

# Travel, Truth and Narrative in the Arabian Writings of James Wellsted (1805–1842)

*Charles W. J. Withers*

## Abstract

The essay examines the travel writings of the British Arabian traveller and hydrographer James Wellsted, notably his *Travels in Arabia* (1838). Wellsted's land-based Arabian travels undertaken between 1829 and 1837 as part of coastal navigation work provided important new information on the ancient Near East, especially upon pre-Islamic epigraphy and archaeology, and first-hand perspectives on the economy and cultures of the Arabian peoples in ways which supplemented and extended the observations of Carsten Niebuhr, James Bruce and others. Wellsted's in-the-field expertise was endorsed by the presentation of his work to the Royal Geographical Society. His post-exploration authorial reputation was mediated, however, by his publisher, John Murray, who, for reasons of audience interest, published the novel findings of Wellsted's land travel as volume one of the *Travels in Arabia*, placing the scientific coastal work in volume two. In thus re-ordering Wellsted's narrative, Murray materially altered in print both the chronology and the purpose of Wellsted's work. In assessing the "truth" of travel narratives, we need to pay attention to the material history of the books themselves, to the nature of the shift from explorer to author and to the role of publishers in creating audience demand for travel narratives.

## Introduction

"Prejudices relative to the inconvenience and dangers of travelling in Arabia, have hitherto kept the moderns in equal ignorance". Writing thus in his *Travels through Arabia*, Carsten Niebuhr made clear how he had proceeded. This was partly on the basis of what he had seen for himself, and partly from "different honest and intelligent Arabs". As Niebuhr further wrote, "This information I was most successful in obtaining among the men of letters and the merchants; persons in public offices were more entirely engrossed with their own affairs, and generally of a more reserved character".

This mode of obtaining my information appeared to carry with it several peculiar advantages; and it will be of no less utility, that I distinguish in this manner between what I observed myself, and what I was informed of by others. The reader will thus be enabled to discern between what I mention barely upon the authority of my own observation, and what I relate upon the concurrent evidence of many of the most enlightened persons in the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's strategy speaks both to the particularities of his Arabian travels and to more significant general

---

1. Heron's translation and adaptation of Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and other countries in the East*; Heron (1792), Vol. II, p. 4.

issues in our modern understanding of travel and truth in narratives of exploration. First-hand encounter was not always possible in extensive territories or where one's direction and manner of travel was constrained. Even where first-hand observation could be relied upon, it often required the substantiating warrant of additional information from reliable sources: just as Niebuhr recognised.

Yet, in general, most people did not travel. Furthermore, they experienced the results of travelling at second hand - in print. In an important sense, knowledge of the peoples and natural phenomena encountered by explorers and travellers depends crucially upon the later accounts printed of them. Travel "in the field" might well be inconvenient, even dangerous; but the words of explorer-authors had to face further hazards upon return - the "voyage into narration" - before they could become the bases to new knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The move into print was not straightforward. The explorer-author may well have sought exactness through writing in what he or she recounted during the act of travel. To do otherwise was to risk being exposed as incompetent, or, worse, as a travel liar or fraud. Yet it is often clear that authors' claims to what some called "plain and unvarnished truth" were founded upon other's verbal testimony in the field or upon only fleeting observation of the phenomena and place in question - and thus upon only limited first-hand authoritative experience: exactly Niebuhr's situation. Upon their return, explorer's words were often modified as notebook jottings and as *en route* writing moved into print.<sup>3</sup>

Given these issues about authorship, authority, and authoritativeness, truth telling in exploration writing was far from plain and seldom unvarnished. The implication for scholars engaged in critical exegesis of travel accounts as historical sources is twofold: attention needs to be paid to the evolution of the author, not just to the facts of the exploration, and the making of the author and of the book as a printed ar-

tefact may be seen as a matter of material hermeneutics, both brought into being by others such as publishers.

The processes by which "the explorer in the field was translated into the published author"<sup>4</sup> could furthermore involve that more direct translation, from one language to another, as well as the epistemological sense embraced by the notion of the "voyage into narration." Niebuhr's *Travels* are again illustrative and suggestive. The English language translation, in 1792, was by the Scottish topographical writer and geographical "hack", Robert Heron. Heron was the "author" amongst other works of *A New and Complete System of Universal Geography* in 1796. As he admitted, however, this book (like many such at the time) was a synthesis of others' works "freely and largely borrowed from prior and contemporary writers; but without committing any depredations on the literary depredations of others".<sup>5</sup> In his translation of Niebuhr's work, Heron certainly did commit literary depredations upon the original text. "It would be unfair to neglect advertising [to] the reader" [Heron tells us], "that the whole of Mr Niebuhr's account of his travels, and observations in Arabia, is not comprised in these volumes. Various things seemed to be addressed so exclusively to men of erudition, that they could not be expected to win the attention of the public in general, and have therefore been left out."<sup>6</sup> For English language readers, just those things that had motivated Niebuhr and his Danish patrons and which so engaged his Enlightenment readers were omitted from the volume in question: questions of audience outweighed those of authoritative completeness.

This chapter examines these issues of authority, authoritativeness, of author-making and the production of travel-based knowledge with reference to the work of the British Arabian traveller James Raymond Wellsted (1805-1842). Wellsted published two books, *Travels in Arabia*, in two volumes in 1838, and *Travels to the*

2. Bourguet (1997), p. 296.

3. On these issues, see the work of Ian Maclaren cited in the references below.

4. Driver (2001), p. 8.

5. Heron (1796), Vol. I, p. v.

6. Heron's adaptation of Niebuhr (Heron 1792, vol. I, p. xii).

*City of the Caliphs* in 1840, also in two volumes.<sup>7</sup> Both works, his 1838 *Travels in Arabia* the more so, were in large part based upon work undertaken between 1829 and 1837 and upon papers presented to the Royal Geographical Society in 1835 and in 1836 (work for which Wellsted was made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1837). The survival of some of Wellsted's original papers mean we can assess changes between written versions of his work and discern relationships between what was presented as a spoken and, later, as a published geographical paper, and his printed books.<sup>8</sup>

Although not wholly overlooked, Wellsted has been unjustly neglected by modern scholars. His peers regarded his work highly. In closing his 1816 biography of Carsten Niebuhr, his son Barthold noted: "To this day no traveller returns from the East without admiration and gratitude for this teacher and guide, the most distinguished of oriental travellers. None of those who hitherto have followed him, can be compared with him; and we may well inquire, whether he will ever find a successor who will complete the De-

scription of Arabia and be named along with him?"<sup>9</sup> James Wellsted's Arabian travels compare well with Niebuhr's. There is the same attention to detailed description and empathy for the Arabic peoples. One contemporary review of Wellsted's work even lauds him in comparable tones.<sup>10</sup> Wellsted knew Niebuhr's work well. He cited from it in his own descriptions of places, in commenting upon unknown epigraphy, in collecting botanical specimens, in adjusting or confirming the location of places through longitudinal measurement and in recording his views of the region's peoples and their customs.<sup>11</sup> There is a strong geographical and authorial affiliation between Niebuhr and Wellsted, even what we might think of as a

7. The full title of the work (Wellsted 1840), undertaken in the field and in authorship with Lieutenant Ormsby, is *Travels to the City of the Caliphs, Along the Shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean: Including a Voyage to the Coast of Arabia, and a Tour On the island of Socotra*. Two volumes. (London: Colburn, 1840). Neither Wellsted nor Murray has left us with evidence which might account for his changing to Colburn from Murray between his 1838 and 1840 books: it is possible that Wellsted's frailty of mind after 1837 – see text and foot note 35 – was one reason for Murray to be cautious with respect to Wellsted's capacities.

8. Of the ten separate holdings of Wellsted's papers in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society, the following are the most relevant in this respect: MS JMS/9/16 [Wellsted's paper 'On the Ruins of Nukub ul Hajar'] [sic]; CB2/574, correspondence confirming Wellsted's work as unearthing Hammurabic epigraphy; JMS/9/17, an unpublished 12-page manuscript entitled "Geographical Notice of the Southern Coast of Arabia" [which was read before the RGS on 23 January 1837, before Wellsted's final field season in Oman]; and JMS/9/5, also unpublished, which contains brief notes by Wellsted on the accuracy of James Bruce's longitudinal positions of several settlements in the region. This manuscript is dated 19 May, 1835.

9. Niebuhr (1836), p. 68.

10. One anonymous reviewer noted thus of Wellsted's *Travels in Arabia*: "His book not only contains discoveries and traces new ground, but that ground, as well as the field of his travels which had previously been examined and described, has obtained at his hands such correct, elaborate and ample delineation as will unquestionably secure for him permanent fame. Indeed we regard him as being one of the best-equipped and successful travellers that our times can boast of. He is adventurous to the extremity of English daring, but as prudent as adventurous. He is inquisitive and patient; his knowledge of general literature, art, and science is sufficiently extensive to enable him to treat of the various points which in his progress fell within the compass of each of these departments, in a manner which persons of cultivated minds and considerable acquirements will exactly understand from his simple description; his eye is quick, vigilant, and excursive; while his style of writing is clear, frequently luminous, cheerful, spirited, and possessed of a becoming dignity. Altogether, the reality and force, as well as the variety of his pictures, render Mr. Wellsted's work one of the most agreeable and satisfactory that we have ever read". [Anon.], *Monthly Review*, 2 (February 1838), p. 255–6.

11. Contemporaries were less praiseworthy of Wellsted's plant collecting and botanical skills than they were of those of Niebuhr and Forsskål. This is clear from a brief summary of Wellsted's botanical collections which notes "The collection does much credit to the industry and scientific devotion of this officer; but, as might be expected from the nature of the country explored, possesses little of novelty or importance. It is chiefly interesting as connecting the vegetation of Sinai and Egypt with that of Arabia Felix". [John Lindley], "Notes on a Collection of Plants Sent" (1835), 296.



Fig. 1. Wellsted's "Map of Oman", from his *Travels in Arabia* (1838) shows the routes of his part of his Oman and east Yemen inland travels and of part of his coastal navigation work in that region. His description of the region as being "hitherto wholly unknown to Europeans" was intended to enhance the significance of his own work rather than diminish that of Niebuhr and others, and, since Wellsted was a naval officer (albeit in the Indian Navy or East India Marine), it was probably aimed at Sir John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty and a key supporter of geographical exploration at this time (to whom the map is dedicated). Source: James Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia* (London: John Murray, 1838), I, facing page i. Reproduced with permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

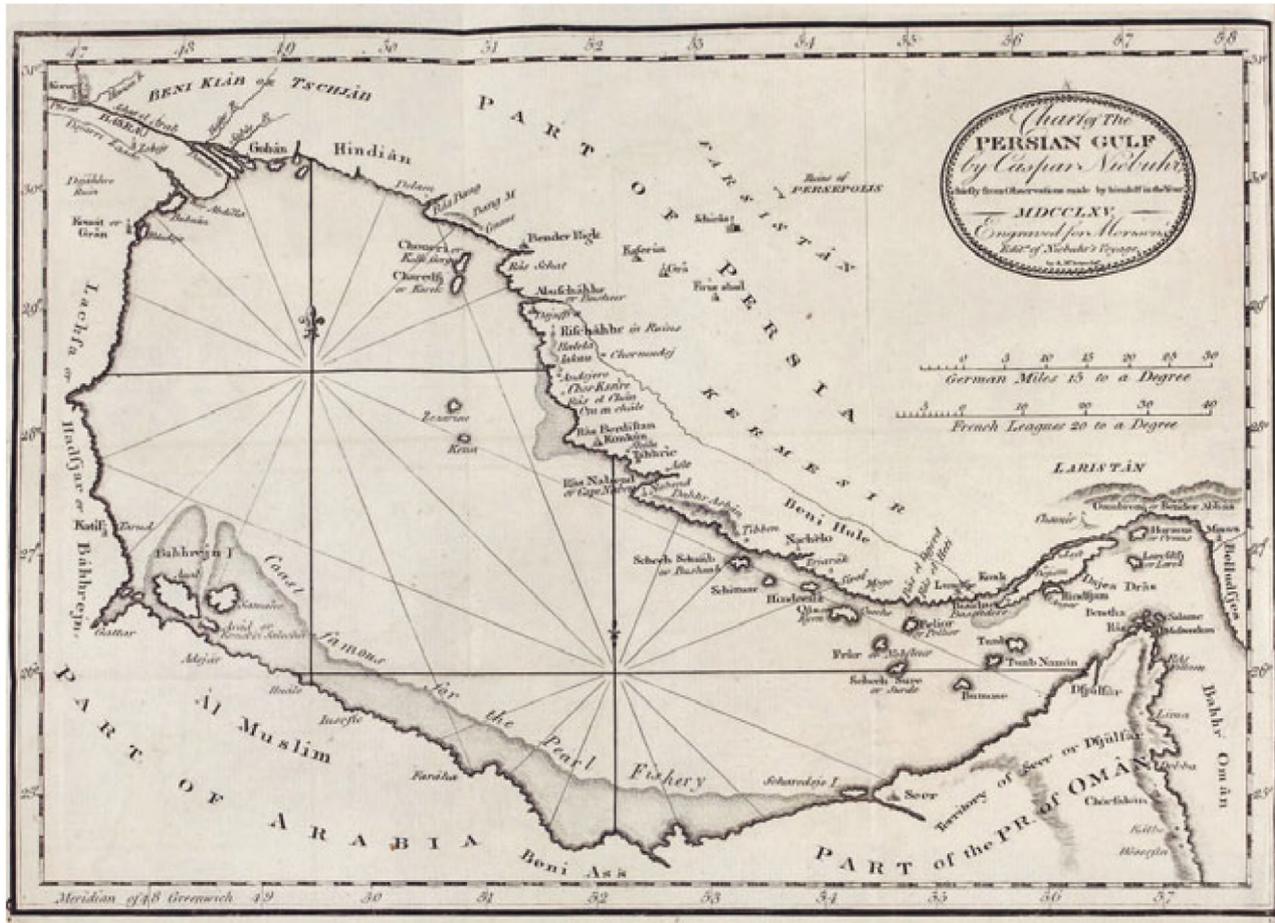


Fig. 2. Niebuhr’s “Chart of the Persian Gulf” from Robert Heron’s 1792 English-language translation of Niebuhr’s Arabia travel account. The area explored in Wellsted’s travels (Figure 1) is largely within that part of Oman shown in the bottom right hand corner of this map. Note that Heron even gets Niebuhr’s Christian name wrong in his translation, giving it here as “Caspar” (in the title to the map image). Source: Robert Heron [translator], *Travels Through Arabia, and Other Countries in the East*. Two volumes. (Edinburgh: Printed for R. Morison and Son Perth; G. Mudie Edinburgh; and T. Vernor, Birchin Lane, London, 1792), II, facing page 121. Reproduced with permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

“citationary geography” in the sense that Wellsted drew upon Niebuhr’s work as a source of reference and in order to correct it (he did so of several others, notably Jacob Burckhardt and James Bruce).<sup>12</sup> Wellsted-

12. The idea of “citationary geography” is taken from Mayhew (2005). By its use, Mayhew means that by examining who was cited as a source for given claims, and how, we may identify not just the scholarly communities of which travel writers and geographical authors were part, but also determine shifts away, for example, from textual accounts based on Classical authority towards evidence derived from first-hand empirical

ed made a point of emphasising, in part in his map work, that he was extending Niebuhr’s work. See Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

I do not want to claim that Wellsted was following in Niebuhr’s footsteps, either literally or figuratively (nor those of Bruce or Burckhardt). I do want to explore Wellsted’s work in order to illustrate its impor-

encounter. On Wellsted’s corrections of the chart and map work of James Bruce, see “Notes on Bruce’s Chart” (Wellsted 1835b).

tance for an understanding of Arabia, particularly Yemen and Oman, in the wake of Niebuhr. But as significantly perhaps, what follows also suggests that in studying Wellsted we can illustrate that wider problem in the material study of travel narratives, namely the relationship between published account, audience and publisher and how the relationship between the explorer in the field and the facts of travel could become less important than that between publisher and audience. In the field, Wellsted's making as an explorer depended upon first-hand empirical enquiry, observational accuracy and, to varying degrees, the guidance of others. In London, before and after his Arabian travels, Wellsted's making as an author depended upon a network of scientific authorities and a publisher, John Murray, whose trust in Wellsted's Arabian authoritativeness was allied with his own concerns – as Heron's had been for Niebuhr – about audience. My related concerns in this paper are, then, to explore the nature of Wellsted's travels in Arabia and the nature of his book's making in London: conjointly, to consider the construction of an exploratory narrative, a reputational geography and of a literary artefact.

### Wellsted's Arabian travels: exploration and authorship in the field

Wellsted's Arabian land travels were part of the hydrographical survey by the Indian Navy of the Gulf of 'Aqabah and the Gulf of Oman being undertaken with a view to charting those waters and identifying opportunities to extend British interests in the region (matters associated with a possible steam navigation trade route from Europe to India that would avoid travel around the Cape of Good Hope).<sup>13</sup> During its work, the survey encountered pirate activity: it may be that stemming such activity was one of its aims in view. Survey work was a means to make both coasts and piracy visible: "So long as these remained unknown to us" [wrote Wellsted], "a feeling of imaginary or real security would induce them to follow their former practices; but the circumstance of Eng-

lish ships "writing down their coast", to use their own descriptive expression, was alone enough to give them an idea that we should possess a perfect knowledge of it". As Wellsted further observed, "The result has hitherto justified the anticipation, for the survey was no sooner completed, and a strict system of surveillance established, than their appliances and resources became, as a measure of necessity, turned from piratical to commercial pursuits".<sup>14</sup>

As his ship the *Palinurus* navigated the coasts, Wellsted and companions were landed for days and sometimes weeks at a time to undertake examination of the hinterland, partly with an eye to the contemporary economic utility of the Arabian interior, partly with a view to its antiquities, ethnography and natural history. Wellsted travelled in Sinai, a region then known to European commentators, and to Oman and Yemen, hitherto little known, and to the island of Socotra. Wellsted's warrant to safe passage took the form of letters, part of whose contents noted that "all those who are desirous of maintaining the friendship of the British Government are requested to show him every attention and civility".<sup>15</sup> As Wellsted recounts, several of those persons with whom he was in contact knew little and cared less about Britain's friendship but they showed him attention and civility nonetheless. "Whenever the officers of the *Palinurus* landed, they were permitted to roam about the town" [Wellsted is here referring to the Red Sea port of Yembo] "without being made sensible, either by importunities or questions, that this liberty was granted as an indulgence, or that their steps were being watched. ... The pigs we had on board excited more attention and curiosity than the ship, though no European vessel had visited their port for many years before."<sup>16</sup>

Wellsted's movement from sea to land to sea permitted a sort of "repeat circuitry" as he moved inland, "writing down the coast" to paraphrase his own words, before rejoining his ship once more (see Figure

14. Wellsted (1838), Vol. I, p. 253.

15. Wellsted (1838), Vol. I, p. 3.

16. "Observations on the Coast of Arabia", Wellsted (1836a), p. 72.

13. Kelly (1968), pp. 371-374; Low (1877), Vol. II, pp. 85-87.

1). For the modern researcher, what we are afforded is less a linear narrative than a sequence of moments of contact, partly instances of incommensurability as Wellsted got his bearings, literally and figuratively, before beginning inland travel, and partly a record of site-based study and commentary. There is not the space here to analyse all of what he narrates. The main themes were ancient history and geography, wherein Wellsted was concerned with monuments and inscriptions (he even undertook some archaeological excavations to this end); topography and political economy; natural history; and ethnographic observations. In this last context, Wellsted's repeated movement throughout the region afforded opportunity for him to be quizzed by the inhabitants: his is by no means a European commentary of an *a priori* moral and political superiority.

Contemporary interest in the region's archaeological remains centred upon what evidence there was in the present for sites with Biblical significance, and in epigraphy. Much of the ancient geography was unknown to Europeans. It appears to have been far from understood by the indigenous inhabitants. As Wellsted noted at one point: "During the progress of the survey of the south coast of Arabia, ... the Bedowins brought us intelligence that some extensive ruins, which they describe as being erected by infidels, and of great antiquity, were to be found at some distance from the coast."<sup>17</sup> To Wellsted's frustration, his native guides refused to proceed to inscriptions nearby which were already known about, but were happy enough to escort him to a further set of ruins. Hindered by the Bedouin as to what he might be shown, Wellsted's observational capacities were at moments restricted: "they watched our movements so closely, that I found it, for a time, impossible to take either notes or sketches."<sup>18</sup> His excitement, then, at reaching the ruins at Nakab al Hajar [now Niqqab-al-Najar in southern Yemen], at being allowed access to the ruins and finding there hitherto unknown inscriptions is palpable:

The ruins of Nakab al Hajar, considered by themselves, present nothing therefore than a mass of ruins surrounded by a wall; but the magnitude of the stones with which this is built, the unity of conception and execution, exhibited in the style and mode of placing them together, – with its towers, and its great extent, would stamp it as a work of considerable labour in any other part of the world. But in Arabia, where, as far as is known, architectural remains are of rare occurrence, its appearance excites the liveliest interest.

Wellsted was also perceptive in noting that "The inscription which it has been our good fortune to discover, will, there is every reason to believe, create considerable interest among the learned".<sup>19</sup>

Wellsted's remarks about this site, its size and grandeur and its inscriptions are amongst the first to disclose an even more ancient history to Arabia. Wellsted was a perceptive commentator generally, upon both the facts of material remains and in their interpretation and significance to an understanding of "modern", that is, contemporary to him, Arabia. This region and the "antique lands" of the Middle East as a whole was read by many contemporaries as "backward", either from associations with oriental despotism or from the lack of any recognisable political system at all.<sup>20</sup> Yet Arabia fascinated precisely because of these relics of an even more ancient and distinguished past, a past which, of course, threatened to place European civilisation in an inferior position. This was contemporary geographical encounter and archaeological exploration as time travel.

Not that he quite knew it then, what Wellsted was unearthing at Nakab al Hajar and elsewhere was crucial new evidence concerning the Himyarí people as termed by modern Arabs, the Homēritæ of Ptolemy, also known as the Hammurabic peoples. These interests were to crystallise in work on the pre-Islamic ar-

17. Wellsted (1837), p. 20.

18. Wellsted (1837), p. 23.

19. Wellsted (1837), pp. 30, 31. There is no difference, apart from a brief and perhaps to-be-expected expansion of parts of the narrative concerning the nature of his travel (rather than the facts and the excitement of the findings), between Wellsted's words in this printed published account and his manuscript account of it in JMS/9/16 (see footnote 8 above).

20. Leask (2002).

chaeology of the Arabian and Yemeni peninsula and the region's comparative philological and religious history.<sup>21</sup> In his work on the ruins of Berenice [what is today Medinet-el Haras on Egypt's Red Sea coast], Wellsted helped confirm the site as that of Berenice Troglodytica, one of the most prosperous cities of the ancient world and a key trade link between India and Egypt.<sup>22</sup> In a further sense, Wellsted's work may thus be historiographically placed between those late Enlightenment questions of Biblical exegesis which motivated Carsten Niebuhr and his patrons, and that work in the Holy Land from the 1840s onwards of British, German and American scriptural geographers which was distinguished by its combination of archaeological excavation, Biblical analysis, comparative philology and epigraphy and landscape study.<sup>23</sup> In his lengthy work on Socotra by contrast, Wellsted could find no "ancient vestiges or monuments" by which to prove the island peopled "by a race further advanced than the present."<sup>24</sup> That island was read in terms of its contemporary economic importance and for its natural history rather than as a laboratory of historical difference.

Wellsted's interests in contemporary agriculture, commerce and political economy were also informed by his interpretation of ancient remains in the landscape and what they might signify. He read the present for what it contained of the past, and the past for

what comparative light it threw on present-day human cultures. On being shown the ruins of one settlement in a "luxuriant though uncultivated tract", the evidence for his judgment of it as "not of Arabic origin" stemmed simply from the presence of an associated aqueduct which, he averred, had clearly been built "at the cost of more trouble and labour than in all probability the Bedouins, under any circumstances, would have bestowed on such an undertaking."<sup>25</sup> What Wellsted considered the "usual apathy and indifference to agricultural pursuits common to the Bedouins"<sup>26</sup> was sufficient basis for him to argue thus. But of the then fertile and populated region of central Oman he wrote in a mixture of astonishment and admiration at the civic and hydraulic engineering that had been put in place to allow agriculture: "nearly all the towns in the interior of Oman, owe their fertility to the happy manner in which the inhabitants have availed themselves of a mode of conducting water to them, a mode, as far as I know, peculiar to this country, and at expense of labour and skill more Chinese than Arabian."<sup>27</sup>

Wellsted's narrative tone is not overly moralistic or judgmental. He more than once writes about his preparedness to sacrifice European comforts in travelling, in meeting Arabs and Bedouins on their terms. On several occasions he was the object of interrogation. These enquiries partly concerned his immediate circumstances and exploratory intentions, regarding, for example, the refusal by some natives to permit Wellsted to investigate past ruins and observe epigraphic inscriptions lest, in the interpretation of their past, contemporary cultures should be found wanting. They also partly related to Wellsted the traveller as a credible witness for his own culture – over, for instance, the perceived "great liberty" afforded European women (the fact that many were encouraged to read and write, to have gainful employment and so

---

21. See, for example, Forster (1844). In his *Travels in Arabia*, Wellsted later commented (initially this had been in one of verbal presentations to the Royal Geographical Society) about the gathering evidence concerning epigraphy and the significance of its comparative assessment: "But there is yet one more important fact connected with this subject, which has very recently come to my notice, and to which I beg to solicit the attention of the Society – that since my discovery of the inscriptions of Nukub-el-Hedjer [sic], others have also been discovered in Egypt, in India, and in America; the latter affords abundant matter for speculation": Wellsted (1838), Vol. II, p. 39.

22. "Notice on the Ruins of Berenice", Wellsted (1836b), pp. 96–100.

23. Aikin (2010). Wellsted is not mentioned in Aikin's survey.

24. "Memoir on the Island of Socotra", Wellsted (1835a), p. 219.

---

25. "Observations on the Coast of Arabia", Wellsted (1836a), p. 54.

26. "Observations on the Coast of Arabia", Wellsted (1836a), 54.

27. Wellsted (1838), Vol. I, p. 92.

on). Wellsted the hydrographic surveyor was thus quite often under surveillance during his land travels.

Viewed from a modern perspective, Wellsted's *Travels in Arabia* and his associated publications provide important insight into the ancient geography and present history of a region of the world which although illuminated by Niebuhr nearly seventy years before remained largely unknown to most Europeans. His land travels – the secondary, terrestrial and narrative off-shoot of his primary, hydrographic and chart-based enquiries – brought him recognition and a degree of social standing as an explorer-author. As we shall see, however, Wellsted's making as a credible author involved more than his own work.

### Exploration into print: the making of Wellsted's narrative

In the preface to his *Travels in Arabia*, Wellsted offers some brief comment on how he had proceeded, in the field and in his later authorial role. This is less a methodological disclaimer in the style of Niebuhr than insight into his narrative's making: "In the personal narrative he has endeavoured to convey to the reader the impressions produced on his mind at the moment of each particular occurrence. As to the rest, it was compiled from copious notes collected at various intervals." The merit of the work lay in its novelty: "Many of the facts herein stated have never previously been made known to a European public, and it is on this ground of novelty alone that the Author diffidently hopes his researches may prove interesting to the philosopher and the naturalist, as well as those more immediately engaged in geographical pursuits".<sup>28</sup>

For the most part, Wellsted was right to stress his work's novelty, for the reasons identified. But where the merit of the work lay in Wellsted's innovative field enquiries (its actual novel content concerning ancient geography and contemporary economy), the making of the book as a literary artefact as the very thing which the public would use *ex post facto* to test his mettle as an explorer was dependent upon other

people, and upon Wellsted's work elsewhere. It was in part dependent upon Wellsted's personal and spoken performance in presentation of his work to the Royal Geographical Society. It was in part also dependent upon that network of men of status and patronage upon whom he had to draw in order to become "authorised" as a credible writer by virtue of his association with them and not simply because he was an able explorer as attested to by spoken word and presence in the field. These men were his commanding officer Captain Moresby, the Rev. John Reynolds for translation of manuscripts and inscriptions found in Oman and Yemen, Sir Charles Malcolm, head of the Indian Navy and long-time member of Council of the Royal Geographical Society whom Wellsted acknowledges for "his enthusiastic zeal for the promotion of geographical science", and, not least, Sir John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty, to whom the map of Oman engraved by John Arrowsmith, is dedicated (see Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> Barrow was certainly present at Wellsted's spoken performances in the RGS. But the final shaping of the narrative, and the final making of Wellsted as author, owed most to his publisher, John Murray, whose imprint included numerous accounts of geographical exploration and travel in this period.<sup>30</sup>

Writing to Murray in February 1837, Wellsted remarked "I feel flattered that a person so competent to judge as Mr Murray should think favourably of my M.S.". He further noted: "With respect to the form in which it should be published I must confess that I

29. Wellsted (1838), Vol. I, pp. vi–vii. Barrow's work in promoting exploration and the advance of modern geography is the subject of Fleming (2001).

30. John Murray was also publisher to the Royal Geographical Society at this point, producing the *Journal* for them. There is no evidence that Murray was more supportive of Wellsted than he might otherwise have been given this connection but it is possible that Murray was present at the spoken presentations by Wellsted within the Royal Geographical Society and that, upon hearing him, as well as knowing the network of men to whom Wellsted was making reference, Murray resolved to publish the work after coming to a judgement about its intrinsic geographical importance.

28. Wellsted (1838), Vol. I, p. v.

would rather submit it to the judgment of others than my own – no one knows the public taste better than Mr Murray and there is no one whose opinion would be of more value”. Wellsted ends his letter by expressing a hope that “but little alteration in the arrangement [of the narrative] would be required but on this subject if agreeable to Mr Murray I shall hear more from you.”<sup>31</sup> Murray’s reply has unfortunately not survived. The narrative was published by Murray in 1838 with the chronology of Wellsted’s Arabian travels reversed: his 1834–37 Yemen and Oman work, with its attention to comparative epigraphy and the novel facts of travel in unknown regions, was made the first of the two volumes. The more specialist coastal survey work undertaken between 1829 and 1834 and Wellsted’s Arabian mapping was made the basis to the second volume.<sup>32</sup> Wellsted clearly wrote in the field and amended his Arabian travels on the basis of London-based presentations and his own authorial purposes; Murray re-fashioned the order and relationship of Wellsted’s travel facts in order to suit perceived audience demands.

---

31. National Library of Scotland, MS 41258, James Raymond Wellsted to John Murray [John Murray II], 28 February 1837. In this letter, Wellsted also notes “The only person who has seen the M.S. which I sent to you [Murray] is Mr Frere in Malta who went over it & has added as you may have observed some notes – his opinion would induce me to hope but little alteration in the arrangement of that would be required but on this subject if agreeable to Mr Murray I shall hear more from you”. It is possible that this was Bartle Frere, later connected with the RGS and from 1834 colonial governor in Sind in India (in which context given his Indian Navy connections Wellsted may have met Frere, but this cannot be confirmed). In the absence of Wellsted’s original manuscript, the nature of Frere’s additional material (if indeed it is his) cannot be known.

32. It is possible, of course, although unlikely that this was Wellsted’s intention rather than Murray’s. Even if this were so, final sanction of the form of exploration narratives remained with Murray as publisher rather than with the author, so the reversal of chronology with a view to putting what was novel as the first volume must have received Murray’s approval, and in all probability was made by him. For a similar example involving Murray as publisher and exploration narratives, see Withers and Keighren (2011), pp. 560–573.

This decision to re-order Wellsted’s Arabian narrative was commented upon by reviewers:

In Arabia, the place of honour is always given to age – not so in Albemarle Street or the Row. Among us, the great Sheikhs of publication, who recline voluptuously beneath their shady groves, while their literary herds browse in the desert, invariably give the preference to what is new; and, regardless of the sense, turn topsyturvy whatever MSS, are placed in their hands, solely for the purpose of placing in the front whatever strikes the eye most with the glistening of novelty. To the influence of such guides we ascribe it, that while Mr. Wellsted’s first volume commences with a journey made in 1835, the second falls back to 1829. This disregard of chronological order releases us from the obligation of following very scrupulously in our author’s track: we feel ourselves quite at liberty to pass from his second volume to his first, and back again at our own discretion, so as to be able to give a connected view of these researches and excursions which are best viewed in conjunction, and which, embodied in such a manner as to exhibit their general results, are most likely to prove interesting and profitable to our readers.<sup>33</sup>

The reader’s experience of travel and Arabian encounters, and the publisher’s as to what was significant and “novel”, could be very different from the author’s. Because this is so, we need to be attentive – as Wellsted’s case well illustrates as also does the Niebuhr-Heron relationship in translation – to the “after life” of travel facts, to their publication history and to the relationships between publishers and authors and “translators” not just to the author’s experiences in the field.

---

33. [Anon.], *The Athenæum*, 13 January 1838, pp. 29–30. The reviewer in the *Quarterly Review* likewise indicated to his readers that “it will be expedient to reverse the arrangement of the author, by commencing with the second volume, – that being first in the order of time”. [Anon.], *Quarterly Review* 61 (1838), p. 301. The reference here to ‘Albemarle Street or the Row’ is, respectively, to the location in London of John Murray’s business offices where he met with his authors and booksellers, and to Savile Row, the then address of the Royal Geographical Society.

## Conclusion: Wellsted, Arabian exploration and book history

Discussing the path from exploration to publication of George Back's polar narratives in the 1830s, Maclaren notes that "It is in the nature of this line of enquiry . . . that the findings of one book or of one explorer are not necessarily pertinent to any other case". He further remarks: "Nor should the availability of publishers' correspondence with authors necessarily serve to undermine the status of the published text itself."<sup>34</sup> His cautionary remarks are well taken, and they may be supplemented from this particular instance.

Wellsted's books and papers on Arabian exploration did not straightforwardly disclose the facts of travel upon which they were based. Wellsted amended his own notes to suit the purposes intended. Murray altered the order of their undertaking to highlight the importance of the novel facts encountered by Wellsted. Nor was Wellsted the explorer-author always of sound mind. In Oman in April 1837, in a delirium brought on by fever, Wellsted put his pistols in his mouth – but succeeded only in leaving himself with ghastly wounds to his upper jaw. Invalided back to Bombay, thence to London, he lived for a further five years in France and in Kent, his health and mind much impaired. As he wrote to Murray in March 1839, "Little I care about dying and all who know me will attest with what nerve I have faced misfortune and danger".<sup>35</sup> Here is further testament to the dangers of

travel, injury stemming either from illness or madness, such things (even if only temporary) being prompted by the climate, the diet or the sensory be-dazzlement that came with encountering the new.<sup>36</sup>

Wellsted's important insightful land-based Arabian travels were an ancillary consequence of hydrographic and navigational work. Yet his narrative *Travels in Arabia* confined itself to "remarks on the nature and general features of the country, and information connected with the inhabitants, which my several journeys have enabled me to obtain": much of the maritime material including "proceedings or incidents connected with our progress from station to station" was omitted.<sup>37</sup> In one sense, this is to observe nothing more than Wellsted's authorial competencies and his later authoritativeness did not correspond with his in-the-field experiences: he left things out; his writing was based on recall and on "copious notes" collected over time. And Murray re-arranged such facts as were assembled. In another sense, this is to highlight a more general difference common to all travel narratives and global encounters: between the *explorer*-author at work in the field with a view to establishing his empirical credentials with an expectation of novelty and utility for the work, and the *author*-explorer being scrutinised elsewhere, his words being made to serve the quite different purposes of readability and audience interest.

The status of the published text, for Wellsted or anyone else, is in no way diminished by our knowing that it is partial, redacted by the author and re-ordered by the publisher. For Wellsted the explorer, the encounters that mattered were actual, novel, intrinsically interesting and took place in Arabia. But these facts had to travel and to be epistemically "translated" into prose. In part, the process of translation was Wellsted's and involved his retrospective recall and redaction of those "impressions produced on his mind at the mo-

34. Maclaren (1994), pp. 51–52.

35. National Library of Scotland, MS 41258, Wellsted to Murray, 13 March 1839. In an earlier letter [6 March 1839], Wellsted had written to Murray to inform him "It gives me pleasure to inform you that the tone of my mind is entirely restored". In a further but undated letter of March 1839, he wrote to Murray noting how "I want something to do, it would kill me now I am well to be idle and it is not the steady application to one thing which does me harm but dividing my attention as I did before I left Tawee [?] into twenty different channels and following up all with an eagerness that left me scarcely time to eat, drink or sleep": National Library of Scotland, MS 41258, Wellsted to Murray, undated [March 1839].

36. On this point, see Fabian (2000); and, for her discussion of Alexander von Humboldt's temporary madness (as he described it to his brother) in encountering the diversity of Amazonia, see Outram (1999), pp. 281–294.

37. Wellsted (1838), Vol. II, p. 4.

ment of each particular occurrence.” In part also, the production of author and text took place in the performance and speech spaces of the Royal Geographical Society in London. For Murray, however, the encounters that mattered were not directly Wellsted’s actual travels. What mattered to him was the prospective reception of the novel facts, the encounters which would take place in silent reading in drawing rooms and the approbation or not of public review. For modern researchers into questions of travel, exploratory culture and narrative practice, the example of Wellsted’s Arabian travels is a further reminder about the need to know how partial explorer’s texts are, and in what ways the hermeneutic gap between exploratory intent and textual realisation – between author’s experiences and audiences’ expectations – was manifest.

## Acknowledgements

For assistance with sources I am grateful to the staff of the Foyle Library and Archives of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) and to the staff of the National Library of Scotland. For comments on an earlier draft, I acknowledge the helpful criticisms and comments from participants at the Copenhagen conference.

## References

- Aikin, Edward. 2010. *Scriptural Geography: Portraying the Holy Land*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Bourguet, Marie-Noëlle. 1997. The Explorer. In: *Enlightenment Portraits*, ed. Michel Vovelle. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 257–315.
- Driver, Felix. 2001. *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fabian, Johannes. 2000. *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Fleming, Fergus. 2001. *Barrow’s Boys: A Stirring Story of Daring, Fortitude and Outright Lunacy*. London: Granta Books.
- Forster, Charles R. 1844. *The Historical Geography of Arabia; or the Patriarchal Evidences of Revealed Religion*. Two volumes. London: Duncan and Malcolm.
- Heron, Robert [translator]. 1792. Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and other countries in the East*. Two volumes. Edinburgh: Printed for R. Morison and Son Perth; G. Mudie Edinburgh; and T. Vernor, Birchin Lane, London.
- Heron, Robert. 1796. *A New and Complete System of Universal Geography*. Two volumes. Edinburgh: Printed for R. Morison, Perth.
- Kelly, James B. 1968. *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795–1880*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Leask, Nigel J. 2002. *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770–1840*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lindley, John. 1835. Notes on a Collection of Plants Sent, With His papers, by Lieutenant Wellsted, E. I. C. Marine. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 5: 296.
- Low, C. R. 1877. *History of the Indian Navy, 1613–1863*. Two volumes. Delhi: Manas Publications.
- MacLaren, Ian S. 1992. Exploration/Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Author. *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 5: 39–68.
- MacLaren, Ian S. 1994. From Exploration to Publication: the Evolution of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Arctic Narrative. *Arctic* 47: 43–53.
- MacLaren, Ian S. 2011. In Consideration of the Evolution of Explorers and Travellers into Authors: A Model. *Studies in Travel Writing* 15: 221–241.
- Mayhew, Robert J. 2005. Mapping science’s imagined community: geography as a Republic of Letters, 1600–1800. *The British Journal for the History of Science* 38(1): 73–92.
- Niebuhr, Barthold G. 1836. *The Life of Carsten Niebuhr, the Oriental Traveller*. Translated by A. Robinson. Edinburgh: T. Clark.
- Outram, Dorinda. 1999. On Being Perseus: New Knowledge, Dislocation, and Enlightenment Exploration. In: David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (eds.). *Geography and Enlightenment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 281–94.
- Wellsted, James R. 1835a. Memoir on the Island of Socotra. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 5: 129–229.
- Wellsted, J. R. 1835b. Notes on Bruce’s Chart of the Coasts of the Red Sea. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 5: 286–295.
- Wellsted, [J]. R. 1836a. Observations on the Coast of Arabia between Rás Mohammed and Jiddah. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 6: 51–96.
- Wellsted, [James] R. 1836b. Notice on the Ruins of Berenice. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 6: 96–100.

Wellsted, James R. 1837. Narrative of a Journey from the Tower of Ba-'l-haff, on the Southern Coast of Arabia, to the Ruins of Nakab al Hajar, in April, 1835. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 7: 20-34.

Wellsted, James R. 1838. *Travels in Arabia*. Two volumes. London: John Murray.

Wellsted, J. R. 1840. *Travels to the City of the Caliphs, Along the Shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean: Including a Voyage to the Coast of Arabia, and a Tour On the island of Socotra*. Two volumes. London: Colburn.

Withers, Charles W. J., and Innes M. Keighren. 2011. Travels into Print: Authoring, Editing and Narratives of Travel and Exploration, c.1815-c.1857. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36: 560-73.

### Location of archival material

The manuscript material drawn upon and cited in this article is housed in the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh and in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society, London.