



Thesiger, Sir Wilfred (1910-2003)

by Desmond Ariel

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Sir Wilfred Patrick Thesiger, travel writer, explorer, photographer, and cult figure, probably can not be labeled as homosexual or even pederastic, but his most powerful emotional bonds were with young men. Indeed, his closest ties were with the companions on his famous journeys, indigenous men through whose eyes he sought to interpret the world.

Thesiger was born on June 3, 1910, in Abyssinia, where his father was British minister, to a well-connected, aristocratic British family. He grew up in the medieval-like imperial court at Addis Ababa. He was educated at Eton (1923-28) and Magdalen College, Oxford (1929-33). At Oxford, he captained the boxing team and prepared himself for a career in the British foreign service.

During his first summer vacation from Oxford, he set off on the first of his solitary travels: this one to Istanbul and back, recording his voyage both in prose and in black-and-white photographs.

After graduation from Oxford he accepted a position as an assistant district commissioner in the Sudan political service. He served in remote areas such as Darfur and the Sudd. Here he began his practice of "going native," traveling with indigenous people, dressing, eating, and seeing the world as they did.

During World War II, he earned the DSO for leadership in the battle against Italian forces in North Africa. He also served as adviser to Haile Selassie in Abyssinia.

After the war, Thesiger made his most famous journeys in the desert of Arabia. He was not the first to cross the legendary *Rub' al Khali* or Empty Quarter, but he was the first to explore it fully, mapping the oasis of Liwa and the quicksands of Umm as-Sammim. His later trek across the western sands from the Hadhramaut to Abu Dhabi has been described as "the last and greatest expedition of Arabian travel."

Thesiger's life was filled with adventure. He lived in places as diverse as Kenya, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan, always attempting to understand the perspectives of the natives in the colorful lands that he visited.

He achieved fame for his book *Arabian Sands* (1959), which defined him as the last of a particular kind of adventure traveller and established him as a travel writer of the first rank. It has been described as "probably the finest book ever written about Arabia and a tribute to a world now lost forever." Among his other books are *The Marsh Arabs* (1964) and *Desert, Marsh and Mountain* (1979). In 1987, he published both his autobiography, *The Life of My Choice*, and a portfolio of photographs, *Visions of a Nomad*.

With his craggy face and dour looks, Thesiger was a Luddite misfit, an eccentric curmudgeon who rejected modernity absolutely, preferring to live simply and frugally, notably among Bedouin tribesmen in the deserts of Arabia. What he gained from this self-imposed cultural isolation was a hard-won spiritual solitude, oddly filled with delightful companions.

Thesiger's Boys

Although Thesiger acknowledged that he preferred the male physique to the female, he also stated that "Sex has been of no consequence to me, and the celibacy of desert life left me untroubled." Questions nevertheless remain about the aesthetic and emotional nature of the relationships he enjoyed with his young companions and assistants, relationships that he claimed were the happiest of his life.

These companions and assistants were largely youths of exceptional good looks and hunting talent: Idris in Sudan; Faris in Syria; bin Ghabaisha, whom he compared to Hadrian's Antinous, and bin Kabina in Arabia, each of whom he lovingly photographed.

In the 1950s, a troupe of four teenaged Arabs, including the handsome Amara, lived with Thesiger in a floating reed hut where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet. They would massage him each evening, as was the tradition among the Marsh land Arabs of Iraq. Later, in Maralal, Kenya, he lived with Erope, Lawi, and Lopago, a bodyguard with whom he shared his bed.

Travel Writing

Both *Arabian Sands* and *The Marsh Arabs* are now regarded as classics of travel writing, praised for their economy of style and acuity of observation. They have had a lasting impact beyond the works of his contemporaries, including his arch-rival, Jan Morris, and even Thesiger's own later books.

While on the surface the writing in these books seems plodding and dry, it memorably conveys the sustained emotional need of each journey. The books therefore leave an indelible impression of Thesiger's heroic and dignified personal struggle to identify with pre-industrial societies.

Thesiger's black-and-white photographs are now increasingly valued for their unadorned simplicity, as they wistfully chronicle peoples and lifestyles that have almost completely vanished.

Thesiger's Opinions

Thesiger often made disarming statements, many of which convey distinctly homoerotic, as well as homosocial, interests. For example, he went out of his way to see Nuba wrestlers and the dancing boys of Marshland Iraq, and to photograph naked Turkana boys in Kenya. Commenting on the Nuer people of southern Sudan, he observed that Nuer young men went naked and dyed their hair gold with cow's urine, which, he averred, only added to their beauty.

Thesiger's strong opinions are well-documented. He rated the Bedouins, with their gentleman's code of hospitality, most highly of all. He scorned women, once declaring that the wife of a friend should be shot for interrupting their conversation.

His ideas about the British Empire were rigidly conservative. Although he himself was ostracized by British expatriates for sharing meals and beds with Sudanese and Arab natives, he nevertheless saw the British as the most responsible of colonizers. He reluctantly acknowledged that the French Foreign Legion in North Africa did not segregate the Africans from the Europeans.

While Thesiger detested the trappings of modernity, cars, and televisions, his favorite film was Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice*, which he saw twice.

Not at all squeamish about blood as he was about spiders, he became a competent amateur doctor, performing ritual circumcisions on numerous young men who queued to go under his knife.

Thesiger as Cult Figure

Ian Buruma has described Thesiger as "an inverted sensualist," suggesting that his romantic notions of suffering amid an exclusively male comradeship originated from an extreme form of voluptuous pleasure in pain. He places the explorer within a tradition that includes T.E. Lawrence, and, more recently, Bruce Chatwin.

Thesiger has become a genuine cult figure. His quiet austerity, somehow fearless and kind, able to kill, yet both lacking in ethnocentrism and falling prey to it, has captured the imagination of many readers. His absolute rejection of modernity has increasingly made him a hero, adding to his reputation as the last of the authentic travellers and a true champion of pre-industrial man.

He ended his days laden with honors. He won medals from several learned societies, including the founder's medal of the Royal Geographic Society. He was awarded honorary fellowships from Magdalen College, Oxford and the British Academy, as well as an honorary doctorate from Leicester University. In 1968, he was made a Companion of the British Empire; and in 1995 he was knighted.

Thesiger spent his final years living with Lawi, who became his foster son, and various Samburu warrior neighbors in Kenya, lamenting the passing of his days of "barbaric splendour" and the purer desert life with the wonderful comradeship he experienced among Bedouins.

The explorer and writer died on August 24, 2003, somewhat ironically in suburban Surrey.

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About the Author

Desmond Ariel is a Briton who writes fiction, essays, and reviews. His short story, "Twelve Days in a Week," appears in *Foreign Affairs: Erotic Travel Tales*, edited by Mitzi Szereto (2004, Cleis Press). His memoir, "Shushalooza Meyl: Johannesburg to Capetown," will appear in *Looking for Love in Faraway Places: Tales of Gay Men's Romance Overseas*, edited by Michael Luongo (2006, Haworth Press).