

The Adventures of Miss Ross

Interventions into, and the Tenacity of, Romantic Travel Writing in South West Persia

Barbara Cooke

University of Leicester

Abstract

This article concerns the written life of Dr Elizabeth Ness Macbean Ross (1878–1911). Ross’s posthumously published memoir about this time, *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land* (1921), challenges the masculine, monomythic stance of her travel-writing forebears Sir Henry Layard and Sir Richard Burton and anticipates contemporary texts in which the encounter between “traveling” self and “native” other destabilizes, rather than reaffirms, the traveler’s sense of identity and authority. The article also briefly examines a set of stories the *Times* ran on Dr Ross, which attempted to appropriate her for a dominant narrative of the Middle East reliant on a languid orientalism, on the one hand, and tales of derring-do, on the other.

Keywords: Bakhtiari, feminism, Iran, life writing, orientalism, romance, travel writing

This article explores the written life of Elizabeth Ness Macbean Ross (1878–1915), forgotten doctor and independent woman traveler. It demonstrates how Ross’s neglected memoir, *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land* (1921), challenges the contemporary, orientalist vision of the East and the kind of Westerners who frequented it. Ultimately, despite Ross’s lived and written intervention into this imperially motivated romanticism, it is the latter that has stood the test of time. This obfuscation has left us with a misleadingly linear impression of travel writing in the Middle East that evolves smoothly from the monomythic quests of Richard Burton and Henry Layard in the nineteenth

century to the more reflexive encounters described by contemporary writers such as Amitav Ghosh. The truth, as Ross's life and work make clear, is a little more complicated than that.

After providing a brief biography of Ross, I describe how her travel writing simultaneously refutes and conforms to the conventions of its romantic, imperial, and masculine heritage. I focus on Ross's remarkably modern depictions of both herself and her subjects. I then refer to an incident not recorded in Ross's memoir but reported by the British newspaper *Times* in which the author encounters two bands of robbers while traveling between Isfahan and Shiraz. The move Ross undergoes from representing the other to being represented herself is just one of the ironies contained in the journey from *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land* to the *Times*'s "Adventures of Miss Ross," and the trajectory of her story reveals how her own interventions into the imperial romantic genre were, in turn, buried by the continuing survival of the genre itself.

Elizabeth Ness Macbean Ross, 1878–1915

Ross was born on Valentine's Day in 1878, and grew up in a large middle class family in the Scottish Highlands. Her father was a bank manager, and two of her seven siblings were also medics ("Obituary," 1915). Ross graduated from the prestigious Glasgow Medical School in 1901, a university which, seven years earlier, had become the first in Scotland to confer degrees upon women; Ross received her MB and ChB in the company of only twenty-six other female graduates and only eight other female doctors. Ross and her cohort studied not alongside their male contemporaries, but in the purpose-built medical facilities in Queen Margaret College, home to Glasgow's first women students (University of Glasgow 2013). She struggled with her final exams, having to re-take a

number of these, but excelled in midwifery (*University of Glasgow Schedules* 1901; *University Calendar* 1901: 452).

After graduating, Ross practiced in rural communities on the Hebridean Islands of Colonsay and Oronsay, in Dublin slums, and in the East End of London (“Obituary,” 1915) before answering—as she remembers it—an advertisement for “A Lady Doctor in the East” (Macbean Ross 1921: 10). She first traveled to Persia in 1907 as an assistant to an Armenian physician, but after a few years found herself “unexpectedly free and thrown entirely on my own resources” (Macbean Ross 1921: 11, 18; Tain and District Museum 2013). Luckily, she remembered an offer made to her by the chief of a powerful branch of the Bakhtiari tribe of Southwest Persia, who wanted to recruit a British doctor to live and work among his people. She accepted this offer in the winter of 1909, and for the next two and a half years administered to the elite women of the Haft-Lang Bakhtiari, a semi-autonomous people whose territory lay in the mountainous regions to the west of Persia’s second largest city, Isfahan. The women were known as Bibis, a term of honor roughly equivalent to Lady, and while working for them Ross acquired the title of Bibi Gulafrus (Blazing Flower). “From henceforth,” Ross writes, “I was always addressed as Bibi Gulafrus when in Bakhtiari costume and, when professionally engaged, as Bibi Doctoor” (Macbean Ross 1921: 27).¹ In 1909, Persia’s central government was weak, buffeted between the demands of Russia to the north and British-influenced lands along the Persian Gulf, and as a result the tribe had gained a great deal of political power. In fact, they would not be so powerful again.

Ross spent some time in London following her years with the Bakhtiari, apparently to recover her health, and was admitted as a Fellow of the Society of Tropical Medicine in 1914 (“Obituary,” 1915). She then served for a short time as a ship’s surgeon before returning again to Isfahan (Tain and District Museum 2013). At the outbreak of

World War I, she answered a request from the Russian government to take command of a military hospital at Nish in Serbia (Macbean Ross 1921: vii), after which she was moved to a fever hospital in Kragujevac, where a unit of doctors and nurses from the Scottish Women's Hospital were also seconded. Ross made friends with a number of women in the unit, and they discussed the "heart-rending" stories of their patients together (Sister Louisa Jordan cited in Leneman 1994: 18–20). A typhus epidemic set in, killing at least twenty-five doctors before Ross herself fell ill. Two nurses from the Scottish Women's Hospital cared for her, but could do nothing to save her (Leneman 1994: 18–20), and she died on her thirty-seventh birthday. There was a full military procession at Ross's funeral, which was "headed by the band of the Guards of the Crown Prince of Serbia" ("Obituary," 1915). Ross's only monograph, *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land*, was most likely written when she returned to Britain prior to the outbreak of the war, but was not published until seven years after her death. Like the contours of her life itself, Ross's memoir suggests its protagonist as compassionate, resourceful, and determined to expand her horizons. It is a curious text, both announcing itself as a "book of travel" and defying straightforward characterization as such.

A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land

Ross's memoir of her two-and-a-half years with the Haft Lang was published posthumously in 1921 with a preface by her surgeon brother James. In its opening pages, the book identifies itself as a social ethnographic study, dealing with the home life and cultural attitudes of the Bakhtiari. In particular, it announces a focus on the wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters of the Bakhtiari chiefs to whom Ross was guest, physician, and friend (Macbean Ross 1921: 24). It may then be categorized as a "domestic ethnography," a typically feminine genre of travel writing that, by Ross' time,

had established itself as “distinctly middle class.” Domestic ethnographies became a principal means of writing about the Muslim world because they were able to uncover the “secrets” of the harem and other spaces that were strictly off-limits to the traveling white male (Melman 2002: 111–112). According to Susan Bassnett (2002: 229), exclusion from these spaces led to an “eroticisation of the unfamiliar” that domestic ethnography could help redress, by, for example, rejecting “clear-cut distinctions between private spaces, identified with women and taken to signify powerlessness, and public ones” (Melman 2002: 112). Ross provides a vivid example of this in her account of her first visit to a Bakhtiari *anderoun*, or women’s courtyard: “At first it struck me as strange ... the room was crowded with men of all sorts who had come to do business, sitting down and smoking the ghalyan [shisha] or drinking tea with the ladies, and I must admit my ideas about Oriental seclusion received a rude shock” (Macbean Ross 1921: 100–101). As such, Ross’s account reveals that the inner sanctum of the female, domestic space is in fact the public and economic center of the Bakhtiari community.

This extract from *Lady Doctor* also highlights a further characteristic of travel writing about the Muslim world. According to Melman, this sub-genre is peculiarly “textual” and “excessively citationary” (2002: 110, 117), and the weight of previous travelers’ observations often threatens to overwhelm the direct experience of the writer. On the very first page of *Lady Doctor*, Ross describes her undertaking her “winter-journey” out to Asia as a romantic dream, and attributes her love of the *idea* of the East to being “nurtured in my nursery days” by *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Arabian Nights* (Macbean Ross 1921: 9). As Ross grew up in the late nineteenth century, she was probably most familiar with William Lane’s family-friendly version of the *Nights* (1839).² This Victorian incarnation of the stories, along with Richard Burton’s erotic *Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885), was essentially a Western fiction that re-imagined

the Orient for its own audience. Lane, for example, excised anything potentially offensive from his 200 Arabic source texts, and thus half the stories available to him were not translated. Burton took the opposite approach to produce a work of “Oriental voyeurism” and both these and other contemporary editions, according to Melman, drew “on collective fantasy and considerable prejudice regarding Muslim practises” (2002: 111). Similarly, David Damrosch comments that translating the *Nights* has proved a principal means for “many Westerners [to project] their fantasy life onto the Middle East” (2009: 80). The young Ross, then, was not being provided with a window onto the East through her nursery reading so much as a mirror that reflected her own romantic dreams. Yet, despite the various *Nights*’ revealing at least as much about the cultural context of their target as their myriad source cultures, the canon was during Ross’s time respected not as a literary text so much as an ethnographic “textual authority” on the Middle East (Melman 2002: 112).³

Ross does not state explicitly where her “ideas about Oriental seclusion” came from, but it is reasonable to assume that her childhood reading had something to do with it. They would also have been shaped by her travel-writing forebears such as Burton, Isabella Bird Bishop, and Sir Henry Layard. Ross is careful to place herself within a tradition of British travel writing in her memoir, but differs from the others in that she alone of the four seems capable of casting off the burden of “textual authority” in her observations. Compare, for example, Ross’s description of the *anderoun* with Isabella Bird’s description of the Bakhtiari women published twenty years earlier:

There were some very handsome rugs on the floor, and divans covered in Kashan velvet; but rugs, divans and squabs were heaped to the depth of some inches with rose petals which were being prepared for rose-water, and the principal wife rose out of a perfect bed of them.

These ladies have no conversation and relapse into apathy after asking a few personal questions. ... I felt sorry for them, sorrier than I can say, as I realised more fully the unspeakable degradation and dullness of their lives. (Bird [1891] 1988: 375–376)

It is hard to know whether Bird's use of "rose" three times in the same sentence as adjective, noun, and verb is a deliberate literary device or if she was simply carried away by her own romantic imagination. Yet before condemning Bird—an extremely intelligent, resilient, and respected travel writer—the contextual differences that exist between her and Ross's accounts should be acknowledged. First, while Bird was just passing through, Ross spent two and a half years in Bakhtiari country. Ross therefore had far greater opportunity than Bird to develop a nuanced perspective of Bakhtiari life (similarly Vita Sackville-West, whose Persian writings enjoyed great popularity in the interwar years, spent only a short amount of time among the Bakhtiari). Second, to expect little to have changed for the Bakhtiari between 1891 and 1911 would be to play into the hands of an orientalist fallacy that contrasts a static, immutable East with a dynamic and constantly progressing West (Said 1978: 2–7). In fact, as Ross makes clear, these were years of profound change for the tribe. Their political ascendancy meant that their territories had expanded hugely, and the tribal chiefs were often away negotiating in the capital or governing outlying areas while Ross lived in Bakhtiari land. As a result, it fell to the elite women, or Bibis, to manage their husbands' estates, and their outlook and prospects changed accordingly. Over three generations, for example, Ross writes that the marriage age for girls had risen from eight to seventeen (Macbean Ross 1921: 75). The Bibis were literate, shrewd accountants and knowledgeable pharmacists—so knowledgeable in fact that Ross sometimes viewed herself as surplus to requirements. Far from being bored and degraded, the Bakhtiari women Ross came to know were part of a

modernizing tribe, and enjoyed a certain degree of agency and power. They followed Persia's political struggles closely and actively, and wished to stake a claim in the new order in their own right rather than their husbands'. They were aware of the British suffrage movement, and claimed kinship with it: after all, one woman commented to Ross, "We could break windows just as well as English women, though we are not so well educated" (Macbean Ross 1921: 106–107).

Lady Doctor, then, carves out a three-dimensional image of the Bakhtiari Bibis that belies the one-dimensional image passed down from Bird. Ross also draws attention to the fact that her account "differs greatly" from Henry Layard's *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana and Babylonia Including a Residence Among the Bakhtiyari and Other Wild Tribes Before the Discovery of Nineveh* (1853), although she is careful not to accuse the better-known male author of inaccuracy, and instead attributes "any discrepancy ... either to circumstances changing through lapse of time or to inherent differences between the habits and customs' of Ross' hosts and the rival branch of Bakhtiari featured in *Early Adventures* (Macbean Ross 1921: 37). By documenting the everyday experience of the Bakhtiari Bibis in detail, Ross goes some distance toward countering the excessively romantic tendencies of the contemporary Middle Eastern travel genre. However, the way Ross positions herself in relation to her "subjects" marks a more fundamental difference between her and the majority of her literary antecedents. Ross's interactions with the Bakhtiari, I argue, have much more in common with the dialectical "interplay between the observer and the observed" (Blanton [1995] 2002: 5) that characterize modernist and early twenty first-century texts than they do with hierarchical Victorian and Edwardian travelogues.

Before investigating that interplay, and examining how it represents a break with British Imperialist tradition, it is useful to consider what kind of "self" Ross is bringing to

Lady Doctor; in particular, the ambivalences that may have existed for Ross as a Scottish female doctor in the era of late colonialism. These specifics are important, for, as the existence of this issue makes clear, being a woman who traveled, or even being a woman who wrote about travel, is not enough to mark Ross out as particularly unusual. Women's writing on the Middle East had been in circulation since Lady Mary Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*, published posthumously in 1763 (Melman 2002: 111), and women's travel writing in general enjoyed a growing readership throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (Bassnett [1995] 2002: 226). To make this point is not to dismiss the fact that many women who wrote about travel did so apologetically, or were at pains to insist on their femininity even when, for example, beating off crocodile attacks with the oar of a rowing boat (Blanton [1995] 2002: 52–53). Certainly, the woman traveler has often been perceived as anomaly even when publishing figures have begged the contrary (Bassnett 2002: 228). However, I am more concerned here with what made Ross different in circumstance rather than perception. These differences relate both to Ross's personal situation and the changing context in which she wrote.

At the time of publication of *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land*, ethnographic travel writing was undergoing a transformation. Previously, anthropological accounts had typically been written by either “merchants, navigators, missionaries, and cultural administrators” to make governing, trading with, or converting the people under observation easier, or by genteel scholars for broadly humanitarian reasons (Pau Rubiés 2002: 256, 258). The domestic ethnography fitted the second category, which came under threat of being “dismissed as superficial or irrelevant” as ethnography itself became institutionalized as an academic science in the 1900–1920s (Pau Rubiés 2002: 258). Due to its author's qualifications, however, *Lady Doctor* stood more chance of being taken seriously than its kin. Ross's medical education meant that she was one of a small

number of contemporary women travelers able to speak with authority within a scientific discourse. It is reasonable, then, to assume that the self encountered in *Lady Doctor* is dependent to a large extent on academic authority in general and medical knowledge in particular—qualities strongly identified as masculine in concept and materially unavailable to the vast majority of women at the time.

A second ambivalence arises from a sense of authority, shared by all contemporary travelers from the Anglophone world, derived from belonging to a supposedly more “advanced” nation—advanced in terms of moral conduct, education, and technological achievement. This is what the British Empire chiefly meant for those who considered themselves its representatives, but for a Scot the situation was not straightforward. For many Scots, then as now, being part of Britain was considered the result of coercion rather than a source of national pride. This was exacerbated for Scots of Ross’s provenance in particular; the Highland clearances, in which tenant families were evicted by the thousand in order to convert their smallholdings into grazing pasture, would have been a recent local memory at the time of Ross’s birth. The last mass eviction had occurred in 1855, in Ross’s own county (Smout 1986: 63). Many associated the clearances with English or English-educated landowners in particular, and so the idea of a shared heritage was an anathema. English oppression was instead widely blamed for a loss of Gaelic identity and, conversely, some English commentators “thought of Highlanders almost as savages” (Smout 1986: 65).⁴

Ross, then, occupied two liminal spaces that made her at once an “insider” and an “outsider”: she was part of an intellectual elite, yet made an exception within it by her gender.⁵ She was also a British subject, yet hailed from a corner of Britain that had suffered recent, severe, and systematic injustice and was considered as worse than provincial by the centers of the empire.⁶ While authority could be drawn from both

positions, that authority would always be ambivalent. As a consequence, Ross uses encounters with her subjects in *Lady Doctor* to reflect on the apparently unassailable position of the British doctor-anthropologist. In stark contrast to Layard, Burton, and even Bird, this project entails both the attempt to “make the authentic [Bakhtiari] voice audible” (Melman 2002: 116) and a willingness to accept the challenges to a selfhood constructed through authority which that voice may pose. In doing so, Ross also poses her own challenges to one of the most dominant themes of Victorian travel writing—the self-affirming, heroic adventure story.

Bird notwithstanding, the most influential texts about the Middle East in Ross’s era remained Burton’s *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Madinah and Meccah* ([1893] 1898) and Layard’s *Early Adventures*.⁷ Both texts exemplify what Joseph Campbell (1968) has called the “monomyth” of the heroic narrative which, Casey Blanton argues, holds particularly true for male imperialist travel writing. In Blanton’s summary, the monomyth serves a similar function to the *Bildungsroman*, following the protagonist as he “travels along a path of self-improvement and integration, doing battle with ‘others’ who are the unresolved parts of himself or herself” (Blanton [1995] 2002: 3). In other words, the monomythic travel writers create their subjects consciously or unconsciously to reflect back an image of the narrator to him or herself as he or she wishes to be seen.⁸ This can be read rather literally, for example, in Burton’s satisfaction with his disguise as an Arab man:

I ... rejoiced to see that by dint of a beard and a shaven head I had succeeded ... in “misleading the inquisitive spirit of the populace.” The mingled herd of spectators before whom we passed in review on the landing-place, hearing an audible “*Alhamdulillah*” whispered “Muslim”! ... and when a little boy, presuming that the occasion might possibly open the hand of generosity, looked in my face and

exclaimed “*Bakhshish*,” he obtained in reply a “*Mafish*”; which convinced the bystanders that the sheep-skin covered a real sheep. (Burton [1893] 1898: 7–8)

In this scene, Burton’s “mingled herd of spectators” have nothing better to do than stare at him and wait to be “convinced” or otherwise of his authenticity. They are described in the plural, as extras to his leading man, with the exception of one little boy with whom Burton exchanges precisely two words—two words that serve the single function of confirming Burton in the image of his choosing. Granted, Burton himself is aware that his narrative “may appear to the uninterested critic mere outpourings of a mind full of self,” but he undercuts this awareness by blaming the “uninterested” reader for the impression, and makes “no apology for the egotistical semblance of the narrative” ([1893] 1898: 5).

Ross breaks out from this monomythic heritage in *Lady Doctor* by creating a dialogue of misrecognition between herself and the women she describes. Rather than using the narrative to confirm her self-image, she experiences a destabilization of self through her travels. Typically in the monomythic narrative a traveler-hero who observes his subjects sees reflected back an idealized image of himself—more educated than the “natives,” belonging to a superior nation, possessing a higher work ethic, and so on. However, in *Lady Doctor* the gaze not only travels from author-ethnographer to Bakhtiari tribeswoman, but is also received back in turn from the “observed.” This returned gaze reveals to Ross how she is seen by her would-be subjects, rather than how she wishes or believes herself to appear. One result is that, in a reversal of stereotypes, she becomes the ignorant subject:

I was asked by a certain lady to tell her the English for “liri” and had to confess I was at a dead loss. “I thought you knew French,” she said scornfully. At last I was reduced to ask her to translate this remarkable French word into Persian. “Birinj” (rice) was the reply, and I discovered the mysterious dissyllable to be “le riz.”

Subsequently I could never get any one of my friends at Shalamzar to believe I had even the most elementary knowledge of the French language. (Macbean Ross 1921: 92)

Ross's inability to convince her friends that she could speak French provides a telling counterpoint to Burton's account of his successful disguise; while Burton's false identity is believed, Ross's true identity is believed to be false. In this case, the other refuses to "recognize" Ross as an authority on the French language. A similar destabilization occurs with Ross's professional identity when she is faced with the Bibis' advanced pharmaceutical knowledge: "It proves rather embarrassing to the doctor sometimes," she comments ruefully, "when everything he [*sic*] suggests has been tried" (Macbean Ross 1921: 94). Ross follows many women travelers by writing thus humbly. Blanton and Mary Louise Pratt (2008), for example, comment on a "feminine" tone present in women's travel writing, and cite "Richard Burton's monarch-of-all-I-survey approach" as a contrast to, for example, "Mary Kingsley's more self-effacing travel accounts where more often she is the butt of the joke than the conquering hero" (Blanton [1995] 2002: 131). Ross is not exactly the "butt of the joke" in her book, and nor is she exclusively self-effacing. Rather, it is the encounter between self and other that is the site both of misconceptions that cut both ways, and potentially bruising disbelief of the self by the other.

Ross's identity as a Highland Scot *and* representative of the British Empire also plays a key role in how she empathizes with, and makes sense of, the Bakhtiari. As she does so, a tension arises between revisionist anthropology and imperial romance in *Lady Doctor*. That tension is set up in the opening chapter, when Ross first meets the leader of the Haft-Lang Bakhtiari: "There was something about the fine bearing of this rugged mountaineer which won my heart, conjuring up as it did reminiscences of Ross-shire and

its Highland chieftains. From that day dates my sympathy with the Bakhtiari” (Macbean Ross 1921: 18).

Ross’s account of this meeting simultaneously indicates both a sense of affinity with the Bakhtiari based on her own cultural heritage and an acceptance of orientalist assumptions that to look east is to look back or even out of time. Finding in the Bakhtiari a reflection of the Highlands as they once were was a favorite pastime of British visitors to the region, whether they hailed from those regions or not. Most of them, of course, did not, and their ideas of Highland chieftains were no more accurate than their romanticized view of the Bakhtiari chiefs (Cronin 2007a: 85). Ross however had more knowledge about both groups than was typical, and here the observation might relate more to a shared need to negotiate minority identity under the gaze of an oppressive nation state, than a desire to appropriate Persia as a playground of Western nostalgia.

That said, *Lady Doctor* also makes direct comparisons between Bakhtiari life and sixteenth-century Britain that have little to do with Ross’s personal heritage. In one such reference, she rationalizes the Bakhtiari’s practicing of polygamy as justifiable within a certain stage of “social evolution,” and somewhat incongruously cites the example of Henry Tudor: “Thus in 1527 we find Henry VIII of England sending a petition to Pope Clement asking for dispensation to take a second wife, his former marriage being allowed to stand” (Macbean Ross 1921: 63).

It appears that Ross here signed up to the imperialist fiction of what Ashis Nandy (1988) refers to as the “doctrine of progress,” whose subscribers believed that all societies were evolving—but that the West was undeniably ahead. This made it a colonizer’s duty to lead and educate the members of less “advanced” societies, and led to a re-interpretation of British expansion, originally viewed as a straightforward exercise of power, as a moral imperative. It also rendered native people childlike and uncivilized.

Ross may have sympathized with the Bakhtiari but, as the above extract from Bird makes clear, the line between sympathizing and patronizing can easily become blurred. In *Lady Doctor*, there remains an uncomfortable slippage between empathy with cultural others and seeing in them an idealized past for the self.

Despite Ross's many revisions to dominant modes of imperialist travel writing, *Lady Doctor* still at times "demonstrates the power of textual authority even in the new ethnography based on direct participant observation" (Melman 2002: 12). Given the later developments of Ross's story, it is especially important to point out the traces of imperialist romance that remain in the text. These are particularly clear in the anecdote of the Bakhtiari chief, in which Ross not only comes close to depicting the tribe as noble savages, but also manages to cast herself as two different stock romantic characters. By identifying *with* the rugged Bakhtiari chief and pointing to a shared heritage, she announces that she is similar *to* him. Ross is an adventurer, who has—since her student days—been driven by a "desire for something beyond, something outside the commonplace and conventionality of everyday British life" (Macbean Ross 1921:10). At the same time, she also states that the mountaineer won her heart. This means that, however briefly, Ross appears in her own narrative as a romantic heroine who might be conquered by a suitably wild specimen of masculinity. She is both herself the wild adventurer, as well as being open to seduction by other adventurers.

It is not surprising then that even the most revisionist ethnographer should still be influenced by literary models she has inherited. Equally, it is arguably not necessary to try to resolve these contrasting romantic aspects of Ross's persona. Rather, they join with those of the female anthropologist and Highland representative of the empire to form a productively fragmentary depiction of self, and there are clues in her opening chapter that Ross encourages these disjuncts. The author refers early on to the "numbed condition of

my mind” during her journey east (Macbean Ross 1921: 11), and blames that numbness for her inability: “To serve up any of those practical hints or personal details which form the recognised condiments to Chapter 1 of every well-ordered book of travel” (Macbean Ross 1921: 12).

Ross’s reference to the “recognised condiments” of travel writing makes clear that she is as aware of the literary conventions of her chosen genre as she is of the literal conventions binding life in Britain. It can be inferred, then, that the innovations of her text are the result of a conscious wish to disorder both.

The End?

A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land, Ross’s only “book of travel,” was a remarkable text for its time. It recognized and played with its inherited literary conventions, producing a hybrid text governed by a nuanced, not wholly coherent self in a dialectical relationship with cultural others. Her own sense of self is risked and questioned in this relationship, and as such this interplay mounts a serious challenge to the monomythic narratives that preceded and indeed survived long after the publication of *Lady Doctor*. Ross’s immersion in the life of her subjects also allows her to combat the forceful textuality that frequently overwhelmed Middle Eastern texts, which purported to be the unadulterated result of author observation. Although she was working in an increasingly empiricist discourse, Ross rejected the false objectivity that worked its own fiction in many contemporary anthropological texts (Clifford 1988: 99). In this article, I have argued that she was empowered to do so by means of her ambivalent positioning within the academic elite. Taken together, these features set Ross’s text in anticipation of less deferential travel writing of the 1920s, and the fiction it inspired. In *Twelve Days* (1928), for example, Vita Sackville-West describes a journey through Bakhtiari Land. Like *Lady*

Doctor, Sackville-West's text mocks Western fetishes of romance and nature, observing that: "To us, who come from Europe, there is something poetic in a Persian shepherd calling to his goats and sheep; but the Persian shepherd himself sees nothing except the everyday business of getting a lot of tiresome animals along" (1928: 66).

Sackville-West's Persian adventures are in turn the subject of Virginia Woolf's pseudo-biography *Orlando* ([1928] 200: chapter 3). Here, Orlando—a fantastical representation of Sackville-West, Woolf's lover—lives with a band of gypsies in the Persian mountains for an unspecified period of time. In an echo of *Twelve Days*, the gypsies are irritated by Orlando's idealistic worshipping of "Nature"—even when faced with the hardships of their daily lives: "[The gipsy] showed her the fingers of his left hand, withered by the frost; he showed her his right foot, crushed where a rock had fallen. This, he said, was what her God did to men" (Woolf [1928] 2000: 102).

Moreover, the gypsies' attitude toward Orlando recalls that of the Bakhtiari Bibis who refused to believe that Dr Ross had "even the most elementary knowledge of the French language." To them, England is a "barbarous land where people live in houses because they are too feeble and diseased to stand in the open air" (2000: 100). Faced with this other's view of herself, Orlando is led to question the meaning of her own social privilege—with limited success.

The role-reversal of self and other, with its attendant disruption of power and authority, is carried from Ross to Woolf via Sackville-West before becoming a dominant feature of a much later canon of travel writing. Rather than continuing the narrative of Layard, Burton, and Bird, *Lady Doctor* (and indeed *Orlando*) find kinship with "self-reflexive" modern texts such as Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992), which "defy easy categorization as autobiography, memoir, or travel account" (Bassnett 2002: 225). In an assessment of the travel writing genre as it existed in 2002, Bassnett writes that: "Once

the gaze of the travel writer reflected the singularity of a dominant culture; today, the gaze is more likely to be multi-focal, reflecting the demise of a world-view that separated *us* from *them*, and the role of women in adjusting perspectives is immense” (2002: 240). It is tempting to speculate that, had Ross lived longer, her “role” in “adjusting perspectives” would indeed have been immense.

The comparatively radical nature of Ross’s text and life is thrown into sharp relief by the perception of her championed in the *Times* in 1911, after the narrative of her own memoir has concluded. Here, imperial romance reigns supreme, and the “textual authority” of Ross’s predecessors is reasserted as she is shoehorned to fit a story of Persia that she herself had begun to question. On 17 October of that year, the *Times* ran a story under the heading “Disturbances in Persia: English Lady Missionary Beaten” (“[Disturbances in Persia](#)” 1911). Ross was not referred to as a doctor in this or any of the five subsequent articles the newspaper ran on this story. Ross was, of course, also not English or a missionary, but this description emphasized the moral outrage of her case. What kind of degenerate, the paper asked, would attack a white woman doing God’s work? The *Times* continued this rhetoric into its second article, which held Ross up as the victim of an exceptional outrage, and her treatment as a matter of British and Persian national honor (“Protection for Consulates in Southern Persia” 1911). However, when a third article appeared on Ross, the story’s tone changed considerably. On 31 October, Ross was re-cast as the protagonist of her own Eastern adventure story (“[The Adventures of Miss Ross](#)” 1911c)

THE ADVENTURES OF MISS ROSS

LAWLESSNESS IN SHIRAZ

The unfortunate Miss Ross has been robbed again as she was proceeding from Abadeh to Shiraz. Her escort bolted, leaving her at the mercy of a large party of

robbers on whom the whalebones forming part of her costume exercised a peculiar fascination. They removed them one by one and returned the garment ...

Here, outrageous attacks are repackaged as adventures. Through this change of tack, the *Times* manages to suggest that Ross somehow sought them out and, even if she did not enjoy them herself, the paper's readership are given license to enjoy this latest installment of her predicament as if reading a work of exotic fiction. The word "adventures" was used again ten days later, when the paper issued a further update on "Miss Ross's adventures in Persia" ("[Miss Ross's Adventures in Persia](#)" 1911). This piece appeared on 10 November 1911, and dealt solely with the issue of whether the Persian government had yet paid any compensation to Ross for the first attack. It did not see fit to mention that Ross herself was still holed up in Abadeh following the second attack, waiting to hear if the British Foreign Office would sanction her rescue.

It is curious that the *Times* chose to trivialize her story at the very point at which it took a more sinister turn. The fact that Ross had been forced to remove her corset, or had it forcibly removed from her, carries a suggestion of sexual menace that goes wholly unexplored by the paper. Instead, the removal of whalebones is served up as a quirky anecdote. It may be that there was no specifically sexual motive for this stripping, but it is certainly true that tribal outlaws in Southwest Persia did routinely abuse their victims in this way.⁹ Ross's whiteness, or her association with the Bakhtiari leaders, may have saved her from rape at the hands of her captors. Even so, they had apparently not protected her from a beating during the first robbery, and she likely feared rape during both attacks, even if this did not come to pass.

There is one possible explanation for Ross's sudden transformation throughout the published articles. Perhaps, some time after his second dispatch, the paper's Tehran correspondent realized that Ross was not a missionary. This discovery would have

proved problematic for the paper. As a free agent in Persia—without so much as a male chaperone—Ross was something of an anomaly. Iran in 1911 was seen by the West as a dangerous country not fit for women (Wilson 1911). Therefore, the *Times* attempted to fit Ross into a different narrative template. As an independent traveler in hostile lands, it appears that she was obliged to have “adventures” in the manner set out for her by Burton and Layard. If she had rushed in where ladies fear to tread, then she should expect to have the consequences served up as an adventure.

Misclassifying Ross’s story in this way is profoundly ironic. The monomythic travel narrative functioned to confirm its adventurer-protagonist as supremely active and the master of his own destiny. The *imposition* of an adventure, on the other hand, connotes precisely the reverse. The *Times* operates a form of control over Ross, and the process recalls Sara Mills’s complaint that several studies of travel writing include accounts of women who “traveled” against their will: one, for example, is kidnapped and consigned to a Turkish harem while elsewhere a woman who was “forcibly carried up Mont Blanc for a publicity stunt is considered as a woman mountaineer” (Mills 1991: 200). Ross, who left for Persia in search of adventure, had adventure thrust upon her by the English press.

A similar epistemological violence has been done to the memory of the Bakhtiari. As the new Pahlevi dynasty subjected Persia to a campaign of aggressive modernization in the 1920s and 1930s, the tribe’s own cultural developments were ignored and they came to represent a feudal and nomadic way of life that the Persian government wanted to crush (Ansari 2007:60). That is the image of them that has stood the test of time, rather than Ross’s portraits of a young wife keeping her baby’s milk warm in a thermos flask, giving her husband lessons in how to use a sewing machine or “pursuing her educational studies after the birth of one or more of her children” (Macbean Ross 1921: 152; 103–

104; 90). The journalist Roger Howard used a text from 1840 to describe the Bakhtiari of 1903—Howard (2008: 58) supposes that nothing much would have changed regarding “the tribesmen’s appearance, dress, ways of life and reputation” during the intervening sixty years, despite Ross’ detailed evidence to the contrary.

Ross’s life and work constitute an important refutation of the clichéd and damaging representations of the other, and the celebrations of a hypermasculine self, which were ubiquitous in a certain era of Middle Eastern travel writing and persist to the present day. It is partly as a result of this persistence that Ross and the Bakhtiari way of life she painstakingly recorded have been at best forgotten, and at worst traduced by the literary and historical narratives she challenged. While it is true, for example, that the reflexive model of travel writing championed by Ross more than a century ago is now a mainstream feature of the genre, works such as Howard’s *The Oil Hunters* serve as a reminder that in the popular imagination the Middle East frequently remains “a cultural and economic backwater” living in an “antiquated past” (2008: xiii). In recovering Ross’s voice, we not only recover a fuller and more complex appreciation of the subjects and writers that have shaped the modern travel writing canon: we also re-pose the challenge contained in such works to both the continued tenacity of romantic travel writing and the continued adherence to monomythic imperialism such tenacity implies.

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Notes

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¹ Ross gives a detailed description of the dress worn by the elite Bakhtiari women:

They wear a loose silk shirt, often of bright colours, and over this a coat and waistcoat of rich brocaded velvet, which are shaped exactly like a man’s. They have long tight-fitting trousers and covering these three or

four very full kilted petticoats. ... The skirt measures several yards in circumference and comes down to within six inches of the ground. It is pleated and ... fastened ... below the hips. European shoes and stockings are now always worn and the costume is completed by a silk Ichador [chador] which, however, is never arranged so as to hide the face. (126–127; see also Figure. 1).

² David Damrosch identifies the *Nights* as “a text of striking variability” (2009: 75), available in a wide spectrum of translations and containing any number of combinations of poetry and prose drawn from a pool over 600 narratives originating from India, China, Persia, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria.

³ Even as late as 1973, the Iraqi-born translator N. J. Dawood described the tales as “novelistic realism” (see also Damrosch 2009: 80), the “spontaneous products of untutored minds’ and ‘the most comprehensive record of medieval Islam” (Dawood cited in Damrosch 2009). While the term “spontaneous” might be appropriate to the oral tradition in which the *Nights* originated, the complex evolution of their written form suggests quite the reverse. Likewise, from this temporal and textual distance, any claims for the tales’ documentary credentials must be suspicious.

⁴ A Highland heritage did not, however, preclude Ross’s most famous traveling compatriot from extolling the virtues of the British Empire. David Livingstone, also a doctor, was the grandson of an evicted crofter; nevertheless, he was a staunch advocate of British colonization in Africa and his writings had an unrivalled influence in imperial policy during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Jeal 1973).

⁵ This is not to say that Ross was the exception; in fact, she was both preceded and succeeded in Middle East travel writing by two highly educated women in the shape of Isabella Bird Bishop and Gertrude Bell. But these women’s places among their male

contemporaries were always uneasy, and female scientists traveling off the beaten track continued to experience prejudice throughout the twentieth century. For a more detailed discussion of these women and their experiences (see Bassnett 2002).

⁶ This is, due to space, over-simplifying the issue. Ross was a middle-class woman, and therefore in a different social group to the thousands of crofters who suffered in the clearances. Nevertheless, the fact that she identifies as both a Scot and a Highlander is significant.

⁷ The *Personal Narrative* first appeared in 1855, and was reissued as a memorial edition following the author's death in 1890. Layard's *Early Adventures* enjoyed continuing popularity and was consulted by Englishmen and women abroad well into the early twentieth century.

⁸ This effective co-option of the other recalls both classic Orientalism (Said 1978: 2–7) and the ego ideal of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage (Mulvey 1989: 17).

⁹ Lieutenant Arnold Talbot Wilson, who was eventually sent to rescue Ross, was himself captured by brigands in 1911. The robbers kept him hostage while they terrorized the villages they passed on their journey towards Shiraz, and Wilson reported their use of gang rape, indiscriminate beatings and even killings to the Foreign Office. These were mentioned in official dispatches with the men's actions rendered almost inert as "committing every excess" (Barclay 1911).