

“When One Sits Among The People”

Lucie Duff Gordon’s Letters from Egypt

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As a child Lucie Duff Gordon (née Austin) had travelled a lot with her intellectual parents, learning to appreciate the customs of different people in many foreign countries. Yet it was not for pleasure, or by her own choice, that in 1861 she left England for good. TB forced this forty-year-old lady to leave her children, her friends and her country for The Cape of Good Hope. There she first met (and was immediately fascinated by) Islam, almost by chance:

Yesterday I sat in the full broil for an hour or more in the hot dust of the Malay burial ground. . . . round me sat a crowd of grave brown men chanting ‘Allah il Allah’ to the most monotonous but musical air, and with such perfect voices. The chant seemed to swell, and then fade, like the wind in the trees. . . . I kept at a distance and sat down when they did. But a man came up and said: ‘You are welcome.’ So I went close . . . There were 80 or 100 men, no women, and five or six Hagees . . . the whole lot making less noise in moving and talking than two Englishmen.¹

After a short unhappy summer back in Europe, in 1862 Lady Duff Gordon emigrated to Egypt. She stayed there,

and became a sort of Bint el-Beled (daughter of the land) until her death in Cairo, where she asked to be buried, in July 1869. On her arrival in November 1862 she was welcomed by a young boy chanting the Zikr: “I never heard anything more beautiful and affecting,” she wrote home.² Duff Gordon was immediately enchanted by Cairo: “well may the Prophet (whose name be exalted) smile when he looks on Cairo,” she told her mother in November 1862.³ The writer fell in love at once with Egyptian customs. After a short while, Islamic prayers became her prayers: for example she acquired the habit of saying Al Fatah when starting on a journey, or concluding a bargain.⁴ While many Victorian women travellers preferred to be left alone and — like Marianne North — were more interested in exotic flowers than in foreign people (often labelled as “ungrateful blacks”),⁵ Lucie Duff Gordon liked to be among the native people.

At first the writer (just as the Oxford-educated Katherine in the Postmodern novel *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje) “read” Egypt as a three-layered text: “This country is a palimpsest in which the Bible is written over Herodotus, and the Koran over the Bible. In the towns the Koran is most visible, in the country Herodotus,” she wrote home.⁶ Yet, soon her perspective changed. Lucie,

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like a sort of Shakespearian Bottom, was gradually “translated.” Living in “The French House” (or “Maison de France”) in Luxor gave her the opportunity to get to know the natives exceptionally well. The house she rented was built on the ruins of the Khem temple, and was considered one of the best houses in town: even Gustave Flaubert had sojourned there in 1850. However, Lady Duff Gordon was struck by the violent way Egyptian architecture had been defaced to westernize its aspects. The effacement of Egyptian architecture therefore came to mean for her the erasure of a whole culture: “shabby French houses, like the one I live in, are being run up; and in this weather how much better would be the Arab courtyard, with its mastabah and fountain!” She wrote.⁷

If “Orientalism” (as Edward Said named the discursive construction of the East as opposed to the West) had taken travel books by women into account, borderlines all around us and within ourselves would probably be positioned differently.⁸ Unfortunately, however, the encoding of the East as “other” (meaning inferior, worse; meaning countries to be exploited, people to be enslaved, cultures to be blotted out) is a crucial patriarchal structure of Western society. And patriarchy, to protect itself, has systematically erased women, women’s her/stories, women’s point of view, and their writings.⁹ Lady Duff Gordon’s Letters from Egypt could have contributed to shape the Western conception of the Orient in quite a different way. She happened to witness what was to be a pivotal period for Egypt, the one in which Ismail Pasha succeeded Said Pasha. In her letters the Victorian aristocrat juxtaposed their violent rule, as well as European exploitation and disrespect for human rights, with Islam.

The main characteristic of Islam, as Duff Gordon perceived it, was in fact its respect: particularly for those who are small, poor, female; particularly for foreigners. “What I have met with everything Arab — nothing but kindness and politeness,” she wrote to the prejudiced Baronet who was her husband.¹⁰ To her mother she explained:

The most striking thing is the sweetness and delicacy of feeling — the horror of hurting anyone . . . the creed is simple and there are no priests, a decided advantage. It is enough for you if you do no injury to any man, and above all to any woman or little one. . . . pretty sound morality, methinks, and might be preached with advantage to a meeting of philanthropists in Exeter Hall.¹¹

Victorian philanthropy was characterized by the will to “improve” the life of the lower classes at home and of the natives in the colonies. Lady Duff Gordon, however, affirmed: “I don’t want to improve mankind at all, or assist in the advance of civilization. Quite the other way.”¹² The writer took a firm stand in favour of the oppressed Egyptians: “My heart is with the Arabs,” she seemed to cry, and she stuck to her position.¹³ “This country and these people . . . are so full of tender and affectionate feeling, when they have not been crushed out of them,” she affirmed.¹⁴ Lady Duff Gordon indignantly reported how ill-treated the Egyptians actually were: “What chokes me is to hear English people talk of the stick being ‘the only way to manage Arabs’ as if anyone could doubt that it is the easiest way to manage any people where it can be used with impunity.”¹⁵

Having grown up among “Radicals,” literally on John Stuart Mill’s knee, Lucie thought it only natural that the Egyptian people should have the possibility to enjoy the same rights as her own fellow countrymen. She also earnestly believed that British authorities were intent on using their influence to help the natives obtain their “natural rights.” Unfortunately, she was proved wrong: “I have been amazed at several instances of English fanaticism this year. Why do people come to a Mussulman country with such bitter hatred ‘in their stomachs’ as I have seen three or four times?” Duff Gordon asked in 1865.¹⁶ Two years later she remarked: “I wonder when Europe will drop the absurd delusion about Christians

being persecuted by Muslims. It is absolutely the other way — here at all events.”¹⁷ The writer, with great political acumen, focus on a further key point: “East and West is the difference, not Muslims and Christians. As to that difference, I could tell volumes. . . . I sleep every night in a makaab open to all Luxor, and haven’t a door that has a lock. They bother me for backsheesh; but oh how poor they are, and how rich must be a woman whose very servants drink sugar to their coffee!”¹⁸

As far as differences between East and West were concerned, Lady Duff Gordon was impressed by the fact that in several instances Arab women were freer than European women. Not only were corsets almost unheard of in Egypt, she realized, but marriage was not the only possible lifestyle for women. In 1864 she met “an eccentric Bedawee lady” called el Haggeh, The Pilgrimess: dressed like a man but for her beautiful jewels, “she is a virgin and fond of men’s soci-

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ety, being very clever, so she has her dromedary and goes about alone."¹⁹ Lucie stared at her, puzzled and bewitched. "No one seemed surprised, no one stared," she wrote home, at once shocked and relieved,

and when I asked if it was proper our captain was surprised. 'Why not? If she does not wish to marry, she can go alone . . . what harm? She is a virgin and free.' . . . She expressed her opinions pretty freely as far as I could understand her. . . . To me she seems far the most curious thing I have yet seen."²⁰

For some time Lady Duff Gordon seemed to be obsessed by this queer lady. She kept on asking about el Haggeh, who she is likely to have seen as her own doppelgänger or at least a kindred spirit:

I made further inquiries about the Bedawee lady, who is older than she looks, for she has travelled constantly for ten years. She is rich and much respected, and received in the best houses, where she sits with the men all day and sleeps in the hareem. . . . As soon as I can talk I must try and find her out. . . . There are a good many things about the hareem which I am barbarian enough to think good and rational."²¹

Several weeks later, the writer was still thinking about the mysterious pilgrimess: "I asked Mustafa about the Arab young lady, and he . . . is to let me know if she comes here and to offer her hospitality from me."²² In the same year Lady Duff Gordon met a sixteen-year-old girl en travesti: "Her father has no son and is infirm, so she works in the field for him, and dresses and behaves like a man," she wrote home."²³

Lucie enjoyed visiting hareems, where she sat for hours listening to intriguing stories told by women storytellers as skillful as Sherazade herself: "Hareem is used here like the German Frauenzimmer, and to mean a respectable woman," she told her mother."²⁴ Hareem was, from Duff Gordon's point of view, a place where women lived together sharing everything, even motherhood. It was a place where women, removed from the company of men, could learn to love one other: "My pretty neighbour has gone back into town. She was a nice little woman, and amused me a good deal. . . . I observed that she did not care a bit for the Pasha, by whom she had a

child, but was extremely fond of 'her lady,' as she politely called her."²⁵ In a hareem Lady Duff Gordon was particularly awed and moved by an imposing elderly noblewoman: "She asked about my children and blessed them repeatedly, and took my hand very kindly in doing so, for fear I should think her envious and fear the eye - she had none."²⁶

The female condition in Egypt was for Lady Duff Gordon at once puzzling and incredibly fascinating. On the one hand there were women who had never left their husband's home since marriage; on the other hand a married woman who had a lover seemed not to be emarginated or blamed as would happen in Victorian England. Among the Arabs there was no "double standard" in morality, as Lucie realized with delight: "Violent love comes 'by the visitation of God;' the man or woman must satisfy it or die."²⁷ Moreover, Lady Duff Gordon's Arab servants appeared to be "shocked at the way Englishmen talk about the Hareem among themselves, and think the English hard and unkind to their wives, and to women in general."²⁸ Therefore, comparing the Western "weaker sex" to the Eastern "more spirited sex," Lady Duff Gordon summed up as following: "Tout n'est pas roses for these Eastern tyrants, not to speak of the unbridled license of tongue allowed to women and children."²⁹

Little by little Egypt and its Arab inhabitants became the touchstone for Lady Duff Gordon. Egypt was the country of well-bred, well-mannered people par excellence, Europe was "savage" and "incivil." In 1863, after an unhappy summer interlude in England and France, Lucie wrote contemptuously from Luxor: "It is a real comfort to live in a nation of truly well-bred people and to encounter kindness after the savage incivility of France."³⁰ Although Lady Duff Gordon realized in Egypt how Christianity and Islam had many common aspects ("Curious things are to be seen here in religion. Muslims praying at the tomb of Mar Girgis, St. George, and the resting-places of Sittina Mariam and Seyidna Issa, and miracles, brand-new, of an equally mixed description"),³¹ when comparing

Christianity to Islam, she always chose the latter. In 1864 there was a terrible epidemic of cholera in Egypt: the Coptic priests exhorted to fast and pray in order to mitigate God's wrath. She seems to have almost cried in her letters: "It is enough to make one turn Muslim to compare these greasy rogues with such high-minded charitable shurafa as Abd-el-Waris and Sheykh Yussuf. A sweet

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little Copt boy who is very ill will be killed by the stupid bigotry and the fast."³²

Gradually the writer adopted a form of transculturation: she came to regard Egypt as her own country, she defined herself as a "complete Arab"³³ and "a 'stupid, lazy Arab.'"³⁴ In her letters home it is clear how Lady Duff Gordon started identifying herself completely with the Arabs: "A fanatical Christian dog (quadruped), belonging to the Coptic family who live on the opposite side of the yard, hated me with such virulent intensity that, not content with barking at me all day, he howled at me all night, even after I had put out the lantern and he could not see me in bed," she wrote.³⁵ Her estrangement from British people appears evident to the reader when she narrates about the visit of the traveller and painter Marianne North and her father, whom Lucie had known since childhood: "Mr. North looked rather horrified at the turbaned society in which he found himself. I suppose it did look odd to English eyes," she told her mother in January 1866.³⁶

Time itself seemed to flow à l'Arabe for Lady Duff Gordon. Little by little, Western time ceased to convey any meaning whatsoever to her. "7 Ramadan," she dated a letter to her mother in 1866.³⁷ In April, 1868, she closed a letter with the words: "I no longer have any idea of British time, but here it is the eighth day of Mohazzan."³⁸ Lucie's very name was then changed by the Egyptian people, who called her Sittie ("Lady") Noor-ala-Noor ("light from His light"). This new name was given to her by a poor widow whose only son Lady Duff Gordon had saved from death.³⁹ In 1863 Lucie began to study Arabic seriously, although she had already known it a little: "I have been learning to write Arabic, and know my letters — no trifle, I assure you," she boasted with her eldest daughter, "I am beginning to stammer out a little Arabic, but find it terribly difficult. The plurals are bewildering and the verbs quite heart-breaking. I have no books, which makes learning very slow work."⁴⁰

Her own language even gradually became hybrid: "at Cairo . . . we shall be, Inshallaha, on the 19th," she wrote in 1863.⁴¹ In January 1864, commenting on a photo sent from England she remarked: "it is ugly, but very like the Zuweyeh (little one)."⁴² Women, even the British, became tout court Hareem. Learned women (such as Lucie's mother, Sarah Austin) she started defining as Halmeh ("which the English call Almeh and think is an improper

word");⁴³ alms became backsheesh, Queen Victoria of England "The English Sultana."⁴⁴ In the letters of Lady Duff Gordon expressions such as Alhamdulillah! (God be praised), Mashallah! (God bless you), Wallahy! (by God) are frequent. She also started using, translated into English, typical Arab idioms, for example "darken one's face" (meaning "bring shame") and "do not make oneself big" (i.e. not being haughty).

Lady Duff Gordon was on very good terms with the Ulema, who praised her "Mussulman feelings."⁴⁵ "Fancy a Shereef, one of the Ulema, calling a Frengeeyeh - a heretic — 'sister!'" she exultantly wrote.⁴⁶ Although gravely ill with TB herself, the writer spent most of her time taking care of the Arabs, particularly when they became ill. When she realized that she could do nothing for them, that they were already dying, she simply held them in her own arms until the end. Her behaviour, so far from that of European women travelling in Egypt at that time, won her many hearts: "As I kissed [the boy], a very pious old moollah said 'Bismillah!' with an

approving nod, and Sheykh Mohammed's old father . . . thanked me with effusion, and prayed that my children might always find help and kindness."⁴⁷ Even when a foreign Sheykh showed his disapproval of her, Duff Gordon's Egyptian friends did not let her down:

There was a tremendous Sheykh-el-Islam from Tunis . . . seated on a carpet in state receiving homage. I don't think he liked the heretical woman at all. Even the Mahon did not dare to be as 'politeful' as usual to me. . . . Then Yussuf came . . . and sat below me on the mat, leaned his elbow on my cushion and made more demonstration of regard for me than ever. . . . It was as if a poor curate had devoted himself to a rank papist under the eye of a scowling Shaftesbury Bishop.⁴⁸

While discussing women travellers in exotic countries, Sara Mills has used the term "going native" not only for the process of their adopting the natives' customs and the abandoning of their own, but also the fact that they "potentially aligned themselves with that culture."⁴⁹ Mills adds that "this 'going native' by women constitutes both a challenge to male Orientalism and a different form of knowledge about other countries."⁵⁰

Lady Duff Gordon took a decisive step toward "going

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native” by choosing not to differentiate between an Arab and an European tyrant — or at least a conniving accomplice of European injustice. “One feeds six or eight Arabs well with the money for one European,” she bitterly remarked, “a water-melon and a loaf a-piece, and a cup of coffee all round; and I pass for a true Arab in hospitality. . . . no European can live so, and they despise the Arabs for doing it.”⁵¹ Moreover, the writer witnessed several massacres of unarmed, innocent people. She also realized despairingly that no one in England seemed to care for what the Arabs were enduring: “your letter shows how little moment the extermination of four villages is in this country,” she wrote her husband.⁵² Lucie, on the contrary, exposed what was happening in Egypt:

Mahommed was really eloquent, and when he threw his melayeh over his face and sobbed, I am not ashamed to say that I cried too. . . . I know that Mohammed feels just as John Smith or Tom Brown would feel in his place. . . . Every man and

woman and child in any degree kin to Achmet-et-Tayib has been taken in chains to Keneh and no one here expects to see one of them return alive.⁵³

In a desperate letter to her mother, Lady Duff Gordon expressed her views with great clarity, situating her perspective in the same dust where the Arabs were forced to stay: “You will think me a complete rebel, but . . . 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 the Europeans and Christians who can help to ‘break these bruised reeds.’”⁵⁴

Lady Lucie Duff Gordon’s letters told the story of two cultures, the Eastern and the Western culture, which never really met each other. It would seem the violent, stupid, prejudiced Europeans still bear the blame for that.

To conclude in her spirit, though East and West have not yet truly met but only clashed; yet, they still may meet, Inshallah.

End Notes

1. Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from The Cape*, (1864) (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1927), pp. 41-42.
2. Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, (1875) (London: Virago, 1997), p. 33.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
5. Dorothy Middleton, *Victorian Lady Travellers* (Chicago: Academy, 1993), pp. 54, 61.
6. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, pp. 67-68.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
8. Edward Said, (1978) *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of The Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995).
9. See Joanna Russ, (1983) *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* (London: The Women’s Press, 1984).
10. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, p. 37.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-127.
12. Katherine Frank, *Lucie Duff Gordon. A Passage to Egypt* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), p. 320.
13. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, p. 65.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 365.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 112.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 363.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 135.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 57.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
38. Letter to Sir Alexander Duff Gordon, April 1868, Waterfield Archive, *The British Institute of Florence*.
39. Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from The Cape*, p. 158.
40. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, p. 115.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
43. Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from The Cape*, p. 20.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
45. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, p. 153.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.
49. Sarah Mills, *Discourses of Difference. An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 98.
50. Mills, p. 99.
51. Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, p. 289.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 240.