least two causes: jealousy of Omar, both friend and nurse; and a suspicion that her family would toe the color line and blame Omar, which they did (Duff Gordon 194). She herself was too proud, having begun the passage across cultural boundaries, to turn back.

Duff Gordon lost much in the course of her exile — family and friends and ultimately even the pastoral Egypt that had first consoled her. Lamenting the enforced labour that depopulated

villages to construct railroads and canals, she writes, "When I remember the lovely smiling landscape which I first beheld from my windows, swarming with beasts and men, and look at the dreary waste now, I feel the 'foot of the Turk' heavy indeed" (319). Yet she managed in exile to create a new life. The social ease and aristocratic independence that made her a grand woman in Victorian drawing rooms made her an Emeereh in Egypt. She seemed instinctively to know when to condescend by sitting on the carpet and eating with her fingers, when to conquer with eloquent speech. The people of Luxor, whom she doctored through an epidemic, named her Noor-ala-Noor, or "light from the light." Her daughter Janet Ross writes of how, on a journey to visit her mother at Luxor, the Ross party had difficulty obtaining food until the Egyptian ship's captain "proclaimed aloud that the daughter of the Sitt-el-Kebir (the Great Lady) was on board," whereupon the people brought out milk, fowls, and lambs (Duff Gordon 311). Arrived at Luxor, Ross continues:

Our procession to dinner was quite Biblical. Mamma on her donkey, which I led, while Henry walked by her side. Two boys in front had lanterns, and Omar in his best clothes walked behind carrying some sweet dish for which he is famous, followed by more lantern bearers. As we went through the little village the people came out of their mud huts and called on Allah to bless us, the men throwing down their poor cloaks for my mother to ride over and the women kissing the hem of her dress. (312)

One hears again echoes of *A Passage to India* and the spontaneous cult of the sympathetic Englishwoman Mrs. Moore — or "Emiss Esmoor," as her name is chanted through the streets (*Passage* 225).

Back in England and America, the letters of Lucie Duff Gordon did help to create sympathy for the Egyptian people (Duff Gordon 254). And to future readers, the letters proved that at the height of imperial progress, the ability of the British to connect did not entirely fail. Forster pays tribute to the few travellers to the East who transcended that maddening British insularity: "Kinglake, Doughy, Blunt, Lucie Duff-Gordon, discovered more than Dagoland: they found gravity and mirth here, also health, friendship, peace . . ." ("Salute" 244).

NOTE

¹ I cite Waterfield's edition, which includes previously unpublished letters and a helpful introduction; it does, however, rearrange some of the original material for the sake of the narrative.

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