

# Writing their Own Way: American Women, Palestine's Bedouins and Issues of Safety in the Nineteenth Century

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We felt no fear of them, for we had heard in Jaffa that if there was a woman in the caravan there was no danger of their attacking it. They have a profound respect for courage. (Kate Kraft, shortly after arriving in Palestine, 31 March 1868)<sup>1</sup>

Joseph rushed into the tent, exclaiming: 'Sir, your revolver, the Bedouins!' Until then we had believed but little in attacks of Bedouins. (Kate Kraft, on the night Bedouins attacked her encampment, 25 April 1868)<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, more and more Americans traveled abroad, especially after the American Civil War (1861-1865). Many, upon their return home, published their travel accounts. I have collected and analyzed the published accounts of fifty American women. What follows is an investigation into how American women travelers who ventured to Palestine perceived and interacted with Palestine's Bedouin populations by examining their published travel accounts. American women either tended to feel safe because they were in the care of Bedouins who acted as their guides and guards, or, conversely, they felt unsafe because Bedouins were nearby. In either case, it was rare for these American travelers to

identify Bedouins without some negative descriptor. Most, such as Mary S. Allen, qualified Bedouins as "the wild Bedouin tribes."<sup>3</sup>

Also, some American women compared Palestine's Bedouins with American Indians. Hilton Obenzinger notes that Americans typically equated Arabs with American Indians, usually within the settler-colonial context of seeing Palestine as the American West and the Arabs as American Indians who fought against being "civilized" by American settlers.<sup>4</sup>

At first, few American women drew connections between feeling or being safe and being in the presence of Bedouins. In all but one case, Bedouins were hired to serve as guides and guards for these Americans. Sarah Haight, being the exception, still recalled a sense of safety when she was in the presence of Bedouins. While traveling from Jerusalem to the Jordan River, Haight and her party came upon a group of Bedouins who sought to race the Westerners. "We were not to be outgeneralled [sic] by a Bedouin . . . so we slacked our reins and put our fleet coursers to their utmost speed."<sup>5</sup> Haight reportedly beat the Bedouins in the race, and established her camp right in the middle of the Bedouin encampment.

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While she did describe them as “wild,” she noted nothing but hospitality and respect from them. According to Haight, the Bedouin “sheik” offered both pipe and tea to her. After smoking, and drinking a cup of tea, many Bedouin men came to her tent in order “to pay their respects to us.” Before leaving the next morning, Haight presented the “sheik” with a pair of Turkish pistols in exchange for his hospitality. In fact, Haight never felt that the Bedouins, while “wearing so rough an exterior,” would ever harm her or her fellow travelers because the Bedouins were simply too hospitable, as she told her reading audience.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all American women in my study hired Bedouins to be their guides or to act as personal guards while in Palestine. This indicates that the women believed themselves to be in harm’s way and thus needed an armed guard; they nevertheless did not feel the harm came from Bedouins. For example, Lizzie McMillan hired “a Bedouin guard from the time of leaving Jerusalem until we got back, as they say it is not safe to travel in this country without one.” Unlike Sarah Haight’s description of Bedouins as wild and rough, McMillan called her Bedouin guard “very handsome . . . [who] took good care of us.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Mrs. Marie and Miss Emma Straiton hired Bedouins as guides. Mrs. Straiton also described Bedouins as “wild Arabs” who were traditionally noisy. “The Bedouins and camels kept up such a noise and every moment I expected to see a dusky head peep through the covering.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Louise Griswold hired a Bedouin “sheik” to act as the group’s escort and guard.<sup>9</sup> Mattie Wood hired a Bedouin not only to guide her through Palestine but also to act as her personal guard. It was not her idea, however, to hire this particular Bedouin. According to Wood’s account, he was “furnished for our protection at the request of the United States Consul.” Furthermore, Wood claimed that some Bedouins were “paid by the Turkish government to protect travelers from the assaults of wandering Bedouins.”<sup>10</sup>

Bedouins were not only to serve as American women’s guides and guards, however. Sometimes they provided information and other times they were trading partners. Sarah Barclay Johnson noted her relief when she came upon a party of Bedouins. Johnson became lost somewhere in the “wild region” near the “banks of a deep and rapid river.” She had unsuccessfully looked for a place to ford the river when she came across a group of Bedouins: “A party of Bedawin [sic] approached, and for the first time we felt a sense of relief” because she had hoped that they might be able to tell her where she could safely cross the river.<sup>11</sup>

Near the Jordan River, Johnson came across another group of Bedouins who traded their fruit (“the veritable apples

of Sodom” as Johnson described them) for her telescope. It was not her telescope that these Bedouins were most interested in obtaining, however. Johnson claimed that Bedouins always treated her with respect and “with the greatest kindness” because she had medicine, which they needed.

Yet she also noted that “the profound ignorance of these semi-civilized beings, very naturally leads to the grossest superstition, of which we often had instances.” Also, “of medical knowledge, they have none,” reported Johnson. She noted that Bedouins would frequently place their sick upon the tombs of saints, or a Koran would be hung around the patient’s neck in the hope that divine intervention would cure the malady. “Another popular mode of treatment is a severe flogging!,” proclaimed Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, according to Johnson, she and her party were always safe in the company of Bedouins because Bedouins needed and sought western medicine.

Johnson’s characterization of Bedouins as “semi-civilized,” ignorant, and superstitious does not seem to be outside the norm for how westerners viewed non-westerners. According to Judy Mabro, “accusations of prejudice and superstition are common.” Yet, Mabro also sees these accusations more prevalent when the subject is a non-European woman.<sup>13</sup>

There was one thing that each of these six women who portrayed Bedouins in a positive manner had in common: none of them traveled alone. Each one came to Palestine with at least one American companion. This could suggest that these travelers already felt a level of safety and security simply because they were not alone. This cannot be said about those who felt unsafe when Bedouins were near by, however.

While those six travelers felt most safe when in the company of Bedouins, the majority of American women, both the lone travelers as well as those who ventured in groups, felt just the opposite. Ten of the twenty-two travelers who observed Palestine’s Bedouins noted in their published accounts being unsafe when Bedouins were nearby. Jane Eames felt generally unsafe because each Bedouin she saw was armed “with a gun or a sword or pistol, and sometimes with all three.”<sup>14</sup> Eames had heard stories about Palestine being “unquiet and unsafe.” She said that seeing all of those armed Bedouins was an indication that those stories were true. Not surprisingly, Eames concluded that the reason, at least in part, for the safety problem in Palestine was due to the extensively armed Bedouins. She never suggested that the Bedouins were armed because Palestine was unsafe. Instead, she believed that Palestine was unsafe because Bedouins were armed.<sup>15</sup>

Like the ideas purported by Eames in her travel account, many other American women, such as Susan Brewer Thomas, believed that Palestine was unsafe due to the hostile, as she called them, "wild Arabs," and consistently portrayed Bedouins as unruly, uncivilized, and untrustworthy vagabonds.<sup>16</sup> Susan Wallace believed that Palestine was unsafe because the Bedouins did not acknowledge law: "They are a law unto themselves, and acknowledge no other ruler."<sup>17</sup>

Others, such as Susan Elston Wallace, Mary Ninde, and Clara Moyses Tadlock believed that Bedouins were born thieves.<sup>18</sup> While passing through Hebron, Wallace noted that soldiers were stationed in the area. She attributed the presence of these soldiers to "thieving Bedouins, who infest these desolate roads, robbing with impunity, unless the avenging sword is in sight."<sup>19</sup> Ninde and Tadlock also portrayed Bedouins as murderous heathen who would put to death any foreigner they came across. According to Tadlock, Bedouins killed travelers just to steal their possessions, "like those Texas stage-robbers."<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, L.L. Adams reported that "Bedawin [sic]. . . are known to be great robbers, and often attack parties of travelers."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, she hired a Bedouin for protection: "In front, on a splendid white horse, rode an Arab Sheikh, in all the warlike array of gun, sword, and spear, and dressed in the gay colors of his tribe . . . He was to be our guard as well as our guide." She believed that she needed the help of a Bedouin to protect her from other Bedouins. "This Sheikh is the chief of a tribe of Bedawin

[sic] in that region," Adams reported, "and his presence with us was a sufficient protection against the attacks of his men, who might otherwise have plundered us on our way."<sup>22</sup>

Not only were Bedouins portrayed as murderers, but also, according to Mary L. Ninde, Bedouins turned killing into a game for their self-amusement. Ninde recalled a story she heard about six scientists who were robbed by Bedouins. After relieving the scientists of all worldly possessions, according to the story, the Bedouins gave the scientists a choice in regard to how they would die: either jump off a cliff or be shot.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Cora Agnes Benneson, an Illinois attorney, simply reported in her travelogue that she proceeded through Palestine "cautiously, with our guard always ahead, for the Bedouins live by plunder, and often attack strangers."<sup>24</sup>

Most of these women who forwarded racist or stereotypical views of Bedouins never experienced a negative encounter with Palestine's Bedouins themselves—they were merely passing on to their readers the rumors and innuendoes they had heard about Palestine's Bedouins. In fact, it was not unusual for these women who reported over and over that everyone should be frightened of the murderous, thieving Bedouins as a group, to describe individual Bedouins as caring, hospitable fellow travelers. Cora Benneson, for example, noted that the Bedouins she met respected "the laws of hospitality, however, and if any one in trouble solicits their aid, they give him the kindest reception, and protect him for three days after his departure from their camp."<sup>25</sup> On the one hand Benneson told her readers not to trust Bedouins (as a monolithic entity) because they were known murderers and thieves. She also told her readers how individual Bedouins were helpful to, kind towards, and receptive of foreign travelers.

Benneson described an encounter she had with a Bedouin troupe led by a man named Ibn Ishmair. First, this is one of the few cases I have encountered in which an American traveler took the time to note the name of their Bedouin host. Second, while Benneson told her readers to fear Bedouins, she also described her chance encounter with this particular Bedouin in nothing but pleasant terms. For example, she said how one wife of Ibn Ishmair entertained them in "European" custom, while his other wives observed "traditional [Bedouin] hospitality." She noted



Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

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that Ibn Ishmair and others in his group lived simply, yet were wealthy and had "a native dignity and grace of manner, which might have been envied by a prince."<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Benneson continued to fear Bedouins, even after her meeting with this one Bedouin leader. Upon departing from Ibn Ishmar's camp, she once again reported being very nervous for fear of running into a group of Bedouins. "We finally reached Kuneitirah in safety," she reported.<sup>27</sup> This entire exchange is rather odd because while Benneson witnessed or experienced nothing that should have made her fearful of Bedouins, she nonetheless feared Bedouins and passed on those feelings to her readers by never challenging or questioning the veracity of the rumors that Bedouins were, by nature, a thieving, murderous lot.

If anyone had initial cause to fear Bedouins out of personal experience it was Dr. Sarah Wells who reported being captured by a group of Bedouins. "Horrors of those who before had fallen into the hands of these lawless rovers, rushed before our minds. What were we to do?," Dr. Wells pondered. She noticed "no indication of mercy . . . in their black fierce looking eyes [while] they demanded our money and other effects." Wells, et al, were ordered to mount their horses. "For hours we traveled on under the guidance of our captors," Wells noted.<sup>28</sup>

Upon reaching the Bedouin encampment, Wells' dragoon was taken to the leader's tent while the travelers awaited their fate. "In a little while, we were invited into the tent," recalled Wells, "and to our surprise and great relief, the sheik received us with the utmost hospitality." Wives of the sheik spread out new mats on the ground for Dr. Wells and her fellow travelers to sit upon. They also served fresh milk, coffee, bread, and eggs to the Americans. In exchange for the food and drink, Dr. Wells gave them lemons, oranges, and some sugar.

After "resting for a while," as Wells called it, the sheik provided the travelers with a guide and an armed escort. She noted that the Bedouins were from the "Azeneah" tribe which she called "the largest and most powerful of all the wild Arabs." Interestingly enough, she believed it was divine intervention that delivered her and her party "from these wild, fierce, marauding people."<sup>29</sup> It was not that the Bedouins she met were hospitable, kind, and generous. She believed that it was Providence that saw them to safety. It must be remembered, however, that Wells' ten-year long trip around the world resulted in a large, published account, which in turn spawned an across-the-country circuit of lectures about her ten years away from the United States. In other words, it is not impossible that Dr. Wells just made up, or at least embellished, her encounter with the Bedouins in order to sell more books, which in turn

would bring more people to her lectures, which would result in more sales of her book. She portrayed herself as a woman who faced certain death, yet somehow God intervened on her behalf to deliver her back to the United States to share her harrowing experiences with the American reading public.

Similarly, Kate Kraft never believed that Bedouins would attack a party of travelers, until her party was attacked one night. Her concern, however, was not of being killed by Bedouins. "I already fancied I was carried off by an Arab chief, tied behind him on his horse, riding at a fearful rate over mounts and valleys to the place of his abode."<sup>30</sup> There seems to be a possible romantic nature to Kraft's wording, nonetheless. Her fear of being taken by an Arab sheik "to the place of his abode" was unique among her fellow American women travelers.

Even when individual "wild Arabs" proved to be hospitable, provided shelter and food, and gave American travelers guides and escorts, these women still continued to believe and portray Palestine's Bedouins as a monolithic entity of ruthless barbarians who would opt to steal from and kill travelers over being hospitable.

This does not suggest, however, that American women travelers saw nothing good or placed no positive characteristics upon individual Bedouins. In fact, just the opposite was true. For example, Maria Ballard Holyoke called Bedouins "lawless and predatory" when speaking about them monolithically.<sup>31</sup> Yet, she placed positive characteristics upon individual Bedouins such as "the Sheik of the whole district" who offered her protection. She identified him as "a splendid fellow, with a keen black eye, and a countenance expressive of sagacity, dignity and good nature." She described another Bedouin man as "brilliant eyed" who "readily returned a courteous salutation."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Nellie Sims Beckman was interested in the Bedouins because she saw them as contradictory:

Murder and plunder they delight in, yet an act of kindness they will never forget. They respect the laws governing their ideas of hospitality, but do not hesitate to rob, plunder, and murder any one to whom they are not obligated. They have scanty food and clothing, but their evident happy and contented tent life make them objects of interest.<sup>33</sup>

Marion Harland placed both positive and negative characteristics upon Palestine's Bedouins, yet her "observations" were based on stories she heard from other members of her traveling party. She never actually met, spoke with, or reported seeing any Bedouins. "Their object in living seems to rob other tribes, and to fight the injured parties afterward," Harland believed. She identified their "leading characteristics" as "politeness and hospitality to guests; revenge and ill-doing to enemies; and a large and

level eye to the main chance, especially in the matter of robbery and horse trades."<sup>34</sup>

According to Harland, not only were Bedouins harsh to their enemies, they were equally harsh to their wives or daughters who they suspected of carrying on extra-matrimonial liaisons. The husband or father would take his wife or daughter on a hunting expedition, or for a long ride, and always return alone. According to Harland, no questions were asked. Or, "her father or brother takes her off out of sight of the camp, and shoots her as he would a dog suspected of hydrophobia."<sup>35</sup> No other American woman traveler recorded this unusually severe method of dealing with adultery or suspected adultery or other acts of "dishonor," however. Yet that is not to say that "honor killings" were not widespread in Palestine or any other place in the Middle East in the nineteenth century.

These examples tend to suggest that the American travelers did not differentiate between Arab culture and individual personalities. Thieving and murder were seen as cultural traits, while physical features and adherence to law codes were viewed as personality traits that were shared by particular Bedouins. Yet even though some Bedouins were portrayed with handsome physical features who routinely followed cultural laws regarding hospitality, underneath that veneer, so believed some of these Americans, were the sociopathic traits of thieving and murder.

As stated above, some Americans identified the Bedouins they came across as something akin to American Indians. Again, Obenzinger notes that it "was a standard association" for American travelers to equate Arabs with Indians.<sup>36</sup> Louise Griswold, from New York, noted that the Bedouins she came across resembled "the Camanche Indians of our own country."<sup>37</sup> Later on, she came upon a Bedouin encampment. She noted that they were "savage looking" and their yell resembled "an Indian war whoop."<sup>38</sup>

Anna P. Little came across a group of Bedouins near Jericho. Some of the Bedouins began dancing and performing for the travelers. "The leader came up to us," recalled Little, "placed his mouth to our ears, and with his hand patting his lips gave the most thrilling howls, something like the Indian war-cry."<sup>39</sup> Also, Little noted that the leader of this Bedouin group, whom she called "Shiek Yosef" (possibly a take off on the Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph, who would have been known in the United States at that time) gave the women a presentation "of a Bedouin on the war-path." According to Little:

He suddenly dashed off, racing over the plains, and quickly turning his horse, came like a flash to Aissi [Little's

guide], who had also started his horse, and when the two met, Yosef gave an unearthly yell and drew his sword as though he intended cutting off Aissi's head.<sup>40</sup>

It was not the yelling of Bedouins that reminded Lucia Palmer of Indians, rather it was their horsemanship. In Bethany, Palmer noted that the government placed a group of Bedouins in charge of protection for the town and its vicinity. "The sheik was an old man; he came out to meet us, but his son, heir apparent, was to accompany us. At our appearance the son came galloping down the hill at a speed that would astonish an American Indian," recalled Palmer.<sup>41</sup> In another account, Lucy Bainbridge portrayed the English spoken by her Arab dragoman as broken and awkward: "Must go now, gemman; run horse six mile. Day's bad, bery bad Bedouin here; me can no make 'em do."<sup>42</sup>

Several women in this study tended to portray Bedouins as "Palestine Indians." It is unclear just how widespread that mentality was among the other women in this study, however. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay noted that Americans developed more intense anti-Indian views later in the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that some of the women in this study described Palestine's Bedouins as Middle Eastern Indians. If there was a pervasive anti-Indian sentiment among the American women who ventured to Palestine, and if they tended to view Bedouins as Indians, it should not be surprising to discover Bedouins being characterized in a negative manner. Of the six who consistently portrayed Bedouins negatively, Benneson, Tadlock, Ninde, and Wallace all traveled to Palestine after 1872, the year of the Modoc War.<sup>44</sup>

Overall, American women travelers drew a connection between their personal safety and the relative proximity of Bedouins. While some believed the presence of Bedouins meant that they were safe and secure, others felt anything but safe and secure when Bedouins were present. Even though almost every woman in this study placed some good qualities or characteristics upon individual Bedouins, nonetheless most also feared collective Bedouins.

Only one woman in this study viewed Bedouins in a neutral manner. Mrs. D.L. Miller simply noted "During the day Bedouin [sic] Arab camps were passed, as we saw their tents, which were made of goats' hair closely woven together, making them water-tight . . . These people are of a roving nature, therefore remain but a short time at one place. Their families go with them, of course." Miller also noted that the Bedouins she saw hunted and fished for their food in and around the Lake Hulch area. She did not place any fear in connection to their presence, nor did she seem relieved that Bedouins were in the vicinity, thus suggesting that Bedouins were not connected to safety, as many of Miller's contemporaries tended to believe. Miller's

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account is also unique because she used the words “people” and “families” in describing the Bedouins. In short, she never judged them; she just described them.

In conclusion, while most American women portrayed Bedouins in their published accounts as a monolithic entity and reacted with fear, some also showed individual Bedouins to be kind, honest, helpful, and hospitable. Even a few Americans drew parallels or connections between

Palestinian Bedouins and American Indians. Those women never mentioned the sources of their apprehension thus suggesting that they could have simply feared what was culturally and socially foreign. Of course, by equating Bedouins with American Indians they were possibly perpetuating stereotypes of “savage” and “uncivilized” American Indians and transferring those stereotypes on people who they believe physically and socially resembled American Indians.

## End Notes

1. Kate Kraft, *The Nilometer and the Sacred Soil* (New York: Carleton, 1869) p. 197.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 263-264.
3. Mary S. Allen, *From West to East* (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1898) p. 84.
4. Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) pp. 190-191.
5. Sarah Haight, *Letters from the Old World* Volume II (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840) p. 136.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-140.
7. Lizzie McMillan, *Letters of Lizzie McMillan* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1902) p. 209.
8. Marie and Emma Straiton, *Two Lady Tramps Abroad* (Flushing, NY: Evening Journal Press, 1881) p. 89.
9. Mrs. Stephen M. Griswold, *A Woman's Pilgrimage* (Hartford, CT: Published by the author, 1871) p. 289.
10. Mattie Sisson Wood, *England and the Orient* (North Attleboro, MA: J.A. Wood, 1882) p. 247.
11. Sarah Barclay Johnson, *Hadji in Syria, or, Three Years in Jerusalem* (New York: Arno Press, 1977) pp. 47-48. A reprint of the edition published by J. Challen, Philadelphia [nd].
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-127.
13. Judy Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991) p. 155.
14. Jane Anthony Eames, *Another Budget*. Second Edition (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855) p. 386.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Susan Brewer Thomas, *Travels in Europe, Egypt, and Palestine* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Company, 1860) pp. 306, 307.
17. Susan E. Wallace, *Along the Bosphorus* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1898) p. 84.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 84; Mary L. Ninde, *We Two Alone in Europe* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Company, 1886) p. 292; and, Clara Moyses Tadlock, *Bohemian Days* (New York: John B. Alden, 1889) p. 371.
19. Wallace, *Along the Bosphorus*, p. 84.
20. Tadlock, *Bohemian Days*, p. 371. Besides comparing the Bedouins with Texas stage-robbers, she also compared them to Mormons due to their shared custom of plural marriage. *Ibid.*
21. L.L. Adams, *A Ride of Horseback Through the Holy Land Written for the Children* (Boston: Henry Hoyt, 1874) pp. 44-45.
22. Adams, *A Ride on Horseback*, pp. 195-106.
23. Ninde, *We Two Alone in Europe*, p. 292.
24. Cora Agnes Benneson, “Palestine To-Day,” *The Unitarian*, September 1890, p. 431.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Dr. Sarah Furnas Wells, *Ten Years' Travel Around the World* (West Milton, OH: Morning Star Publishing Company, 1885) pp. 204-206.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.
30. Kraft, *Sacred Soil*, p. 264.
31. Maria Ballard Holyoke, *Golden Memories of Old World Lands* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1893) p. 481.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 472, 473.
33. Mrs. William Beckman, *Backsheesh, A Woman's Wanderings*. (San Francisco: Whitaker and Ray Company, 1900) pp. 202-203.
34. Marion Harland, *Under the Flag of the Orient* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1897) p. 171.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Obenzinger, *American Palestine*, p. 190.
37. Griswold, *A Woman's Pilgrimage*, p. 300.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 304, 305.
39. Anna P. Little, *The World as We Saw It* (Boston: Cupples, 1887) p. 350.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 348
41. Lucia Palmer, *Oriental Days* (New York: Baker and Taylor Company, 1897) p. 164.
42. Lucy Seaman Bainbridge, *Round the World Letters* (Boston: D. Lothrop & Company, 1882) p. 379.
43. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, *The Frontier of Women's Writings* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) p. 178.
44. As Georgi-Findlay points out, Americans tended to view Indians in a more negative manner after the 1872 Modoc War. *Ibid.*