

Studies in Travel Writing

Half Past Ten in the Afternoon: An Englishman's Journey from Aneiza to Makkah

James Budd

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Offering a welcome addition to the genre of modern British travel literature connected with Arabia, *Half Past Ten in the Afternoon* is a memoir of the author's experience as school teacher in the small desert town of Aneiza in Saudi Arabia. Set between the years 1965 and 1970, the narrative recalls local customs and manners, delineates the camaraderie of male encounter among male friends and injects a sense of adventure by virtue of the author being, for most of his time in Aneiza, the only white Westerner cast among Arabs. With the desert fringe nipping at the edges of the account, *Half past Ten in the Afternoon* usefully documents the workings of this small rural outpost in the Najd at a time when little was recorded of the living history of the region. Budd's memoir may have remained as just that – a pleasant, if unremarkable account of an unremarkable town – were it not for the parallel journey that charts the author's faith from its first stirring in Aneiza to its apotheosis in Mecca many years later.

The book begins by detailing the author's five-year residence in Aneiza at a time when the town was balanced between the past and the future. Suspended between the desert and the sown, and awaiting the injection of oil wealth that will transform it forever, the town represents a culture in transition. Behind lies the Arabia described by the desert travellers, W. G. Palgrave, Chares M. Doughty and H. St. J. Philby, all of whom spent time in Aneiza, and ahead lies the urban phenomenon observed by the academics Donald P. Cole and Soraya Altorki whom Budd met during his secondment there. Budd's own observations cast a glance in both directions; he read Wilfred Thesiger as a boy and is excited when he touches the broader context of the desert literary tradition. Although 1960s Aneiza looked much the same as it did when Doughty stayed in one of its mudbrick houses, the town that Budd describes is nonetheless on a fast-track to modernisation, propelled there by its own inhabitants.

Keen to record a passing way of life for posterity, in the spirit of literary forebears, Budd's memoir is careful to avoid valued statements about the relative merits of past and present. It is only in the final chapter, in which he describes his return to Aneiza in 2011 as a guest of a former pupil, that a sense of regret for the peaceful have once represented by Aneiza is reflected in the elegiac tone and in lamentations about globalisation (185). This tension between the old and the new, the local and the global, is prefigured in the title. "Half past ten" in a Western context refers to the morning or the evening, not to the afternoon, but during the period of the author's residence in Aneiza, hours used to be counted in the ancient Arab way- from sunset, rather than from midnight. The reference to time helps signpost Budd's insider knowledge of Arab culture and brings authenticity to his account – necessary as, by the author's own admission, most of the narrative is written several decades after the event, and without the benefit of journals.

The veracity of "desert texts" is often established through description of the minutiae of Islamic practice and *Half Past Ten in the Afternoon: An Englishman's Journey from Aneiza to Makkah* (to give it its full title) is an interesting modern exploration of this trope. This journey to Mecca is no cynical exercise to see the two holy cities forbidden to infidels (in the tradition of the nineteenth-century Arabist, Richard Burton), but the climax of a genuine quest to find spiritual meaning following Budd's conversion to Islam. In time-worn fashion, Budd gives a warts-and-all account of pilgrimage and much of the experience is described as anything other than uplifting – the jostling crowds of Anatolians, the terrifying crush at the point where pilgrims stone the devil, being cheated by the Indian fixer and having to share a bed with fevers, flu and strangers. Floating above the mundane misery of the logistics, however, is the vision of heaven that transcends all the local irritations, as represented by the image of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, heightened by a moment of ecstasy (169).

Despite its climactic position in the book, it is not the pilgrimage but the description of the inner journey from agnosticism to Islam that forms the narrative's spiritual heart. Fellowship, camaraderie, sharing, a life

of small material worth but of pleasure in social encounter, this entwined with Budd's notions of Islam. As such, when he finds himself uprooted from the place where he experienced these values first hand, expelled by some of the more conservative inhabitants of a town he had come to love, the experience registers as deeply painful. In a statement worthy of Edward Said, Budd finds a reason for his expulsion in the spread of Western influence: "it is hardly surprising that people in the Muslim world feel threatened by Western capitalism and Western cultural imperialism when Western armies occupy Muslim lands [...] and Western-based multinationals dominate their market-places and shopping malls" (152).

As an account that serves two main purposes, to record the pattern of life in a town before modernity impinged, and as an expiation of the pain of being rejected from an approximate garden of Eden, this is a book likely to appeal to those who look to travel literature for a metaphor of loss and redemption.. islam, Budd states, provided him "with a secure refuge from this turbulent world and a deep sense of peace with myself and my surroundings" (162). The physical locus of this secure refuge can be traced back to a sleepy desert town, on the edge of the dunes, far from the oil industry that was bringing rapid transformation to the rest of the country, and far from the complexities and sophistication of life back home. In this regard, Budd's memoir takes its place alongside the world of other modern neo-primitivists who find in Arabia a life they feel the West has lost.

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