

“Throwing Off the European”: Marmaduke Pickthall’s Travels in Arabia 1894–96

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In 1894, it was not simply the allure of the East which drew the young and impressionable Marmaduke Pickthall to Arabia. Rather, Pickthall had botched his attempt to join the administrative classes of the British Empire by failing the examinations for the “Consular Service for Turkey, Persia and the Levant”.¹ Aged only eighteen, it must have seemed his life was already rather in tatters. He had left an inglorious impression at Harrow School and now, poised as he was between youth and adulthood, Pickthall surely wondered quite what he should do. Matters must have seemed rather desperate. He had a choice: either return to Harrow (which he had already endured rather than enjoyed during his time there), or take up the invitation to join a family friend, Thomas Dowling, who was due to leave for Palestine to become chaplain to the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem.²

Marmaduke Pickthall took the chance to travel and to get “away from the drab monotone of London fog”.³ He left England in 1894 still with a vague sense that his real destination lay in the civil administration of Britain’s colonial interests; believing, or perhaps seeking to convince himself, that by heading to the East he would find some back route into the Foreign Office, and so finally please those elders of the family whom he had let down both in his schooling

1 Marmaduke Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters: Palestine and Syria (1894-5-6)* (London: Collins, 1918), 1.

2 The precise details of Marmaduke Pickthall’s travels in Arabia are not easy to definitively ascertain. No archive for Marmaduke Pickthall exists, nor do those archival materials on Pickthall which do exist provide much information on his travels in Arabia. Instead, the main source is his own work *Oriental Encounters* with that suggestive subtitle of *Palestine and Syria (1894-5-6)*. Peter Clark has noted how he searched extensively for any personal papers without success and that Pickthall’s earlier biographer Anne Fremantle similarly knew of no archive, nor papers. Clark has stated to me that he had “relied on [Pickthall’s] own writings for reconstructing his travels” when he wrote the biography *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim* (personal email correspondence, 1 May 2015). This lack of archival material means that it is largely on *Oriental Encounters* that I have lent in order to reconstruct Pickthall’s travels in Arabia.

3 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 1.

and in his recent failure to reach the Consular Service. Yet on arrival in Egypt, Pickthall's first sighting of the East, thoughts of a career in imperial administration were swiftly blown from his mind; any excitement which that pathway into colonial service appeared to offer was put into pitiful perspective by the exotic wonder of Egypt. Pickthall later related in his Introduction to *Oriental Encounters* just how that aim of finding Foreign Office employment very soon "lost whatever lustre it had had at home". Instead, with his initial impressions of Egypt "the European ceased to interest me, appearing somehow inappropriate and false in those surroundings".⁴

Before we plunge back into those adventurous late nineteenth-century travels into Palestine and Syria with the youth Marmaduke Pickthall it is first vital to understand the contexts of the time and place. In 1894, Egypt was no longer an independent country but one governed and controlled by Britain. While Cairo may have remained a vast sprawling city of Arabia, it was run by British colonial administrators. Only some twelve years before Pickthall's arrival, Britain had seized Egypt by launching a sustained naval attack on 11 July 1882 which bombarded Alexandria into submission, before destroying what remained of the Egyptian military, taking Cairo by force and turning the city into a centre for British imperial administration. Britain would assume control over Egyptian affairs for the next seventy-four years until the Suez Crisis in 1956. That act of imperial aggression by British forces in 1882 had hugely important ramifications. Britain now had a base on the north-eastern edge of Africa from which it could gaze out over Arabia and from which it could now run its imperial interest across the region. Of most significance, Britain now had control of the Suez Canal which had only been completed in 1869 and which allowed British merchant and naval shipping to journey east to the key imperial interest of India without having to take the far longer and more perilous voyage around Africa. By seizing Egypt in 1882, Britain now had control of this vital passageway of the seas; a central factor for the future prosperity of the British Empire based as it was on control of the world's seas and waterways.⁵ Within the historical context of Britain's military seizure of Egypt in 1882, the comment by Pickthall in the opening pages of his Introduction to *Oriental Encounters* that "the European [...] [seemed] somehow inappropriate and false" in Cairo might be read as an anti-colonial statement, though Pickthall's political ideas at this time were undeveloped and hardly unconventional.

4 Ibid., 2.

5 James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011) gives a more complete exposition of the history of British military and cultural imperialism in Egypt and Arabia.

While the young figure of Pickthall must have wandered the streets and bazaars of Cairo amazed at their exoticism, the appearance of an increasing presence of 'European' cultural aspects and persons stood out as incongruous to the Egyptian scene. Pickthall continues that "at first I tried to overcome this feeling or perception, which, while I lived with English people, seemed unlawful".⁶ Though only in Cairo for a short period, he had apparently soon formed strong opinions as to the right and just way in which he should view the locals. He wanted to spend time with them. Instead, he had swiftly been swept up into the world of the British abroad – natives were there to serve and to clean, and were certainly not there to fraternise with or to get to know as friends and equals. That imperial philosophy was especially so in a country like Egypt which had so recently come under British governance and certainly in a city like Cairo which was starting to be populated with ever greater numbers of colonial administrators, soldiers and religious travellers keen to support British efforts as the empire expanded into the east and into Arabia. It is important to remember that with the occupation of Egypt in 1882, ostensibly to protect the Suez Canal passage to India, came a new collective British curiosity about Arabia. Increasing financial interest accompanied the wave of missionaries, archaeologists, military and administrative personnel, not only in Egypt, but in the Christian Holy Lands and Greater Syria. Marmaduke Pickthall's was a case in point. He came to the East under the aegis of his country's imperial banner and initially with thoughts of securing himself as one of the rafters which supported the structures of colonial administration; and he came to Arabia thanks to Christian missionary friends of the family. Yet Pickthall, even within days of landing in this fresh British colony of Egypt, saw the incongruity of European ways in the Orient.

So Pickthall came as a young man to Egypt very much typical of his type – public-school educated, Christian, seeking to serve the British Empire. Yet if he came as a quite unexceptional figure among so many who were following British forces into Egypt, Pickthall's travel experiences in Arabia were to be so unlike those of the vast majority of his fellow compatriots. After initially staying "some weeks" in Cairo "with English people", Pickthall ventured to Jaffa under the guidance of another European "mentor".⁷ There, in Jaffa, after a couple of weeks of wandering the streets alone, he met the Reverend J.E. Hanauer, "an English clergyman who had been born in Jerusalem".⁸ That pattern of personal introductions through a network of Christian missionary and clergy figures

6 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 2.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim* (London: Quartet, 1986), 10.

is not surprising – religious imperialism was a vital branch of the colonising process; in Egypt post-1882 the numbers of Christian travellers increased dramatically with Britain’s military forces providing the security to carry out missionary work and a comforting background to exploring the region – especially the Christian Holy Lands.⁹

In Hanauer, Pickthall found a fellow after his own heart. Hanauer was fascinated with the people and culture of Arabia beyond his position as “English chaplain”. He “took pity on [Pickthall’s] solitary state” so took to walking about Jaffa with the young Pickthall, teaching him his first “words of Arabic”. Hanauer was unlike his ex-pat compatriots who frowned on any interaction with the natives; he supported Pickthall’s “sneaking wish to fraternise with Orientals”. Now Pickthall had a sympathetic English friend. Soon he had a local friend, too, in the figure of Suleyman, a Syrian dragoman who was staying in the same hotel in Jaffa and who “helped [Pickthall] to throw off the European and plunge into the native way of living”¹⁰

That phrase of “throwing off the European” carries such a tangible sense of being cast free of the cultural baggage which defines expected ways of being and thinking. Pickthall was already a young Englishman with a desire to be independent. He did not see the Arab locals as the vast majority of his countrymen (and other Europeans) saw them with “imperial eyes” and the colonial mindset of ruler over the ruled.¹¹ Here began Pickthall’s true travels about Arabia. He rode about Palestine accompanied by Suleyman as guide and translator in a gentle meander:

about the plain of Sharon, sojourning among the fellahin, and sitting in the coffee-shops of Ramleh, Lydda, Gaza ... [We] went on pilgrimage to Nebi Rubin, the mosque upon the edge of marshes by the sea, half-way to Gaza ... [We] rode up northward to the foot of Carmel; explored the gorges of the mountains of Judea; frequented Turkish baths; ate native meals and slept in native houses – following the customs of the people of the land in all respects.¹²

9 See especially Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1964); Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*.

10 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 4.

11 The term “imperial eyes” is taken from the title of Mary Louise Pratt’s excellent guide to the colonial mindset in travellers, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

12 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 4–5.

Even though Marmaduke Pickthall wrote that summary of his first travels in Arabia some twenty-three years after the events, there is something still of the breathless excitement in his summary of those adventurous voyages across the lands of Palestine. The sense of liberation from the strictures of his life as an educated Englishman is plain: public schooling, consular service examinations, the expectations of his parents and of English society have all been forgotten as Pickthall rides into a wild and exhilarating new world. He is a young man freed from responsibility and the rigours of his British upbringing. He rides without any of the biases or prejudices which the majority of his countrymen would hold, accompanied only by his Syrian guide Suleyman from whom he learns the life and customs of the lands, while also picking up Arabic in his own informal way, “acquiring the vernacular without an effort, in the manner of amusement”. Pickthall’s sense of deliverance is made all the more clear when he expounds on the feelings experienced during those first explorations into Arabia:

And I was amazed at the immense relief I found in such a life. In all my previous years I had not seen happy people. These were happy. Poor they might be, but they had no dream of wealth; the very thought of competition was unknown to them [...] Wages and rent were troubles they had never heard of. Class distinctions, as we understood them, were not. Everybody talked to everybody. With inequality they had a true fraternity.¹³

English and Arabian societies seem dichotomous to the young Pickthall (it is worth remembering that he was only nineteen years old when he first wandered off on these travels into Palestine). His reflections on English society serve to illustrate what he sees as all that English people do not have – happiness, contentment, fraternity. These qualities were just what Pickthall had been crying out for. We can feel and imagine the emotional release Pickthall must have felt; that “immense relief I found in such a life”, after the stressful years of public schooling and his failure in securing meaningful employment serving Britain’s empire. Out there in Palestine, in the villages of Arabia and in the wild open spaces of the deserts, none of that mattered – not to the people he shared his days and nights with and certainly not to him either.

Thanks to the guidance of his Syrian dragoman friend, the nineteen-year-old Pickthall not only found his feet in Arabia but discovered a new-found sense of freedom to his days, an emotion which had been sadly lacking from his life in England. Suleyman also introduced Marmaduke Pickthall to the

13 Ibid.

Baldensperger family – French Alsatians who were well respected for their work on bee-keeping in Palestine and who happily embraced Pickthall into their warm and easy-going ways. Of those first few adventures into Palestine, Pickthall explains that he “ran completely wild for months, in a manner unbecoming to an Englishman”,¹⁴ the tone of that phrase emphasising the change which had been brought over the shy, under-confident young man who had taken the option to head east rather than joining his brother at Oxford.¹⁵ Within a matter of a few months after arriving in Arabia, Pickthall was transformed – the depressive cloud which he felt following his every footstep in England had lifted; the vibrant wonder of the Arabian landscape, the experience of travelling, learning the ways, culture and language of the peoples he met on his journeys engorged his mind and developed an affection for Arabia that would last his lifetime. Yet when he ventured back into the fold of the British imperial community in Jerusalem, both they and he were in for a shock. Pickthall returned to them:

in semi-native garb and with a love for Arabs which, I was made to understand, was hardly decent. My native friends were objects of suspicion. I was told that they were undesirable, and, when I stood up for them, was soon put down by the retort that I was very young.¹⁶

Marmaduke Pickthall was indeed very young. He was perhaps just twenty years old at the time. His approach to the inhabitants of the countryside he was so busy exploring sat utterly incongruous to that of his elders, those echelons of British society who were responsible for carrying out the administration of British colonial policy for Egypt – the latest jewel in Queen Victoria’s imperial collection. For Pickthall, those “mature advisors” of the British imperial community acted as a “disapproving shadow in the background” to his years of travel in Arabia. These “respectable English residents in Syria” gave “frequent warnings [...] to distrust the people of [Syria]” and were so “censorious and hostile” in their attitudes that they became “moral precepts” to be disobeyed by the increasingly self-confident and self-content Marmaduke Pickthall.¹⁷

In *Oriental Encounters*, Pickthall offers us an insight into his Arabian travels. While the sub-title of the book “Palestine and Syria (1894-5-6)” suggests a travelogue of his time there, in the introduction Pickthall states that the work

14 Ibid., 7.

15 Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 9.

16 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 7.

17 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 8.

is “embodied fictionally [from] ... impressions still remaining clear after the lapse of more than twenty years”. He saw the work as “a comic sketch-book of experience”.¹⁸ The tales that follow are therefore embellished both by the action of Pickthall and the substantial interval of time. Peter Clark refers to *Oriental Encounters* as one of Pickthall’s “Near Eastern novels”.¹⁹ If *Oriental Encounters* cannot be relied on as an entirely factual account of Pickthall’s travels in Arabia, it nevertheless is a valuable document providing entry into the mind of its author at two crucial phases of his life. Firstly, for the two years of youthful travels about Arabia which provided such an elixir to his rather depressive English upbringing; and secondly, as he wrote up in 1917 the tales of those Arabian voyages, reflecting and reminiscing on his fruitful first experiences of the Middle East, when he was on the cusp of declaring his conversion to Islam. The timing of Pickthall returning back to his youthful travel experiences in Arabia seems pertinent. Perhaps by mentally returning to those innocent journeys from another era, Pickthall saw the context to his severing from a key aspect of his British identity: his Christian faith.²⁰ Was it the writing of *Oriental Encounters* which prefigured his conversion to Islam, or his decision to break from the Anglican Church which led Pickthall to write *Oriental Encounters*? Whichever way was causal, as he was writing *Oriental Encounters* in 1917, Pickthall underwent a dramatic and public schism.

There are two chapters in *Oriental Encounters* which warrant particular analysis as they paint such a vivid impression of the nature of Pickthall’s travels in Arabia and detail the extent to which those times acted as a decisive factor in the personal identity issues which drew Pickthall away from his British compatriots and ultimately away from his Christian faith. By Chapter 9 of *Oriental Encounters*, titled “My Countryman”, the reader finds Pickthall journeying “in the south of Syria [...] around the Sea of Lot”.²¹ He has an entourage consisting of Suleyman, his rather disreputable dragoman, who is now accompanied by Rashid, a Syrian soldier saved from Turkish servitude by Pickthall for five pounds, and an unnamed cook. They are approaching a village spring of fresh water. Rashid is leading the party when the local villagers mob him, shouting angrily that the water is theirs and theirs only. Rashid is all for beating a few of them. Pickthall stays his vengeance. Suleyman prepares to head over to see if he can ascertain the cause of the rumpus when his eye is caught by something remarkable:

18 Ibid., 9.

19 Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 2.

20 Ibid., 103–4.

21 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 87.

“A marvel!” [Suleymân] exclaimed after a moment spent in gazing. “Never, I suppose, since first this village was created, have two Franks approached it in a single day before. Thou art as one of us in outward seeming”, he remarked to me; “but yonder comes a perfect Frank with two attendants”.

We looked in the direction which his finger pointed, and beheld a man on horseback clad in white from head to foot, with a pith helmet and a puggaree [turban used as sun-shade], followed by two native servants leading sumpter-mules [packhorses].

“Our horses are in need of water”, growled Rashîd, uninterested in the sight. “It is a sin for those low people to refuse it to us”.

“Let us first wait and see how this newcomer fares, what method he adopts”, replied Suleymân, reclining once more at his ease.

The Frank and his attendants reached the outskirts of the village, and headed naturally for the spring. The fellâhîn, already put upon their guard by Rashîd’s venture, opposed them in a solid mass. The Frank expostulated. We could hear his voice of high command.

“Aha, he knows some Arabic. He is a missionary, not a traveller”, said Suleymân, who now sat up and showed keen interest. “I might have known it, for the touring season is long past”.

He rose with dignified deliberation and remounted. We followed him as he rode slowly down towards the scene of strife. When we arrived, the Frank, after laying about him vainly with his riding-whip, had drawn out a revolver. He was being stoned. His muleteers had fled to a safe distance. In another minute, as it seemed, he would have shot some person, when nothing under Allah could have saved his life.

Suleymân cried out in English:

“Don’t you be a fool, sir! Don’t you fire!”²²

The scene is perfectly painted to recognise the incongruity in the two English figures who have wandered across each other’s paths there in the Syrian desert. The dramatic contrast in the appearance of the two Englishmen is drawn in that initial vision of the one dressed all in white, with pith helmet on his head, sat astride a horse while his sad servants traipse behind. He does not even recognise Pickthall as a fellow countryman thanks to his “semi-native garb”. He is the evangelical Victorian traveller of the nineteenth century heading out into distant lands for the sake of God and country, with the Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. He is an archetype who receives recognition merely as “the Frank”. Pickthall accounts him no more personal respect than

22 Ibid., 90–2.

that. It is Suleyman who recognises that this Englishman is no tourist but a missionary – by the fact he “knows some Arabic”. That kind of local knowledge allows us to witness the calm intelligence of Suleyman while at that very moment the Englishman is frantically trying to whip the local villagers about him. He soon pulls a revolver and yet is held from stepping any closer to disaster by the presence of Suleyman who steps into the fray with an admonition not to “be a fool” and to desist from firing the gun.

It is perhaps worthwhile here to pause in our analysis of Pickthall’s work and turn to a comment made by Edward Said in *Orientalism* concerning the depiction of Arabs presented to British and European readers. Referring to Marmaduke Pickthall as a “minor writer”, Said described Pickthall’s work as “exotic fiction” which is composed of “picturesque characters”.²³ In some respects the words tie rather well with Pickthall’s own description of *Oriental Encounters* as “a comic sketch-book of experience”. Yet they don’t quite seem to give justice to the complexity of the power relations drawn in scenes such as the one detailed above where it is Suleyman who is the more fully composed figure compared to the stereotypical Victorian missionary whose cultural blindness and pomposity nearly leads him to a violence conflict from which he will undoubtedly not leave unharmed. Suleyman is the character with the wherewithal to rationalise the situation, to recognise the variance between the stances of the villagers and the missionary; it is Sulayman who is then brave enough to step into the conflict to find a resolution. Edward Said’s analysis maintains that in Pickthall’s work (as in so many other European writers on Arabia), the non-European is “either a figure of fun, or an atom in a vast collectivity designated in ordinary or cultivated discourse as an undifferentiated type called Oriental, African, yellow, brown, or Muslim”.²⁴ Yet of the two characters – Suleyman and the missionary – it is the latter whom Pickthall draws as a figure of fun and one wholly undifferentiated from the mass of other English missionaries who also wander the deserts of Arabia with a few words of Arabic, so strikingly dressed in their all-white garb. In *Oriental Encounters*, it is the Englishman – he is not even given a name by Pickthall, merely the appellation of “the Frank” – who is drawn as an abstraction of his type rather than the non-European, native friends of Pickthall.

In *Reading Arabia: British Orientalism in the Age of Mass Publication, 1880–1930*, Andrew C. Long has noted how *Oriental Encounters* acts as “a clear expression and articulation of Pickthall’s intellectual and creative persona [...] a

23 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 252.

24 Said, *Orientalism*, 252.

very personal reflection on how [his first visit to Syria and Palestine] changed Pickthall in spiritual, cultural and intellectual ways". "[This] idea of the (white) Briton who enters into and becomes a part of the world of the Arab other is both scandalous and becomes a guarantor of commercial success. Titillation about crossing over – the pleasure of being mistaken for the 'other' – is certainly a popular publishing ploy and an exciting idea for British readers, perhaps even today". Pickthall has managed to adopt the standpoint or the position "of the outsider on the inside, or the Westerner with the privileged view from the interior of the East" that is, according to Long, "clearly the basis for the modern artist's aesthetic" in the sense that "the modernist/modern artist stands on the periphery, isolated in the midst of modern life, and from this position – this standpoint – is able to see and represent modernity in ways that defy the efforts and abject consciousness of those who live within the rhythms of modern everyday life".²⁵ So indeed in many ways we might want to view Marmaduke Pickthall's *Oriental Encounters* not as Edward Said read works by other Western writers on the East, but as a work challenging the orthodox stereotypic European vision of Arabia and its inhabitants; and as a book embodying a sense of modernism in its gaze back upon aspects of the late nineteenth-century Arabia from 1917 as the world writhes in the horrors of war.

That scene in "My Countryman" then develops as "the Frank" even refuses to pay the meagre five piastres which Suleyman has negotiated with the elder of the village for taking water from the well. The missionary maintains the water is "the gift of God" and so should be free. When Pickthall steps in to explain that water in the desert is a precious commodity and so one deserving of a price, his nationality is recognised: "What! Are you English?" (94) exclaims the missionary as he stares at that "semi-native garb" which constitutes the young Englishman's clothes. It is a moment of delightful tension: two Englishmen meet in the Syria desert far from any other European presence. Queen Victoria reigns. Yet this is no Stanley-Livingstone moment. Even if it is another extraordinary encounter between Englishmen on the edges of the British Empire, these two Englishmen share little common ground. There is not even anything of the serene reservation embodied in those famous first words, "Dr Livingstone, I presume". Instead, Pickthall's Englishmen hardly see the commonality of their nationhood. "Are you English?" are their first words together. Pickthall agrees to join the Frank for supper, for the ties of English identity are hard to break. Suleyman and Rashid are both annoyed at the decision, "jealous of the Frank, whom they regarded as an enemy, and feared lest he should turn my mind

25 Andrew C. Long, *Reading Arabia: British Orientalism in the Age of Mass Publication, 1880–1930* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 137.

against them”.²⁶ Indeed, Pickthall talks of his “deep regret and [...] degree of shame” at promising to break bread with the missionary even after recognising how terribly his fellow Englishman has treated the local villagers and his native friends that very afternoon. But those ties of cultural and national identity are hard to ignore. His steps to the missionary’s tent form the opening scene to the next chapter in *Oriental Encounters*, titled “The Parting of the Ways”.

Once more the depiction of the English missionary is imbued with stereotype, the kind of depiction which British imperial writers often employed to portray the collective vision of the other of Arabia: “He spoke of the day’s heat and the fatigues of travel and the flies”.²⁷ Looking to lighten the mood and “make him laugh” Pickthall tells the missionary an anecdote on local methods of pest control:

Rashid had spoken of the virtues of a certain shrub; but Suleymân declared the best specific was a new-born baby. This, if laid within a room for a short while, attracted every insect. The babe should then be carried out and dusted. The missionary did not even smile.²⁸

Pickthall’s attempt to unite the two Englishmen by a light-hearted prod at the locals falls on stony ground. The comedy of the scene is born from the distinct division between the ways in which these two Englishmen approach Arabia and the local population. Even Pickthall’s attempt to step into the shared cultural territory of English customs with the missionary fails. The missionary murmurs his discontent, his incredulity that Pickthall can even entertain the company of Arabs. “How can you, an Englishman, and apparently a man of education, bear their intimacy?”²⁹

In Pickthall’s pen, it is the missionary whose appearance and attitude are brutally stereotypical. He has no nuance to distinguish him. “The Frank” sums up his core identity as an Englishman on Arab soils not for the chance to get to know and love the lands and their peoples but to evangelise. Over supper, the racism and diction typical of the British colonial mindset unfurls:

He had [Suleyman and Rashid] summed up at sight. They were two cunning rogues, whose only object was to fleece me. He told me stories about Englishmen who had been ruined in that very way through making

²⁶ Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

friends with natives whom they thought devoted to them. One story ended in a horrid murder. He wanted me to have no more to do with them, and when he saw I was attached to them, begged me earnestly to treat them always as inferiors, to "keep them in their place"

The missionary leaves Pickthall with some startling final words of advice: "Go back to England".³⁰

And so we watch the figure of Marmaduke Pickthall, not yet twenty years of age, stepping from the tent of that English missionary who embodies so much of the world in which Pickthall lived before he came here to Arabia and whose advice is ringing in the young man's ears. It is night in the Arabian desert. Pickthall returns to his two friends Suleyman and Rashid, to the rooftop where they are to sleep. All is contrasts. The villagers have "eager, friendly faces" while that of the missionary's now seems as though that of "a great bird of prey". Pickthall suddenly feels a rush of violent emotion towards his fellow Englishman; he "hated him instinctively" but could not ignore the weight of his words as an elder. On the rooftop, lit by starlight, the three friends lie down. It is Suleyman who speaks, his words laden with truth:

Things will never be the same [...] the missionary has spoilt everything. He told you not to trust us, not to be so friendly with persons who are natives of this land, and therefore born inferior.³¹

Pickthall remains silent. Suleyman speaks on:

A man who journeys in the desert finds a guide among the desert people, and he who journeys on the sea trusts seamen ... An Englishman such as that missionary treats good and bad alike as enemies if they are not of his nation. He gives bare justice; which, in human life, is cruelty. He keeps a strict account with every man. We, when we love a man, keep no account.³²

Pickthall recognises the words as true but knows too that he is torn – the advice of the missionary still ringing in his head to "give up this aimless wandering" and return to England.

³⁰ Ibid., 99–100.

³¹ Ibid., 100–1.

³² Ibid., 102.

It was the hour immediately before dawn, and the life seemed hopeless. The missionary's voice seemed then to me the call of duty, yet every instinct in my blood was fierce against it.³³

It is a wonderfully tense scene. As the first glow of dawn breaks, Pickthall is held in a crisis of identity. In the Introduction to *Oriental Encounters*, Pickthall writes of the feelings he had had those twenty years or so before, when travelling Arabia as a young man and living what he calls "a double life".³⁴ Here then is the moment when Pickthall can no longer continue to live the double life. He has to choose one life or the other: to recant his gentle, wandering ways travelling Arabia and befriending the locals he comes across, learning their language and customs with a loving interest; or to turn back to the imperial mindset and the ways of his English cultural upbringing, to the approach and attitude to the local Arab inhabitants of these lands so perfectly embodied in that of the Frank, the missionary. In that mystical still as the sun rises over the Arabian desert, Pickthall makes his decision:

A streak of light grew on the far horizon, enabling us to see the outlines of the rugged landscape. A half-awakened wild-bird cried among the rocks below us. And suddenly my mind grew clear. I cared no longer for the missionary's warning. I was content to face the dangers which those warnings threatened; to be contaminated, even ruined as an Englishman. The mischief, as I thought it, was already done. I knew that I could never truly think as did that missionary, nor hold myself superior to eastern folk again. If that was to be reprobate, then I was finished.³⁵

Framed against the naturally dramatic lighting of the sunrise, Pickthall bravely forges his future. He will follow the path dictated by his heart. He will walk the line which distinguishes him from the thoughts and prejudices of the missionary. The two may share their nationhood, but nothing more. Both are Englishmen travelling Arabia, yet the missionary seeks no friendship in the faces of the local Arabs he meets along the way. We have already seen the contemptuous manner in which the missionary treats those hosts whose land he walks. For Pickthall, that common tie of England is not strong enough to unite the two men. As Pickthall states, he cannot hold himself as "superior to eastern folk". And such a stance truly distinguishes him from the mould of

33 Ibid., 103–4.

34 Ibid., 8.

35 Ibid., 104.

so many Englishmen of the period. He will not eschew his English heritage yet he will have nothing to do with the belittling attitude so common amongst his countrymen.

So here then is the very moment when Marmaduke Pickthall declares his cultural identity. Or at least, here is a fictionalised remembrance of that dawn revelation which befell his younger self. Whether the scene actually took place as portrayed in *Oriental Encounters* is impossible to determine without archival materials. Yet re-reading the chapter, the emblematic resonances and significances are hard to ignore. The timing of the moment when Pickthall must decide to heed the missionary's words is so fitting: the dawning of a new day. With the cry of that "half-awakened wild-bird" Pickthall's "mind grew clear" such that he could suddenly now see beyond the missionary's words of warning. Both Rashid and Suleyman call out "Praise be to Allah!" as their young English friend declares himself freed from the cultural chains of figures such as the missionary. Together, the three friends ride off "towards the dawn" that is "beginning to grow red behind the heights of Moab".³⁶

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It was not until 1917 that Marmaduke Pickthall published many of the stories of his travels in Arabia which were to eventually form *Oriental Encounters*; the same year which would see his conversion to Islam. The two actions should certainly be seen as connected. The year was a momentous one for Pickthall. In February 1917, the tale "Rashid the Fair" was published in *New Age*, a "radical, even socialist" weekly journal financially propped up by George Bernard Shaw and whose regular writers included Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and Katherine Mansfield.³⁷ Pickthall had written for *New Age* since 1912 but in February 1917 the appearance of "Rashid the Fair" (which would become the first chapter of *Oriental Encounters* in 1918) demonstrates how significant those years of Arabian travel were to Pickthall even more than twenty years later. From February 1917, Pickthall had eighteen tales of *Oriental Encounters* published in *New Age*.³⁸ The book of the same name was published by William Collins in June of 1918. In between had come "Pickthall's declaration of his [Muslim] faith in November 1917 [which] was the turning point of his life".³⁹ Significant in this context is the fact that the two chapters "My Countryman"

³⁶ Ibid., 105.

³⁷ Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 19, 142.

³⁸ These appeared in eighteen parts between 1 February 1917 and 22 August 1918.

³⁹ Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall*, 42.

and “The Parting of the Ways” (Chapters 9 and 10 of *Oriental Encounters*) which really explain the background of Pickthall’s crisis of identity and his schism from English Christian mainstream beliefs about Arabia were *not* published in *New Age*. As we have already seen, these chapters are central to the path which the young Pickthall chose to take in life as he chose not to listen to the advice of an English missionary traveller and instead to trust his own judgement in his friendships with local Arabs and to embrace the freedom of wandering unprejudiced in the wide open spaces of Arabia. Twenty years on, in late 1917, Pickthall recollected those Arabian travel experiences. As he prepared to finally and decisively announce his public acceptance of Islam on 29 November 1917, so those youthful days in the Syrian desert exemplified his now firm conviction of his true identity. Indeed, if we turn again to the final lines of the “The Parting of the Ways”, with the young Pickthall having uttered his declaration to care “no longer for the missionary’s warning” and with Rashid and Suleyman ecstatic at his decision, Pickthall laughs and states “I resign myself to be the pigeon of the mosque”.⁴⁰ The echo of that moment rang clear and true to its author so many years later. So indeed we can see the vital role which those Arabian travels from 1894 to 1896 really played in forming the remarkable figure of Marmaduke Pickthall.

40 Pickthall, *Oriental Encounters*, 105.