

## British Women Travellers in Tunisia: Representations of the Land and the People (1850-1930)

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### Abstract

*Nineteenth and early twentieth-century Tunisia attracted a significant number of British Travellers. The majority of these were males, but there was a ubiquitous presence of women who recorded their perceptions of various aspects of the Tunisian culture and society. Yet the experience of these female travellers has not been taken as a subject of historical research in its own right. This paper seeks to fill in this historical gap by focusing on these women's representations of the Tunisian land and people in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. The period coincided with a notable increase in the number of women travellers who visited Tunisia such as Lady Herbert, Norma Lorimer, Francis Nesbitt, Erskine Stewart, and others. This paper argues that these women's travelogues cannot be dismissed as orientalist texts. It reveals that their representations of the Tunisian land and people are not homogenous but a mixture of condemnation and admiration.*

**Keywords:** Tunisia, British women travellers, representations, stereotypes, admiration, hot springs.

## **Introduction**

This paper is an examination of British women travellers' representations of the Tunisian land and people in the second half of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century. It seeks to illuminate our understanding of British perceptions of Tunisia during this period. This aspect of British-Tunisian encounters has been commonly analysed through the lens of male travellers. In this way, British women who journeyed in Tunisia commonly surface as shadowy figures under the blaze of the sun of famous travellers such as Thomas Shaw, Lord Curzon, and Grenville Temple. This paper demonstrates that these women's representations of the land and the people are more complex than the existing research on British-Tunisian encounters shows.

Traveling to Tunisia was an old phenomena dating back to the sixteenth century which coincided with the first commercial treaties signed between Tunisia and Britain (2007, 8). Yet the presence of British travelers became much more notable in the early years of the nineteenth century due to commercial, archeological, historical, and cultural factors. In his study of British travellers' representations of nineteenth and early twentieth century Tunisia, Adel Manai explored an important historical gap in the already scant literature on British-Tunisian encounters. Through a rich body of travel accounts, he revealed that British perceptions of the North African country are suffused with stereotypes, prejudices, and obvious feelings of cultural superiority.

At the outset of the book, Manai offers us an insight into the profile of the typical British traveler who journeyed in Tunisia during the time in question. Most of these travellers were young or middle aged male from the higher echelons of British society (ibid). They were landed aristocrats, political, and diplomatic figures. As a matter of fact, they were highly educated people. Whether it was for commercial, political or cultural motives, these British travellers visited Tunisia and commented on various aspects of the Tunisian culture and society.

Manai's book is structured around specific themes on which travellers commented extensively. These include: the land and the people, the court and religion, local minorities, the harem, education, the arts, sciences and diplomacy. He suggested that travellers "portrayed a decaying Tunisian society, a vanishing religion, subjugated women, an unaccountable political system, and a backward people" (105). He highlighted that these "images were sufficed with a great deal of prejudice and misunderstanding, misconceptions and feelings of superiority" (ibid). In this way, they confirm Edward Said's argument that Western perceptions of the Orient, in this case Tunisia, are grounded in an Orientalist discourse even though they did not lead to the British colonization of Tunisia (5).

Although Manai recognized the fact that Tunisia attracted a number of female travellers, his reference to these women's reflections on different aspects of Tunisian culture remain scant in comparison to the attitudes of male travellers. This paper builds on Manai's work and seeks to understand women's representations of the Tunisian land and people. It suggests that these women's attitudes are more complex than Manai's work shows. In other terms, prejudices and

stereotypes are only one aspect of women's conceptions of Tunisia. Their travelogues show a mixture of admiration and condemnation.

This paper draws on a number of British women travelogues as a primary source. These include Lady Herbert's *A Search After Sunshine or Algeria in 1871*, Herbert Vivian's *Tunisia and the Modern Barbary State*, Mrs Greville Nugent's *A Land of Mosques and Marabouts*, Emily Ward's *Three Travellers in North Africa*, Lady Warren's *Through Tunisian and Algeria on a Motorcycle*, Norma Lorimer's *By the Waters of Carthage*, Francis Nesbitt's *Algeria and Tunisia Painted and Described*, and Stewart Erskine's *Vanished Cities of North Africa*.

As can be noted from the titles of these travelogues, some of the women travellers such as Lady Warren, Francis Nesbitt, and Lady Herbert visited Tunisia together with Algeria. The two North African countries were often promoted as a single destination. Guidebooks, newspaper publicity material, and travel accounts highlighted the major attractions of Tunisia and Algeria such as historical cities and the weather.

Very little biographical information exists about these women travellers with the exception of some of the well-known women such as the Baroness Lady Herbert and novelist Norma Lorimer. They often journeyed in Tunisia in the company of their husbands or male relatives. Emily Ward came to Tunisia with her brother Lord Leigh and a friend. Mrs Vivian came with her husband Herbert Vivian. Most of these women's travelogues offer the reader an insight into their reasons for travelling to Tunisia. The Baroness Mary Elizabeth Herbert who arrived in Tunis after a tour in Algeria in 1871, visited Tunisia to cure her rheumatism (1872, 3). Norma Lorimer explained that her journey was motivated by a keen interest in "Mohamedan countries." She noted that one of the major purposes of her travel account was to describe life "in the most Oriental city which can be visited without scarifying the comforts of civilization" (1925, viii).

Lady Warren's journey was spurred by a spirit of risk, adventure, and a search for the "super oriental." Despite the paramilitary and masculinist attributes of motorcycle travel, Lady Warren wrote about her motorcycling adventure across Tunisia (Speake, 2003, 823). Her travel account was so popular that it was on the 1922 list (Fussell, 1980, 60). Similarly to Lady Warren, Emily Ward, Norma Lorimer, and Erskine Stewart visited Tunisia between the wars years. It was therefore natural to leave the gloomy atmosphere of England in search of other places where there was sun, fantastic scenery, a fine climate, and an impressive natural beauty.

This desire is evidently clear in Mrs Greville's travel account. Her visit to Tunisia was motivated by a desire to "soar over the chimney tops of smoky London" till she found herself far South where the skies are blue and the roofs of cities white and flat "broken here and there by a round cupola marking the grave of some Moslem saint, or a minaret whence the mueddin proclaims the 'Allah il Allah'" (1894, 2). Moreover, she promised her reader novel sights of veiled and trousered women, where "a strange monotonous music strikes the ear and where a wealth of wondrously harmonized color delights the eye" (ibid). It is clear, therefore, that British women travellers expressed different reasons for journeying in Tunisia.

This paper spans the second half of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth which coincided with the rise of tourism. The advent of new means of transport such as railway travel, and steamships provided cheaper and safer means of travel over long distances. Women took advantage of these changes and there was a consequent rise in the number of women traveling around the world. Eric Hobsbawm affirmed that women's escape "from the twilight or lamp-lit cocoon of the bourgeois interior into open air is significant (1987, 205). This greater freedom of movement is highly evident in the accounts of British women travellers who visited many parts of Tunisia such as Carthage, the Djerid, the oases of Hamma, the souks, and mosques of Kairawan and recorded their attitudes towards these geographies and their people.

### **British Women Travellers and the Land**

British women travellers appreciated the natural beauty of Tunisia. Their travelogues abound with glowing descriptions of the natural scenery, the quality of soil, roman remains and the sea resorts. On her way from Bizerta to Tunis, Mrs Greville asserted that the scenery was magnificent. She was delighted to see bold cliffs, with mountains in the background and at times a rocky islet upstanding in the blue sea (1894, 139).

Francis Nesbitt was impressed with the "wondrous blue" of the Mediterranean and the lagoon of the Bahira. She was fascinated with the scene with its distinctive beauty as

The water shimmers in the sunshine and the town of La Goulette gleams likewise and so do the houses scattered along the coast. The slopes of the hill and the whole of the plain towards the sea are covered as it were with cloth scarlet and gold and green, poppies and marigolds and a waving corn, in masses such as can rarely be found elsewhere. (1906, 183)

She commented further on the fantastic scenery as the twin peaks of Bou Korneine, the Gemini Scopuli of Virgil were "soft as a dream in the early morning" (Ibid). Seen from a distance, the ancient ports of Carthage still keep their original form. The tiny lakes were "calm as glass and almost more definitely blue than the Mediterranean" (183). She concluded that the view was beautiful on all sides.

As the train started to reach Tunisia, Erskine Stewart praised the scenery and the quality of the soil. She noted that "the beauty and fertility of the country is striking" (1925, 12). More specifically, Emily Ward saw Djerba as excessively fertile. There were mainly "olive trees of great size that date back to Roman times" (1920, 174). She remarked that Tunisia along with Algeria and Constantine was the granary of Rome, which connotes the abundance of agricultural products in the country.

In addition to the beauty and fertility of the soil, British women travellers were fascinated with Roman ruins. They ventured into great historical sites which were praised in promotional literature. There was an obvious fascination with the ancient past. Most of these women devoted a chapter to the history of Carthage.<sup>1</sup> Emily Ward described it as "the most beautiful building of the kind ever known" (1920, 163). Norma Lorimer acknowledged that although

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Erskine Stewart 15, Ward 163-7, Francis Nesbitt 179.

Carthage is now a “desolate sun parched strip of land on the shores of North Africa,” it will usually be “a magic name” that connotes “ancient greatness” (1925, 264). Ultimately, “Carthage will be Carthage until the world has slipped behind the sea like the ball fire at sunset” (Ibid).

Francis Nesbitt deeply fell in love with the Roman ruins of Dougga which were so beautiful that “no one should count the cost in fatigue and trouble too great for a visit” (126). Moreover, she was captivated by the “grandeur and beauty” of the “ruined arches, “as they are rising from the sunny, flowering fields” (180). Emily Ward found the collection at the Muse Alaoui highly attractive (154). She offered a detailed description of what she saw there. There were broken bas reliefs, pottery, cinerary urns, and a rich mosaic which gives the traveller an insight into past daily life.

Moreover, British women travellers dwelt on the many sea and health resorts which the local population enjoyed and which some of them found much pleasurable and beneficial. Emily Ward reported that Korbous was a “wonderfully beautiful spot, where rheumatic, lane and very fat people seek a cure” (147). There, she saw very fat jewesses who came to benefit from the curing qualities of water. The height of the spot and the hills protect the invalids from the wind and the healing waters sprang out of the mountainside (Ibid).

It is important to note that Korbous was not only popular among Tunisians. Eric Jennings demonstrated that the sea and health resort was a favourite hydro-mineral spa for the local population, and French colonials with its healthy temperate marine climate during the nineteenth century (2006, 154). Julia Clancy Smith showed that resident and European visitors used the waters of Korbous to treat rheumatism and other diseases such as arthritis, dermatitis, and digestive problems (2011, 165). For example, the English consul general in Tunis, Sir Richard Wood visited the “Baths of Korbous” in November 1858 in order to cure his rheumatism (Ibid).

Similarly, Lady Herbert visited Tunisia to test the effectiveness of the curing qualities of certain warm springs which were recommended to her by a Paris doctor for rheumatism (3). This indicates that health tourism started to flourish in Tunisia. Moreover, Herbert recommended to prospective travellers a tourist spot between Cathage and Goletta

where a number of villas and country houses or rather sea-side watering places of the Bey’s family or his ministers and I can conceive no more enjoyable spot in the summer-time than this sea shore with its big shady rocks, beautiful sands, lovely shells and glorious blue sky...Mrs Wood told me that it was her children’s greatest delight to come here for the day for their country home at Marsa which is only a few miles off and did not wonder at their taste.(258-259)

Erskine Stewart enjoyed a bath in al Hamma, an oasis with some thousands of date palms. The spot was characterized by many Roman baths “made of slate, or some dark, coal substance (213). She was delighted with the hot water which “bubbled in at one end and went out at the other, making a delicious bath with the water changing all the time” (Ibid). In addition, she described the rest-house at al Hamma. The latter was quite comfortable with its big and white-washed sitting room. It had quite decent bedrooms with blue tiles on the walls, and a raised garden in the middle with a well in the center (Ibid)

These glowing descriptions of the hot water springs and the available tourist infrastructure and facilities demonstrate the growth of Tunisia as a popular resort for British travellers. British women travellers enjoyed the natural beauty of the country, its fertility, Roman heritage, and bathing in the hot water springs. While their representations of the Tunisian land are largely uniform, the complexity of their attitudes is much more evident through their perceptions of Tunisian men and women.

### **British women Travellers and Tunisians**

British women travellers' representations of Tunisians are a mixture of prejudice and admiration. Some of them displayed an obvious feeling of cultural superiority in depicting the local population, while others expressed admiration for certain aspects of the Tunisian character. Norma Lorimer resented Tunisians for what she considered as excessive idleness and indifference to time. According to her, Arabs and Moors "sleep a great deal, rolled up like fat pigs in white burnouses on the small floors of their cupboard like shops" (13). As a result, they are poor businessmen. Arabs particularly have "no commercial jealousies" (30). They spend their time "doing nothing." This laziness makes them "perfectly happy" (Ibid). In their peaceful happiness, they are similar to a "cow lying in a meadow of young grass" (Ibid). In addition, she despised the physical features of the indolent Arab who has "few angles and indications of bones about his sleek person as a ripe banana (30).

This racist and stereotypical description of Tunisians reveal Lorimer's prejudiced view of the Tunisian character and her obvious feelings of cultural superiority. She attributed Tunisian idleness to their dress. According to her, Tunisians were strongly attached to their traditional dress as it evoked their ancient past. As a result, she claimed that they "are one and all deemed like the resplendent heroes of Arabian nights" (18). It comes as no surprise that Lorimer expressed her admiration for French colonialism. She highlighted that Tunisia was managed in an ideal way under French colonial rule. She claimed that "it is one of the safest, cleanest, most orderly and pleasant towns you can imagine that you never know that it being managed" (38). Besides, contrary to the "fanatical natives," French officers are superb (38).

This emphasis on Arab's laziness is also expressed by Emily Ward. She was surprised that Dougga was still inhabited by Arabs who were "proverbially lazy." They inhabited the half built Roman houses after finishing the building with mud bricks, and putting on untidy thatches similar to those on their own huts called the gourbis (183).

Contrary to this negative attitude towards Tunisians, Erskine Stewart praised them as hard-working people. Through her visit to Sfax, she described a vibrant social life. She noted that Sfax is a "regular hive of workers." Its souks brim with flourishing trades. Blacksmiths, dyers, and others had successful businesses. She affirmed that "the busy scene presented in the Medina is in direct contrast to the usually accepted idea of Oriental laziness: the population works cheerfully and can be seen at work, as much of it is carried on the open street (201). Moreover, she praised Tunisians as "music-loving nation" (176).

Some women travelers such as Francis Nesbitt wrote favorably about the physical features of Tunisians. She described some young men in the souk el Attarin as "true types of Moors"

with handsome, smooth, and calm faces. They took great care with their clothing and general appearance. They were dressed in “robes of soft cloth and silk of most delicate tints (149). They were polite and the women travellers such as Nesbitt were “adopted as friends, to be greeted placidly” (ibid). Besides, Tunisians have “an innate sense of colour, they “blend and combine hues that would be unthinkable elsewhere, although the result in their hands is charming” (155). She insisted that regardless of their social class the Arabs and the Moors showed politeness and good manners towards others (60).

British women travellers commented also on Tunisian women who are a ubiquitous theme in their accounts of Tunisia. Lady Herbert, Emily Ward, Mrs Vivian and others showed a special interest in the physical appearance of Tunisian women, their dresses, makeup, and status in Tunisian society. They judged Tunisian women according to British standards of beauty. They deplored the Tunisian association of fatness with beauty. Francis Nesbitt attended a wedding ceremony and described women as “short and generally stout, handsome in a rather heavy way, with thick painted eyebrows, darkened eyelashes, and henna-stained hands” (162). She concluded that “all the married women are moving mountains of fat” (165).

Norma Lorimer loathed the fact that prospective brides were fattened for their weddings. As soon as they reach the “marriageable age of thirteen or fourteen”, they were compelled to eat puppies’ flesh, be enslaved in a small room and lead an indolent lifestyle without any activity (25). In her visit to a harem in the heart of the Arab quarter, Mrs Vivian described in great detail the dress and the physical appearance of her hostess. She commented on the fatness of the woman, her makeup, and her excessive interest in jewelry, and lack of refinement. Vivian’s description is so humorous and stereotypical that it is worth quoting:

A funny little fat stumpy woman...She had a round good tempered face, a pink and white complexion not wholly guiltless of rouge, dark eyes torched up with kohl...a very scanty dark hair parted in the middle...she wore white silk trousers, a short loose coat of brilliant rose-colored brocade embroidered in pink and silver. Her bright yellow, high-heeled shoes, elaborately worked in gold, were at least three sizes too small for her, and she hobbled about so painfully in them that we expected every moment to see her fall on her nose. Her little fat fingers are covered right down to the knuckles with rings. Of these she was evidently very proud, as she constantly spread out her hands for us to admire them. Various chains were hung round her neck, and she had an immense variety of broches and other ornaments fastened in her dress and hair. She was probably about eighteen, but she looked five and thirty at least. (1899, 66)

This detailed description is quite revealing of Mrs Vivian’s feelings of cultural superiority. Lady Herbert showed a much more appreciative attitude to the physical appearance of Tunisian women. Describing women at a palace in Marsa, she wrote “their beauty is undeniable. The mother of the little princess had a delicate high-bred face and a gentle courtesy of manner which would have done however to any European court. Her sister in law was very handsome, and covered with beautiful jewels” (262).

Yet, British women travellers agreed upon the inferior position of Tunisian women. Herbert considered women’s position as deplorable. She commented that their sole occupation was to bathe, dress, smoke, and eat (262). Moreover, they were illiterate. As a result, “their time hangs so heavily on their hands that the greatest kindness you can do is to go and pay them a visit, if only to kill half an hour or so” (262).

In addition, women's lack of freedom was widely commented on. Scarcely, do women were allowed to go out, and when this happens they were confined in "a close carriage with all the blinds drawn down" (ibid). Herbert reported exaggeratedly that these restrictions apply to the peasant class as well since no woman was visible in the village (ibid). More specifically, Tunisian women were kept behind closed doors in harems. These were often inaccessible spaces tinged with a sense of mystery and secrecy.

Mrs Vivian remarked that Tunisian harems belonging to the upper echelons of Tunisian society were more inaccessible than the harems of Turkey and Egypt. She explained that Tunisian Arabs were "particularly strict about keeping their wives from contact with Europeans" (65). Unlike their male companions, British women travellers enjoyed access into the secrets of a mysterious world. Despite the language barrier, these women reported on everything they saw and experienced.

Mrs Vivian admired the architectural structure of the harem she visited. She was fascinated with beautiful arabesque decorations and tiles, white marble columns harmonized exquisitely with dazzling arabesques of infinitely delicate patterns and beautiful fountains in the middle (68). Yet, they agreed that the harem with its "air of reserve, tales of terror, cruelty and persecution" was an epitome of women's subsidiary position (161).

Since women's presence was relegated to the domestic sphere, their appearance in man's world was considered a transgressive act. As a result, Tunisian women could not venture out into the outside world without being veiled. British women travellers affirmed that this was an obvious sign of women's oppression. Norma Lorimer contended that "the first glimpse of muffled and veiled women" made her thank God for her Christian husband, who not only admits that his wife was a soul...but allows her to possess it in liberty, fraternity, and equality with his own" (2). She suggested that "despite being a shapeless bundle of white," elderly women were also compelled to be veiled. Describing the souk in Tunis, Emily Ward wrote about the gloomy sight of women who "were entirely covered with tight and black crepe veil (146).

This condemnation of the inferior position of Tunisian women within Tunisian society is for sure reflective of British women travellers' prejudices and stereotypes. Despite the fact that these women's agreed on the subservient position of local women, their representations of the land and the Tunisian character are far away from being homogenous. These women's travel accounts cannot be therefore dismissed as orientalist texts. They are rather a mixture of condemnation and admiration.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the complexity of British women travellers' perceptions of the Tunisian land and people. It revealed that women travellers in the second half and early twentieth century Tunisia such as Erskine Stewart, Emily Ward, and Lady Herbert commented favorably on the Tunisian land. They were impressed with the natural beauty, fertility, the glorious Roman remains, and the sea and health resorts of the country. Their attitudes to Tunisian men and women are less homogeneous. They praised and condemned some aspects



of the Tunisian character. They reflected on the condition and status of women in Tunisia. They judged Tunisian women in terms of British standards of beauty and lamented their deplorable position.

Evidently, British women travellers' perceptions of the Tunisian land and people are not purely negative. They are rather a mixture of appreciation and criticism. This paper offers therefore a much more nuanced reading of British representations of Tunisia.

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