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Desert exploration in North Africa: some generalisations

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Abstract

This paper considers some of the general issues relating to the history of exploration in the Libyan (Western) Desert. These issues are: why there have been remarkably few books on desert exploration; the despised role of the motor car which was so important in the exploration of the Libyan Desert; the longevity of some explorers, the prominent role of women in Islamic travels; the great deal of time – sometimes years – that some of the explorers spent in the field; the role of indigenous people; the parts played by professionals, and amateurs; the undertaking of scientific work of high quality, not least in the field of geomorphology; and the international nature of exploration.

تتناول هذه الورقة بعض المواضيع العامة المتعلقة بتاريخ استكشاف الصحراء الليبية (الغربية). هذه المواضيع تشمل: لماذا يوجد عدد قليل جدا من الكتب حول استكشاف الصحراء، الدور الغير مرغوب فيه للسيارة و التي كانت مهمة جدا في استكشاف الصحراء الليبية، طول فترة خدمة بعض المستكشفين، الدور البارز للنساء في الأسفار الإسلامية ، القدر الكبير من الزمن – في بعض الأحيان سنوات – الذي أمضاه بعض المستكشفين في هذا المجال، دور السكان الأصليين، الدور الذي لعبه المحترفون والهواة، القيام بأعمال علمية ذات جودة عالية، ليس أقلها في مجال الجيومورفولوجيا (geomorphology)، والطبيعة الدولية للاستكشاف .

Introduction

Over recent years I have written two books on desert exploration. One (Goudie 2008) was on exploration of the Libyan Desert by motor vehicles, while the other (Goudie 2016) described the achievements of some sixty or so desert explorers from all over the world's arid lands. Both books were published through the Silphium Press imprint of the Society for Libyan Studies, and the latter was also published with the help of the Royal Geographical Society. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the generalisations that relate to the practice of desert exploration in the eastern parts of North Africa. One stimulus to this endeavour has been the publication of a major edited work on the nature of twentieth century exploration (Naylor and Ryan 2010).

Paucity of books on desert exploration

One feature of the literature on exploration is that while there are many books on exploration there are few that specifically deal with desert exploration. Some of the great desert explorers are now little remembered in comparison, say, with those who ventured to the Poles, climbed Everest, or sought the source of the Nile. Yet, crossing unknown deserts is no less challenging because of the severity of their climates, their often immense dimensions, and because of problems created by encounters with indigenous people. Although stupendous discoveries were made in deserts, heroic journeys were made over huge distances and very long periods of time, and some desert landscapes and their peoples proved to have great romantic appeal, the public seem to have been more interested in the pursuit of a very specific objective – reaching the Poles, climbing the world's highest mountain, and seeking the sources of the world's longest river – than in the more diffuse objectives of desert travel.

Despised role of the motor car

One contributory factor to the public view of twentieth century desert exploration may be that some of it was seen to be prosaic because it was carried out using motor vehicles, a form of transport particularly suited to desert travel. This started with the Light Car Patrols (LCPs) of World War I (McQuirk 2013), which the British established to combat Senussi incursions and were employed thereafter by figures like Ball, Jarvis, Beadnell and Bagnold.

Cars had advantages over the camel, not least because they were able to travel greater distances between water sources. Moreover, Ball (1917) pointed out that a Model T could travel five times further per day than a camel. The severe limitations faced by expeditions using camels are well described by Harding King (1912), who had journeyed in the vicinity of Kharga and Dakhla just before the First World War. He regretted the advent of the motor car (Harding King 1925, 11):

> The Libyan Desert, that in the past has to a great extent defied the efforts of all its explorers, is bound before long to give up its secrets. Suitably designed cars…though one cannot but regret the necessity for such prosaic mechanical aids…unquestionably afford an ideal method of conducting long pioneer explorations in a waterless desert.

Orde Wingate sought the mythical oasis of Zerzura. He was a professional soldier who in 1927 obtained an appointment for in the Sudan Defence Force. It was in 1933 that he made a five week expedition into the Libyan Desert (Wingate 1934). It was

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notable that at a time when motor expeditions were becoming the norm, he chose to go on foot, with camels being used to carry his kit. He went to Dakhla by lorry and then travelled with them to Bir Abu Mungar before heading westwards in the direction of Kufra. Half way through the expedition he found, not Zerzura, but the car of Pat Clayton of the Desert Survey Department. As Sykes (1959, 80) observed, 'There are many perils and terrors, and hideous discomfort, in explorations such as those of Doughty and Burton in whose footsteps Wingate was piously and humbly treading, but the worst calamity of all is to find at the end of an agonising march of two weeks that the whole road can be done in a day by a car.'

Thesiger was another explorer who regretted the modern world even though he had used Jeeps during his time with the SAS in North Africa. In spite of his conservatism and anachronistic views Thesiger was perhaps the most revered of British explorers in the twentieth century. Equally, the most famous French explorer of the last century, Monod, loathed the petrol engine, believing that the only transport compatible with desert life was the camel, travelling at three miles an hour.

The longevity of some explorers

Some desert explorers of North Africa lived to a great age (notably Desio to 104, Harding-Newman to 99, Monod to 98, Caton Thompson to 97, Bagnold and Williams to 94, and Thesiger to 93). They plainly had fine constitutions. Conversely, a substantial number died tragically young, either because they suffered from disease, death by flash flooding, or because they were murdered.

The role of women in Islamic travels

It is remarkable that some of the great desert explorers were women. In comparison, rather few women were involved with polar expeditions, the climbing of Everest, or the search for the Nile sources (*pace*, Lady Baker). In some cases the female desert explorers travelled with their husbands (e.g. Mabel Bent and Anne Blunt) or their brothers (e.g. Ella Sykes). Their contributions were, however, not merely as passive partners. Others travelled intrepidly and independently (e.g. Stark, Eberhardt, Bell, Mildred Cable and Eva and Francesca French, Forbes, Caton-Thompson, Gardner and Tinné). It is intriguing that so many of them operated in Islamic lands, where intuitively one might have thought that they might have been unwelcome or forced to overcome major cultural barriers.

The time spent on travels

While many polar and mountaineering expeditions had relatively short durations, of weeks and months, some of the great desert explorers spent years on their travels. Browne's journey (Browne, 1799) in North Africa took six years (though for some of it he was a hostage). Nachtigal's journeys (Nachtigal 1879–1881) in the Sahara and Sudan, lasted five and a half years, as did Barth's major Saharan exploration (Barth 1890). The reasons for this include the sometimes slow mode of travel (a plodding camel or on foot), the immensity of areas like the Libyan Desert (much the same size as India), and the diffuse nature of their objectives.

The role of indigenous people

Indigenous people played a major role in desert exploration. Firstly, in some cases they made expeditions under their own steam. In the Libyan Desert, for example, Hassanein Bey, a member of the Egyptian ruling class, was a friend of Francis Rodd, a distinguished soldier, and they served together during the World War I on the British mission to the Senussis. It was then that they conceived the idea of going to Kufra, but in the event Rodd (who was to carry out subsequent Saharan explorations) dropped out and was replaced by Rosita Forbes (Forbes 1921). In the first half of 1923, Hassanein (1925) made his great camel trek of 3500 km from Sollum on the Mediterranean to El Obeid in Sudan. Another Egyptian who made a notable contribution was Hussein Kemal el Din, son of the Khedive Ismail (El Din 1928). In 1923 he joined up with two British stalwarts, Ball (Director of Desert Surveys) and C.S Jarvis (who had been in the LCPs). They used Citroën halftrack vehicles and Fords. Later he reached and named the Gilf Kebir. His considerable personal wealth provided the necessary finance.

Secondly, quite a large number of the desert motorists used portions of one of the great and ancient trans-desert caravan routes. There included ones from Tripoli via Murzuk to Lake Chad, from Benghazi via Kufra to Wada, and the Darb el Arba'in. This runs from Assiut on the Nile, via Kharga, Selima, and Bir Natrun to Darfur in the Sudan. European explorers were not operating in *terra incognita*.

Thirdly, some of them made extensive use of native guides. An example of this was Harding King (Thomas and Hill 2010). He collected what he called 'native information' about roads, water sources, and topographical features, and hired local employees to guide and support him.

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The role of professionals

Desert explorers showed great diversity. One important group were specifically employed by government agencies because of their professional expertise. Notable in the Libyan Desert was John Ball. He had one of the longest careers in this desert having joined the Egyptian Survey Department in 1897. The Government of Egypt established the Desert Surveys Department in 1920 (Murray 1950), and Ball was its first Director. The department lasted until 1937, when it was amalgamated with the Topographical Survey. From 1926 to 1931 the staff of the Desert Surveys were involved with the discovery and mapping of the Qattara Depression. In 1926 the Department bought Fords for three of its surveyors, Murray, Clayton and Walpole. All three received the Royal Geographical Society's Founder's Medal. Likewise, Mr and Mrs H.J.L. Beadnell used Model Ts from 1927 to 1929, when they were involved with the drilling of water wells at Bir el Sahra and Bir el Messaha. Another of the great explorers was Clayton (Clayton 1998). He first went to Egypt in 1915 and in 1923 he joined the Desert Surveys Department and started to use Fords. In the next few years he was concerned with the demarcation of the border between Egypt and Libya and with mapping the Qattara. In 1930/31, equipped with the Model A Ford he operated at Uweinat and the Gilf Kebir. In Italian territory Desai was a professional geologist and geographer. In 1926, he led a geographical and geological expedition to the oasis of Jaghbub. From 1930 to 1933 he made some expeditions through the Libyan hinterland including the crossing of the Sahara. In 1935 and 1936 he further explored the Fezzan and Tibesti. From 1936 to 1940, he directed the Libyan Geological Survey, which undertook research into mining and artesian waters.

The role of amateurs

Another group of desert explorers were amateurs. Because of personal wealth, they were able to fund their own journeys of discovery. Browne (Browne 1799) could travel because he had been left an inheritance by his father. Bankes, a great collector and connoisseur of antiquities, was able to travel to Abu Simbel because he was a member of a rich Dorset family. Harding King was a lawyer who had no positions in the Egyptian Survey, the British Army, or in a university, but on his father's death he had sufficient finance to travel in the Libyan Desert (Thomas and Hill 2010). Hassainen and Kemal al-Din were both members of the Egyptian aristocracy. Besides using their own wealth, some amateurs also received financial support from such bodies as the Africa Association (e.g. Burckhardt and Hornemann) and the Royal Geographical Society. Commercial interests also offered support, and Almásy, an Austro-Hungarian aristocrat, was in part financed by an Austrian car manufacturer. Claud Williams was a New Zealand soldier, paid to operate in the Libyan Desert against the Sanussi (McQuirk 2013; Williams 1919). Others were supported as they undertook espionage and covert military activities (Forsyth 2017) or archaeological investigations (e.g. Caton Thompson and Gardner).

Importance of scientific work and teams

Both professional and amateur explorers undertook scientific work. Rohlfs made an expedition eastwards across the Libyan Desert in 1873/4 (Rohlfs 1875), and recruited an impressive team of scientists: Ascherson, a botanist from Berlin University; Little, of Munich University, a geologist and palaeontologist; Jordan, a geodesist and astronomer from Karlsruhe; and Remelé, a Prussian photographer.

Beadnell's work on groundwater and on the geology of the oases was of fundamental importance, and he made some of the earliest studies of rates of barchan migration (Beadnell 1909; 1910). Harding King (1916; 1918) made impressive observations on dunes and used smoke to undertake flow visualization experiments over them. Likewise, Ball contributed to our understanding of the desert depressions and of old courses of the Nile across the Limestone Plateau (Ball 1927).

Rather later was the work of Bagnold. Besides exploring new regions and developing new techniques for desert travel he also had time for science. Not only did he use his 1938 expedition to validate his own wind tunnel experiments at Imperial College. He also brought with him people who had expertise in geomorphology, archaeology, anthropology and geology. They made discoveries that included a profusion of archaeological sites and the evidence of changes in past climates. Both Bagnold and Peel (one of his colleagues) made fundamental contributions to desert geomorphology. It was in the Libyan Desert that Bagnold developed fundamental and influential work on the physics of blown sand and desert dunes (Bagnold, 1941). Peel developed models of slope evolution and groundwater sapping in the Gilf Kebir (Peel 1941) that were later to be adopted as explanations of features found on Mars He also mentored Nabil Embabi, the leading Egyptian expert on desert landforms (Embabi 2018). Indeed, the search for Martian analogues stimulated some major field campaigns by NASA and other scientists from the 1970s onwards (El-Baz and Maxwell 1982).

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The international nature of exploration. The final point that needs to be made is that the exploration of the Libyan Desert was an international enterprise. It involved not only the British, but also the Germans, a New Zealander, an Austro-Hungarian, the Italians, the French, the Americans, and Egyptians.

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