Oxford launch of
Travels in Tandem: The Writing of Women and Men Who Travelled Together
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FROM OXFORD TO KERMAN – Ella Sykes' Travels in Persia with her Brother

Some of you were good enough to be here in September 2010 for the launch of *Tasmania: Women, History, Books and Places*. If so, you may remember that I talked about Mary Ward, born in Tasmania, brought to England as a child, and later to become a successful novelist and respected social reformer. I ended my introduction to her with the suggestion that Mary should have a blue plaque on her Oxford house. I later put in an application to the Blue Plaque Board and I hope you will be pleased to learn that the plaque is to be unveiled this Saturday.

I talked about Mary Ward because of the Oxford connection – she was much involved in the setting up of Somerville Hall, and the College has been very supportive about the blue plaque in spite of Mary's later anti-suffrage activities which led them to fall out at the beginning of the 20th century. It is with another Oxford connection that I plan to speed *Travels in Tandem: The Writing of Women and Men Who Travelled Together* on its way. It wouldn't have made sense to try and talk about the other 9 couples who have chapters of their own, let alone the subsidiary characters in the Introduction and Conclusion.

I'm going to concentrate mostly on Ella Sykes and her brother Percy who spent time in Persia and wrote separate books about it. Ella's was *Through Persia on a Side Saddle* (1898) and Percy's was *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia* (1902).

Ella Sykes was one of the first students at Lady Margaret Hall – from 1881-83; it was founded in 1878. When I first started my research on Ella, in 1987, and, therefore, before the internet changed our methods, I wrote to LMH from Hongkong to ask for details of Ella; I didn't even know her date of birth. Ruth Dipple, the Librarian, sent me everything she had, including extracts from the Register, but she didn't have her birthdate. Much later I learnt that she was born in 1863, so was 18 when she arrived at LMH. There she failed her lst year exams, but later passed in Latin, French, Arithmetic and History.

Following their father's death, Ella's brother Percy invited her to accompany him to Persia where, in 1894, he was to set up a British consulate at Kerman, to cover the area from there to Baluchistan. Percy,

educated at Rugby and Sandhurst, and 4 years younger than Ella, was to make his name as the first historian of Persia, though he was also a successful soldier, administrator and intelligence officer.

It has to be said that Percy's *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia* sometimes gives the impression of being a dummy run for his later history: he has a tendency to write such introductions to an area he is visiting as, 'after this brief description of the province I now propose to discuss its history.' (48) And, 'To avoid plunging *in medias res*, I will give a very brief account of the state of Europe and Asia at that time.' (p260)

By 1894, Ella was 31 and unmarried, indeed, she never married, probably from choice. Percy's son-in-law suggested to his biographer that men found Ella 'intimidating' and that she found those in her circle 'dull'. The family even wondered if Ella wasn't 'Lebanese' – perhaps more of a commentary on their confusion about sexual orientation than on Ella's unmarried state.

Ella was a stalwart and indomitable woman of the British empire – as details of her life in biographical entries show; and it is that spirit of imperialism that sheds a patina over the writing of sister and brother – both their complementary books and their later works.

The only thing affecting her own well-being that Ella complained about in Persia – which had long left behind its own glory days of empire – was having to ride side saddle to keep up appearances. And these rides were not just little outings. When they left Kerman for Percy to take part in the commission that would settle the boundary between Persia and British (Indian) Baluchistan, they rode 600 miles in 40 days – no roads, no hotels. She chose the title of her book carefully.

In Kerman, in the household she set up, Ella was a true memsahib, as this extract shows:

> *My first act every morning was to inspect each cooking vessel, and it took a considerable amount of energy to get the remains of one meal emptied out of the saucepans before a fresh dish was commenced in them, and soon I found that I must explore the recesses of the large cooking-boxes, as my cook had an unpleasant habit of hiding vegetables cooked a day or two before, so as to save himself the trouble of preparing a fresh lot for each meal. To fine Abu ten shahis (2½d.) for each dirty vessel was the only way of appealing to his feelings, although it was an unpleasant method to*

resort to, as it made him sulky, and covertly insolent to boot. He would tell me lie after lie, with such admirable self-possession, looking me straight in the face with such guileless eyes the while, that he often fairly staggered me. However, his perversions of the truth were not consistent, and this betrayed him. Thereupon I would say, 'That is not true,' and when he perceived that he was found out, he would answer cheerfully and without a trace of shame, 'Yes, Khanum*, it was a lie'!*

One can see how the traditional image of the white memsahib arriving to disturb the tranquillity of a masculine household came about: a clash of cultures that it is hard entirely to blame Ella for.

Later, in 1910, after another visit to Persia, Ella was to write *Persia and Its People*. I've just finished reading that for the first time and it doesn't compare in interest and style with her more personal travel account, though the chapter on the Art and Crafts of Persia is worth reading. In another chapter she conjures up an English traveller – a man - in Persia and writes:

...He is an Englishman among Orientals, and it adds something to his pride of race to see how instinctively Persian and Baluch look to the Sahib in all emergencies; and he feels, as never before, that in a way he himself is upholding, in a very slight degree, the honour of the British Empire.

Of course, she is really talking about Percy! And he can match her; Derek, with whom I've travelled widely for 33 years, will kindly stand in for Percy:

I think that our officials are somewhat apt to forget how great a power display still is in the East. In Baluchistán a traveller's status is partly determined by the number of his loads, in Persia by his servants and his general turn-out, while everywhere, as far as my experience goes, the greater the show, the greater the effect. Travellers on more than one occasion have told me that they had only brought rough shooting clothes with them; all such I would refer to Lord Curzon's work, where it is laid down that a dress suit is the most essential article of outfit, even for those who would attempt to reach Lhassa. (p292)

No wonder Ella rode side saddle in public, as an English lady was expected to; and she was always in public because they travelled with a

retinue which included the dog – Diana - in the photograph of them that I have passed around.

But then Percy can disarm. Earlier, in 1893, when he reaches the Caucasus to rejoin his regiment, he writes:

> *... I was considered rather a suspicious character, at least I was shadowed, until I demonstrated my harmlessness and the absurdity of their suspicion by asking the shadower to carry my water proof. This, as I afterwards heard, elicited the remark of 'only a mad Englishman,' and I was left in peace! (p3)*

It's worth briefly diverting to the couple who follow the Sykes chronologically and in my next chapter, though it is thirty years later, following World War I, and they are American. In styles quite different from those of the Sykes, Eleanor Lattimore in *Turkistan Reunion* (1934) and her husband Owen in *High Tartary* (1930) constantly play down the importance of their expedition and, indeed, mock those with imperialist pretensions in their mode of travel. Eleanor writes:

> *We want to travel like vagabonds, wandering through the province as simply and inconspicuously as possible, living as much as possible 'off the country' and as the natives do, both because it is cheaper and more carefree and because we can learn more of the people and the country by doing it that way. But we have to compromise to a certain extent between our idea of the kind of people we are and the Chinese idea of the kind of people we ought to be. This is all because the Chinese officials have their own notions as to how bona fide Western travellers ought to travel, and anyone trying to act like a gypsy is likely to be harried as a Russian refugee and suspected as a spy ...*

One of Owen's versions comes when they have met up after adventures by both of them travelling alone; they set off now forced to travel more as an expedition:

> *This matter of becoming an expedition had unfortunately slipped our attention in Peking, so that we had not provided ourselves with the distinctive expeditionary insignia of stamped letterheads and personal titles. My wife had even submitted, in filling out her consular papers, to the description of 'housewife.' I had fallen into a loose way of regarding myself as a person interested in people,*

rather than as a person interesting to people, as a true expeditionary should be. (p91)

In spite of her mode of travel and expatriate life, Ella is good on women's issues, as she was to be throughout her life, working tirelessly in various ways on behalf of less privileged women. She wrote of entertaining Persian men – no Persian women, of course - on those occasions:

As they got to know me by degrees, some of them spoke bitterly about the need of education for their women, comparing these latter with me, to whom they did the honour of saying that I could understand whatever they said! They complained that their wives could talk nothing but gossip picked up at the weekly bath, and that as their religion forbade the men seeing their womenkind, save in the house, they had very few interests in common. I always told them that they alone were to blame, and when I explained to them how I had been educated, they were quite aghast, and one of them exclaimed indignantly, 'It is all the fault of our accursed religion, that binds us in chains as well as our poor women!' (p151)

It seems clear from Ella's life following her Persian escapade that her horizons had been much broadened.

Twenty years later, in 1915, when Percy was asked to take over as Consul General in Kashgar from Sir George Macartney while he was on leave, he invited Ella, rather than his wife of 13 years, to accompany him. They wrote a joint book about their six months there – *Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia* (1920). Ella's concern for women and their problems is once more revealed. Of visiting a Chinese household, she wrote:

My entire ignorance of the language prevented me from enjoying this glimpse of a Chinese home in the way I might otherwise have done, and my thoughts centred on the neat little 'hoofs' shod in black satin which served our hostesses for feet. I had heard Mrs Archibald Little lecture on this fashion, and her account of the tortures inflicted on so many thousands of tiny girls to bring about the repulsive mutilation which the Chinese euphemistically call 'golden lilies' had filled me with an abiding indignation.

In 1992, Derek and I followed in Ella and Percy's footsteps in Kashgar and, indeed, in those of Eleanor and Owen Lattimore and 2 other couples who have chapters of their own: Ella Maillart and Peter Fleming and

Diana and Eric Shipton. Ella's account was particularly useful: for example, she talks of silver buttons bordering embroidered caps. So we set off to look for some down Gold and Silversmiths' Road, past scribes writing letters for clients, pavement barbers, tailors and seamstresses and dozens of little stall, carpeted cubby holes, full of crafts people, mostly gold. Eventually we were successful. One of them is on the jacket I'm wearing tonight. That's part of the fun of reading travel accounts.

Ella Sykes spent her last years in a flat – number 26 – in St George's Court, Gloucester Road, London. The Edwardian block is at the end of Gloucester Road just before you get to Kensington Gardens. I'm contemplating agitating for a blue plaque there …