

Into the desert: reality or unreality? Francis Rennell Rodd and Ahmed Hassanein Bey

WOCMES Barcelona 2010

Janet Starkey

Francis James Rennell Rodd

Adrian Brunel's popular exhibition film, *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1924) was largely filmed in Blackpool beaches: the journey is absurd, the humour surreal: prefiguring such series as *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. In this spoof, three intrepid explorers, Holmes, Sweet and Holmes, travelled to Sagrada, sailing via the Bay of Biscay. They trekked through tropical rain forests, up the languorous Salamander river and across the desert on camels. The 'heroes' journey through rivers, across deserts and finally reach the Sagrada, before reaching their destination. They make for home but one by one drop dead in the desert, leaving their bones to bleach in the sun. This journey is portrayed in an absurd manner, satirising colonial stereotypes of 'native' people.

Crossing the Great Sagrada (1924) now in the National Film Institute, London, was largely modelled on a real travelogue, *Crossing the Great Sahara* (1924). The expedition was less tragic and the participants went on to further adventures. In 1922 Francis Rennell Rodd (1895–1978), accompanied by Captain Angus Buchanan (who had already been to Aïr in 1919 and published an account in his book *Out of the World: north of Nigeria* (1921)) and the Canadian cinematographer T.A. Glover travelled across the Southern Sahara for nine months to study the Tuareg of the Aïr and the Damergu region around Tanout. Glover later completed the first motor journey from the Cape to Cairo (sixteen months from 1924 to 1926 covering 12,732 miles) and made a film of the expedition *Cape to Cairo in 1926*.

Although Francis could not complete the Tuareg trek as he had to resume his diplomatic duties in December 1922, Buchanan and Glover completed the 3,500 mile journey across the Sahel region from Kano in Northern Nigeria in 1922 reaching Tuougourt, Algeria in 1923. Buchanan and Glover eventually compiled a silent film, *Crossing the Great Sahara* (1924) which records their expedition. The journal *Bioscope* called it a 'soberly realistic camera study' very different from 'the romantic adventure land' of Rudolph Valentino's *the Sheikh*.

Yet its exoticism was well advertised: ‘a film picture of sheer adventure, of veiled, mysterious, unknown tribes, and hidden robber cities’.

Yet Francis was not a typical British imperialist as this paper develops we will discover serious cross-cultural facets. In 1926 Francis published *People of the veil: being an account of the habits, organisation and history of the wandering Tuareg tribes which inhabit the mountains of Air or Asben in the central Sahara*. This book is a meticulous anthropological treatise that, according to H.R. Palmer, portrayed with freshness and enthusiasm whilst ‘delineating vividly the romantic side of the life of the people to whom the work mainly relates.’ He uses Ibn Khaldun’s *History of the Berbers*, an author famous for his model of the rise and fall of empires. In his review E.F. Gautier notes ‘Mr. Rodd communicates a sympathetic feeling for the Tuareg to the reader and inspires the like for himself. ... brings a spirit of exactitude, even of meticulousness. ... On the Tuaregs their society, political organization, mode of life, implements-he has gathered very complete data.’ He concludes: ‘Mr. Rodd’s journey shows that the obstacles are not insurmountable. ... he was able to renew a wartime camaraderie with the French officers commanding the military posts, and this naturally contributed to his success. But his personality, which shines through his book, would alone have assured it.’ Francis made a second journey in 1927 accompanied by his brother the rakish Peter Rodd (the husband of Nancy Mitford whom she married on the rebound and pilloried as the character Tony Kroesig in *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949)) and the explorer Augustin Courtauld. Francis’s studies of the Tuareg won him the Royal Geographical Society’s Cuthbert Peek award in 1927 and again in 1929 for ‘For his journeys in the Sahara and his studies of the Tuareg people’ undertaken in 1922 and 1927.

Francis James Rennell Rodd, second Baron Rennell, a strikingly good-looking man like his father before him, was born in England but grew up abroad wherever his father, James Rennell Rodd, first Baron Rennell (1858–1941), was posted. James himself, he was only son of Major James Rennell Rodd; and a grandson of James Rennell, the famous cartographer and geographer whose professional life began in Bengal.¹ Educated Balliol College, Oxford as a classical scholar, James was also a colourful figure an intimate of Oscar Wilde in his youth, and an accomplished poet who published about 20 volumes of poetry between 1881 and 1940. Courteous, unassuming, modest, but resolute he recorded his diplomatic career in

¹ In 1932 Francis published *General William Eaton: the failure of an idea* identified by Cassandra Vivian in 2000 as one of the best sources on one of the first American explorers in the Libyan Desert.

his reminiscences, *Social and Diplomatic Memories* (3 vols. 1922–1925). As a diplomat and a scholar he was unquestionably one of great distinction. Amongst his many other diplomatic postings, James served in Cairo in 1894; in 1899 he was awarded the KCMG work in Cairo during the Fashoda crisis. He then served as ambassador in Rome in a critical period from 1908 to 1919 and his memoirs reflect his familiarity with both Sykes and Picot. In 1919 James was appointed to Viscount Milner's special commission (December 1919 to March 1920) on the status of Egypt after serious anti-British nationalist rioting instigated by Saad Zaghlul and the Wafd party. From 1919 to 1923 James served at that promoter of many nationalisms, the League of Nations, at a time when the British protectorate of Egypt was unilaterally declared in 1922.

Francis was fluent in French, German, and Italian. James records that at sixteen Francis was removed from Eton to spend a year at Weimar where ‘he prepared for Oxford while doing all his work in German. The process was then repeated in French for six months at Geneva, after which he was accepted at Balliol before he was actually eighteen... He had had every opportunity of picking up Italian in his holidays, and thus went up to the University perfectly at home in three foreign languages.’ Francis then went up to Balliol but ‘had only been some four terms at Oxford (1913-1914) when the war broke out (in September 1914), and he of course volunteered at once.’ ‘His knowledge of languages proved so useful that after about a year in France (with the Royal Field Artillery) was employed on various special services [seconded to intelligence duties in Italy, in 1916], which finally brought him to Damascus a short time before hostilities were suspended.’ {James RR}

Francis persuaded David Hogarth (of the Ashmolean Museum and previously Director of the Arab Bureau in Cairo) to check his manuscript before it was published. The Arab Bureau was founded in 1916 with a small group of British intelligence officers to coordinate imperial intelligence activities. Generally pilloried in scholarly literature as being a group of amateurish and incompetent pro-Arab dilettantes who promoted Arab nationalism as a foil for pro-Ottoman sentiment, Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916–1920* (1992) challenged this stereotype, concluding that Bureau members were usually sober-minded strategists aiming to secure the region for imperial British interests. Nevertheless, it was populated by flamboyant characters, particularly T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, David G. Hogarth (its director), Sir Ronald Storrs, St John Philby — and a very junior staff officer Francis who served in Libya, Sinai, Palestine, and finally became staff captain, Arab Bureau, at Damascus. In despatches there is a record to the effect that

‘The Arab Bureau is indebted to Lieut. FR Rodd, General Staff Intelligence, for the following translation of " Appunti sulla natura del ' Califfato ' in genere e sul presunto ' Califfato Ottomano,' " by Carlo Alfonso Nallino, Professor of History and Islamic Institutions, University of Rome (Italian Foreign Office, 1917). James recorded that ‘During the Palestine campaign [Francis] had become devoted to Colonel [T.E.] Lawrence, who won the entire confidence of the Arabs, and played such a conspicuous part in the eastern zone of action.’ Hogarth greatly influenced T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935) whose *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was published in 1926. The character of Dryden in the film *Lawrence of Arabia* was loosely based on an amalgamation of Hogarth and the colonial Governor Sir Ronald Storrs. Did Francis’s admiration of Lawrence encompass British promotion of Arab and even Egyptian nationalism?

It is not surprising that by 1930 Francis recorded his interests in *Who’s Who* as ‘travel and anthropology’, yet he changed career, abandoned his life and a diplomat and sometime anthropologist and traveller, to become a banker with Morgan, Grenville & Co. In a Waugh-like satire on the 'phoney' war, *Pigeon Pie* (1940), Nancy Mitford described a crazy aristocracy and caricaturised her brother-in-law, Francis, as Luke, a pompous merchant banker, a rich bore, who was married to the heroine, Lady Sophia Garfield. Although Francis Rodd left the Tuaregs for the less stimulating reticence of European banking Mitford’s description of him depreciates his extraordinary adventures. Lawrence more accurately described him as: ‘A modern incarnation of Cesare Borgia. A first-rate fellow, and knows a great deal.’

Rosita Forbes

Another early North African travelogue in held by the NFI is the 6 minutes of film made by the traveller and explorer Rosita Forbes’s *Red Sea to Blue Nile* (1926) which is also typical of European ‘actuality’ imperial travelogues of the 1920s. Forbes was a best-selling author in her day famous, for example, for her travel account *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara*. A romantic and thoroughly irritating figure of popular literature, Rosita Forbes was a strikingly handsome woman ‘the hard-riding daughter of a Lincolnshire squire’ in search of exotic adventure. She was the first non-Muslim woman to enter the closed city of Kufra disguised as ‘Khadija’ and claimed a Circassian mother to account for imperfections in her Arabic (Gertrude Bell declared that, ‘in the matter of trumpet blowing she is unique’, adding that ‘she doesn’t know a word of Arabic’). In her book *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* (1921)

Rosita claimed the expedition as her own but it was Ahmed Hassanein's knowledge of the terrain and personalities concerned that were vital to the success of the venture. James recalled that 'it is possible that the blood of his Bedouin forefathers made intimacy with them easier for him since the Briton and the Bedouin not infrequently find in one another a certain kind of kinship of instinct which compels their mutual regard.' Hassanein's own account was serialised in *Al-Ahram*.

Ahmad Hassanein Pasha

Ahmed Mohamed Makhoul Hassanein al-Bulaki was the son of an eminent professor at al-Azhar, and grandson of Ahmed Mazhar Hassanein Pasha, the last Admiral of Egyptian navy before British occupation of Egypt in 1882. The admiral did not immediately comply with the order to surrender his fleet to the British in Malta, famously declaring *Malta mafish* (Malta is not there). The family belonged to the Turco-Circassian upper class that had been part of the Ottoman bureaucracy that was inherited by the subsequent British occupation. Continuing influence of this bureaucracy was derived from patronage of clients and the development of successful interpersonal and communication networks. Their friendship connected Hassanein to the Rennell Rodds through traditional personal networks.

Hassanein had a more conventional English education at Victoria College, in Alexandria than Francis had in Europe. Before going up to Oxford, Hassanein studied for a year at Cairo's Khedivial School of Law. Francis and Hassanein became friends at Balliol College where Hassanein studied between 1910 and 1914. James had 'come to the conclusion that the experiment of sending students from the East to reside at a Western University is one which should only be tried in exceptional cases and with young men of exceptional character.' Thus Britain ruled by co-opting members of the Egyptian elite.

By implying that the Balliol scholar was little more than her hired dragoman led to considerable resentment. In *Min asrār al-sāsa wa'il siyyāsa: Misr ma qabl al-thawra* (1952) [*Secrets of Politicians and Politics*], an eminent Egyptian journalist Mohammad al-Tabi'i concluded that Rosita attempted to seduce Hassanein. James also hints at difficulties as Rosita became enamoured with Hassanein: 'I cannot refrain from recording my testimony that in all such questions, and especially in a very delicate matter'.

It was an amoral period for many, charged with the sexual and emotional amorality of cosmopolitan inter-war period: Rudolph Valentino's role in *The Sheikh* with all its romance of the desert and terrible stereotypes of Bedouin was screened in 1922. In *the Sheikh*, Sheikh

Ahmed Ben Hassan (Valentino) takes Lady Diana Mayo (Agnes Ayers) to his camp when he finds beauty in the desert. Although attracted to the *shaykh*, Lady Diana is able to resist his amorous advances. She is then captured by the villainous Omar (Walter Long), then saved from suicide by the heroic sheikh. Diana helps the sheikh regain his strength after he saves her and she vows her everlasting love to her British-educated hero: fictional shades of the Rosita and Hassanein.

In reality, Hassanein was part of an elite for whom personal networks were critical for the stability of royal rule on one hand whilst working for British masters during a period where they were retreating behind a facade of local rule. Hassanein and Francis began their careers in Cairo: Hassanein in the Ministry of Interior and Francis in the Staff Bureau. During the war when martial law was in force in Egypt Hassanein was attached to General Sir John Maxwell, Commander in Chief of British forces in Egypt, as his private Arabic secretary. By the end of WWI British policy was to set up missions to develop treaties with trusted locals. Francis Rodd and Hassanein were part of a delicate mission as Hassanein described: ‘The inspiration for it dated from 1916, when I went with Colonel the Hon. M.G. Talbot on a mission to Sayed Idris El Senussi. Hassanein, as Arabic secretary, had already accompanied Talbot from Alexandria to Rome ‘after a circuitous route in an Italian vessel to avoid enemy submarines’ in May 1916. After preliminary negotiations with the Italians via the British Ambassador, Sir James Rennell Rodd in Rome they left for Cyrenaica, ‘and the combined British and Italian Missions finally took up their quarters at Zuetina, an Italian fort on the sea coast some sixty miles west of Benghazi, whilst Sayed Idris remained in his camp about twenty miles distant.’ Hassanein continues the tale: ‘At Zuetina I renewed acquaintance with Sayed Idris whom I had already met, through his friendship for my father, when he was returning from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1915.’ ‘I told Sayed Idris of my ambition and desire to make the journey to Kufra, which had been visited only once by a stranger from across the desert's border, the intrepid German explorer Rohlfs in 1879. Sayed Idris was sympathetic with my desires, and asked me to let him know when I was ready to make the expedition. He promised to give me all the help he could in my under taking. Early in 1917, in continuation of the same mission to the Senussi, I met their head again at Akrama, near Tobruk, and told him that I was still determined to make the journey. I proposed to go as soon as the end of the war should set me free.’ Subsequent negotiations ‘involved a second journey to Cyrenaica and on this occasion, in addition to the efficient Hassanein Bey, Talbot had the assistance of Mr. Francis Rodd, of the British Diplomatic Service and a very proficient Italian

scholar.’ Nancy Mitford’s caricature of Francis as Luke in *Pigeon Pie* (1940) who “spoke Italian in such a dreadfully affected way that it embarrassed her to hear him’ does not ring true. In April 1917 Colonel Talbot announced that a successful agreement and as James described: ‘The conclusion of a provisional agreement with Idris was not the less satisfactory to me because my son, together with his friend Ahmed Hassanein Bey, now known to fame as the discoverer of the *Lost Oases*, were with Talbot, and only a few days earlier the reports from Cyrenaica had almost made us despair of reaching any conclusion.’

Hassanein continued ‘Sayed Idris again encouraged my determination and renewed his promise of co-operation. There was with me then on the same mission Mr. Francis Rodd, an old Balliol friend. We discussed the proposed expedition together, and agreed that we would be companions in it. At the close of the war Mrs. McGrath (then Mrs. Rosita Forbes) brought me a letter of introduction from Mr. Rodd. She wanted to join us on the journey. We proceeded to plan an undertaking in which we three should participate, but when the time came, Mr. Rodd was prevented from making one of the party.’ In 1919 Francis passed the examination for the Diplomatic Service, and was appointed to the Embassy at Rome. With introductions to the Italian authorities, many of them furnished by James through his negotiations with the Italians and the shaykhs of the Sanussi, Hassanein and Rosita set off by camel-train in the winter of 1920–1921.

In January 1923 to June 1924, Hassanein made a second journey in the Western Desert which put paid to Rosita’s pretentious claims. Cultural patronage was important to Egyptian rulers. Thus King Fu’ad, ‘ordered his government to give Hassanein Effendi a six-month leave and to furnish all possible assistance to the explorer, on the condition that upon his return he will submit all the scientific findings he collected during this journey to the Egyptian government’ (*Al-Ahram*). Hassanein was the first to travel 2200 miles by camel (the last important unmotorised desert adventure) from Sollum on the Mediterranean crossing the Libyan Desert from north to south via the oases of Siwa and Kufra, where Idris, gave him letters of introduction to Sanussi sheikhs. Hassanein continued round the Great Sand Sea to El Obeid, via the lost oases of Arkenu and Ouenat in south-west Egypt. Hassanein also recorded significant rock art Karkur Talh showing ostriches, lions, giraffes, and gazelles, memories of a lost paradise. Hassanein’s account of this second journey was published in the *National Geographic Magazine* in 1924, followed by his book *The Lost Oases* in ‘crisp, thoughtful and unadorned English’ which was published in 1925 in English, German and Arabic. James

wrote the Preface. In 1924 Ahmed Mohammed Bey Hassanein (1889-1946) was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society for 'For his journey to Kufra and Darfur' made in 1921-1922 and 1923-1924. The book was reissued in 2006 with an introduction by Michael Haag, husband of one of Hassanein's granddaughters, in which he describes the book as 'one of the great classics of desert exploration'. Hassanein's adventures as well as those of Hungarian Count Laszlo de Almasy fuelled the debate the possible existence of a legendary lost oasis of Zerzura and eventually provided the inspiration for Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1996).

After his desert adventures Hassanein entered the diplomatic service serving in London, then Washington as First secretary at the Egyptian Embassy. A shrewd patriot, Hassanein developed close ties with the royal court after he had been appointed tutor to the crown prince Fārūq and was in Alexandria to welcome him in 1936. Early in WWII, Hassanein was appointed chief of Fārūq's Royal Cabinet but did not live to see the ruler's expulsion in 1952 as he was killed in Cairo by a British truck in 1946. Seen in the West as charming and sophisticated, Hassanein was a scholar, and explorer, the handsome 'man of the desert, photographer, and airman (Lawrence and he shared a passion for flying and both crashing in Italy — Lawrence en route to Cairo in 1919 and recuperated with the Rennell Rodds in Rome — and Hassanein when he attempted the first Egyptian solo flight between London and Cairo in 1930). Later romantic entanglements and a clandestine marriage to the Queen Mother may have reduced Hassanein's later political influence. AH has recently been portrayed as a romantic gentlemanly figure and charmer of ladies in a 30-episode Egyptian TV Ramadan drama *Al-Malik Farouk* (King Farouk), 2007 but according to some Egyptian sources 'What was shown in the serial runs contrary to historical evidence and common knowledge about the sordid nature of this character'. For, in some circles, Hassanein was thought to have been as a major corruptive influence on Fārūq, both personally and politically.

This paper has focused on the connections between two friends, one British and one Egyptian — one now the stuff of legend — and on various films associated with these gentlemen. Through various films associated with them we see elements that variously incorporate documentary, romanticism, ethnic imagery and political commentary. The heady and turbulent interwar period that finally led to WWII witnessed the rise of Middle East national identities and the decline of the inherited Ottoman bureaucracy. Despite the end of empires,

their adventures relied upon traditional personal networks and friendships in a rapidly changing world: belonging fully to neither east or west — or to both.