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William James Muller, Cairo Bazaar, *Nineteenth century, Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on moderately thick, moderately textured, cream wove paper, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.*

Delight in Storrs

by Jonathan Gaisman

On the life of a colonial administrator.

The Beefsteak club is one of London's more exclusive. Concealed behind an anonymous door in the insalubrious vicinity of Leicester Square, it occupies one room up a flight of stairs, containing a single long table at which its members (there are only five hundred) lunch or dine. By convention, they do not choose their neighbors but are allocated a place at random by the waiters. Among their number are prime ministers (including the incumbent), academics, authors, diplomats, and a strictly controlled number of lawyers. The sole criterion for membership is an ability to talk and listen well.

Some time ago, the club published a volume, *Beefsteak Lives*, comprising short biographies of former members written by current ones. Many familiar twentieth-century names are included, as well as some whose lives the reader might be tempted to pass over with less interest. Among the former are Edwin Lutyens, Lord Curzon, A. J. Ayer, Rudyard Kipling, Isaiah Berlin, and Harold Macmillan. Within the latter class falls Sir Ronald Storrs (1881–1955). As the account has it,

> Elected only a couple of years before his death, Storrs must have been a sad loss for the club since he was an exceptionally interesting man with a taste and talent for conversation. He was one of the most notable colonial servants of his day, having been Oriental Secretary in Cairo under Kitchener. Subsequently he was successively Governor of Jerusalem and of Cyprus before his final post as Governor of Northern Rhodesia. An eminent scholar of Arabic, he was a friend of T. E. Lawrence with whom he worked closely in the First World War. He also had expert knowledge of the Bible and of Shakespeare. His valuable collection of Middle East artefacts was tragically destroyed by fire in Cyprus in 1931. He wrote an admirable autobiographical account of his career entitled *Orientations* (1937) which was an outstanding success.

Despite these hints of Storrs as a brilliant raconteur and the author of a memoir in the same vein as—even superior to—imperial recollections of the *Ponsonby Remembers* type, my acquaintance with Storrs would have ended with this relatively bland encomium had not

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a chance conversation about Horace put into my hands an anthology of translations in various languages of the poet's famous Pyrrha Ode. The anthologist was Storrs. *Ad Pyrrham* so absorbed me that I was moved to write an essay about the collection, "More lasting than bronze," which appeared in this magazine's December 2020 number. Yet more striking than the translations themselves, and the rigor with which Storrs had searched them out, was the learning and gaiety of his introduction, mixing suppressed exuberance with an ironized version of the chalk-dust pedantry of Holofernes, the Latin schoolmaster in *Love's Labour's Lost*. So who was the Storrs behind the Ode?

His friendship with Lawrence suggested that further research might begin in the latter's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), but it was not long before *Orientations* cast its own spell. (The book is unaccountably published in the United States as *The Memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs*.) Whatever the author's reputed talent for conversation in London clubland, his memoir reveals a near genius for anecdote—so much so that it provokes the question whether such an apparently slender facility can rise to the level of a genre and confer such immortality as the writing of history bestows.

Lawrence describes Storrs, whom he first met in 1916, in characteristically peculiar terms.

> The first of us was Ronald Storrs . . . the most brilliant Englishman in the Near East, and subtly efficient, despite his diversion of energy in love of music and letters, of sculpture, painting, of whatever was beautiful in the world's fruit. Nonetheless, Storrs sowed what we reaped
> . . . . His shadow would have covered our work and British policy in the East like a cloak, had he been able to deny himself the world, and to prepare his mind and body with the sternness of an athlete for a great fight.

Storrs called Lawrence "my super-cerebral companion," but it is the former who emerges from *Seven Pillars* as almost excessively cultured. "Waiting off Suez" in December 1916, writes Lawrence in unconscious self-parody,

> was the *Lama*, a small converted liner. Such short voyages on warships were delicious interludes for us passengers. On this occasion, however, there was some embarrassment. Our mixed party seemed to disturb the ship's company in their own element. The juniors had turned out of their berths to give us night space, and by day we filled their living rooms with irregular talk. Storrs' intolerant brain seldom stooped to company. But today he was more abrupt than usual. He turned twice around the decks, sniffed, "No one worth talking to," and sat down in one of the two comfortable armchairs, to begin a discussion of Debussy with Aziz el Masri (in the other). Aziz, the Arab-Circassian ex-colonel in the Turkish Army, now general in the Sherifian Army, was on his way to discuss with the Emir of Mecca the equipment and standing of the Arab regulars he was forming at Rabegh. A few minutes later they had left Debussy, and were depreciating Wagner: Aziz in fluent German, and Storrs in German, French and Arabic. The ship's officers found the whole conversation unnecessary.

In view of subsequent criticism of Lawrence's attitude to Arabs, it can be discerned from his final sentence that the real target of Storrs's intellectual snobbery was his own kind. In truth, Storrs found few Englishmen's company abroad better than his own. A letter home

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describes a later trip on the *Lama*:

> After dinner I oblige [the ship's company] with Wagner and Puccini and dreadfully defeat the Paymaster at chess. In the morning, a little *Inferno*, James's *Washington Square* (his first, American manner) and Turgeneff's *Fumée*; but Russian books are always a slight effort to me, I suppose by reason of the leakage of style in translation.

Walking by night in the Arabian desert in 1917, he recited to himself "a good many Odes of Horace, themes of Bach fugues, Dante and Keats." Of English visitors to Cairo, he wrote:

> Some [tourists] cared so little for the things wherein Egypt differed from the standard European winter resort that I used to wonder why they had bothered to make the journey. Showing a party of seven to the best of my ability round one of the many chamber tombs of Saqqara, I suddenly found we had dwindled to three and hastening anxiously back found the remainder enjoying a quiet rubber of bridge on a Fifth Dynasty sarcophagus.

Some might argue that the best way to show gratitude for the good fortune of scintillating intelligence, breadth of education, and discerning taste is continually to draw upon the benefits conferred by all three, as Storrs ostentatiously did. There will always be others for whom an exhibition of the combination comes across as pure arrogance. More problematical from the vantage point of posterity was Storrs's location in the crosshairs of two perennial arguments.

The first concerns not just the supposed indefensibility of the entire British imperial project, but also its critics' refusal to acknowledge that it might even have entailed incidental benefits. Allied to this is the now modish condemnation of allegedly uniform British attitudes towards their subject peoples, of which the most celebrated instance is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). This book identifies Storrs explicitly, though only in passing and on each occasion as one in a long list of "Orientalists" who each had the same "hostility to and fear of the Orient." Said was a great compiler of lists —frequently of names that appear to have been deliberately chosen for their obscurity, with unintentionally comic effect. Thus, for example:

> To these names [French travelers in the Orient] we must add (at Hassan al-Nouty's suggestion) the names of Oriental Semiticists, including Quatremère; Saulcy, the explorer of the Dead Sea; Renan as Phoenician archaeologist; Judas, the student of Phoenician languages; Catafago and Défrémery, who studied the Ansarians, Ismailis and Seljuks; Clermont-Ganneau who explored Judea, and the Marquis de Vogüé, whose work centred on Palmyrian epigraphy.

Must we indeed? In Storrs's case he offers no evidence for his accusation; it is a case of guilt by association. Subsequent commentators such as Ilia Xypolia have misleadingly implied—among mere gross generalizations—that Said singled out Storrs for criticism. He did not; indeed, he shows no sign of having read *Orientations*. So we may approach Storrs and his autobiography with a clear conscience, especially as every sentence breathes esteem for and engagement on terms of equality with the cultures of the peoples for whom Storrs was responsible.

Secondly and more incendiary still was Storrs's role in Palestine, where as governor of Jerusalem (which he loved, declaring that "there

is no promotion after Jerusalem") he attempted to strike a balance between Arab and Jewish interests, claiming to represent both but finally pleasing neither. Supportive of the Balfour Declaration and therefore of a Jewish homeland, he became increasingly anxious about the implications for the region of Zionist agitation for a Jewish state and reaped the consequences for the remainder of his life. On any view, Storrs made an enormous contribution to maintaining the peace in Jerusalem, while simultaneously restoring the architectural heritage of the city and establishing cultural life there. He was the subject of a sympathetic exhibition in Tel Aviv as recently as 2010. By contrast, Professor Bernard Wasserstein offered this sour assessment in 1998:

> Unusual among mandatory officials in being an intellectual show-off, [Storrs] was regarded by colleagues as being too clever by three quarters, by Arabs as a poseur who pretended to know more Arabic than he did, and by Jews as an untrustworthy hypocrite. They were all right. But Storrs was a superb writer, more readable—and far more accurate as a guide through the Anglo-Arab labyrinth—than that genuine poseur, Lawrence.

While Wasserstein implies that Storrs's Arabic was deficient, Lawrence—a closer witness—rated him highly: "Storrs in full blast was a delight to listen to in the mere matter of Arabic speech, and also a lesson to every Englishman alive of how to deal with suspicious or unwilling Orientals." (The prejudice, be it noted, is Lawrence's.) But any dispute is simply marginalized by this anecdote from *Orientations*:

> Sometime in 1906 I was walking in the heat of the day through the [Cairo] Bazaars. As I passed an Arab café an idle wit, in no hostility to my straw hat but desiring to shine before his friends, called out in Arabic, "God curse your father, O Englishman." I was young then and quicker-tempered, and foolishly could not refrain from answering in his own language that I would also curse his father if he were in a position to inform me which of his mother's two and ninety admirers his father had been. I heard footsteps behind me and slightly picked up the pace, angry with myself for committing the sin [of] a row with Egyptians. In a few seconds I felt a hand on each arm. "My brother," said the original humorist, "return, I pray you, and drink with us coffee and smoke. I did not think that Your Worship knew Arabic, still less the correct Arabic abuse, and we would fain benefit further by your important thoughts."

The cynic might observe this story's unverifiable and self-serving nature, but the world would be a poorer place without it.

Jan Morris, in *Farewell the Trumpets*, rightly called *Orientations* the least imperial and most enjoyable of all imperial memoirs. Executed in the Gibbonian style, it evokes a vanished world of self-confidence in conscientious and competent public service and (in the early years at least) an almost supernatural sense of fun. Storrs sacrificed youth and marriage for his career (he finally wedded a widowed rear admiral's daughter in 1923), but he had the time of his life. The explanation for his intrinsic *joie de vivre* does not obviously lie with his parents. His father was in holy orders and had reading habits that his son thought unambitious, Ronald commenting that Storrs *père* must have supposed that "too many books spoil the Cloth." Of Storrs's mother we learn little save that she "had a lively temper but deflected it as a rule upon inanimate objects." His cheerfulness was nearly always in inverse proportion to the external conditions, which especially during the Great War were often taxing. His diary relates him being "tried severely" at breakfast one morning aboard a wartime ship by the

captain's offer from a tin pannikin of "a length of tripe for you, Mr Storrs?" As he observes: "Somehow a length is a queasy unit of measure."

Another maritime difficulty arose earlier in his career, when the young Storrs struggled to reach Trieste in time to catch the ship that was to return him to Egypt after a spell of home leave. His account displays the notorious English public-school mixture of low cunning and high invention, disguised with apparent self-deprecation:

> We started punctually [by train from Venice], but soon after Mestre had so bad a breakdown that we clearly could not reach Trieste until well after one: despair for an unsuccessful junior not yet confirmed in his appointment and arriving five days late from his first, premature and ill-deserved holiday. I lost control, and getting down at half a dozen alternate stations dispatched to the Captain telegrams in English, French, German and Italian from Mr Robinson, the famille Duval, Ritter von Finkelstein and Commendatore Carracciolo, begging him to accord each but one hour's grace. I then, as the Arabs say, committed my affair to Allah. We reached the town station at one-thirty. It was nearly two o'clock before my cab had trailed me along the blinding white Molo San Carlo and I saw, with mingled relief and terror, the Blue Peter and the Austrian Lloyd house flag floating over a still-moored *Semiramis*. I clambered up the gangway, ticket and passport in hand, and presented them to an officer standing in front of a small group, feeling that it was vital for me not to look at the sheaf of papers he was grasping. "Where are the rest of the party?" he said. I could only answer that I was travelling alone, had seen no others, was glad to be in time myself; and achieving my cabin with as slow a haste as I dared, locked myself in until, after waiting a further 10 minutes, the Captain abandoned "the rest" and put to sea, with a further revolution or two to make up for lost time. Pride I think forbade him to ask me point-blank whether I had sent the telegrams, nor, I suppose, could he make enquiries, still less act upon suspicion; but the four days' voyage to Alexandria proved too short for me to re-establish my position with him, his officers, or even my fellow-passengers.

Two attitudes towards Storrs propose themselves in the light of his memoirs. The first is to undertake the worthy but prosaic assessment of the historical importance of an ultimately minor figure, albeit one at the heart of many controversies. The second and richer course is to revel in the product of what the army officer Edward Spears called his "magnificent pen." History, after all, can be literature. Churchill himself won the Nobel Prize in Literature for works of history, and the honor was not awarded for accuracy. All history is fiction to a high degree. While there can be historical falsehoods, there is no such thing as pure historical truth, and objective history is a chimera. Everything depends on the premises the historian adopts, which are the product of conditioning or choice. Memory is fallible; facts themselves do not speak. While historians argue, the written word remains. More than anyone, the raconteur makes history in his own image. The reader can bask in reminiscences that may entail a degree of fabulation since, as the Italians say, *se non è vero è ben trovato*. The anecdotes in *Orientations* possess an especial flavor too precious to be lost. Historians conducting a political audit will in such a case miss the point, because the stories themselves provide an admissible version of reality.

Not all of Storrs's best tales refer to himself; in fact, most do not. The reader of *Orientations* will find entertaining and pellucid sketches of figures as well-known as Kitchener and the future Edward VIII. The book even offers fresh detail on Lawrence himself,

about whom there cannot be many new speculations. We are unsurprised to read that "he would have retained his composure if he had been suddenly informed that he would never see a woman again." But then there is this:

> I was standing with him one morning in the Continental Hotel, Cairo, when an elderly Englishwoman, quite incapable of understanding his talk, but anxious to be seen conversing with the Uncrowned King of Arabia, moved towards him. It was hot, and she was fanning herself with the newspaper as she introduced herself: "Just think, Colonel Lawrence, ninety-two! Ninety-two." With a tortured smile he replied: "Many happy returns of the day."

Storrs as anecdotalist is even better when evoking less familiar characters. Harry Cust died young, but not before he had cuckolded the Duke of Rutland and engendered the line of Lady Diana Cooper, John Julius Norwich, and Artemis Cooper. Here he is as a young man:

> As a scholar of Trinity and a barrister-at-law he presented himself in Paris for the *Baccalauréat en Droit* and with three French candidates attained the final select for *viva voce* questioning. "*Messieurs*," demanded the Examiner, "*Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'une théorie?*" His compatriots stared at him and at each other (as well they might) but answered never a word. Harry, his head throbbing with legal jargon and fresh from a generous luncheon of port and fierce black coffee, replied at once as if enouncing a standard definition: "*Une théorie, Monsieur le Juge, c'est une généralisation centralisatrice*." The Examiner, bracing himself and looking intently upon the *insulaire*, requested him to oblige once more. Harry did so, and passed out at the head of the list. He was never able to discover whether his improvisation had been sublime or bathetic, and years later I heard Lord Haldane, after deep thought, pronounce himself unable to decide.

The elements here are the familiar upper-class brew of Anglo-French one-upmanship, amateur improvisation enhanced by the consumption of strong drink, and a well-calibrated name-drop by way of conclusion.

Perhaps the liveliest of Storrs's narrations concerns his direct predecessor as oriental secretary, Harry Boyle (nowadays best remembered for his appearance in Ahdaf Soueif's 1999 novel, *The Map of Love*):

> On most afternoons he walked abroad, dressed with a distinguishing improbability. His coat was old, his trousers bagged at the knee and sagged at the waist, his boots were almost mediaeval in their turn-up. On his head a battered straw hat; rather beyond heel a mongrel but *sympathique* cur: the whole enclosing a man of genius. This very appearance was the occasion of a triumph of resource. He was taking his tea one day on the terrace of Shepheard's Hotel when he heard himself accosted by a total stranger: "Sir, are you the Hotel pimp?" "I am, Sir," Boyle replied without hesitation or emotion, "but the management, as you may observe, are good enough to allow me the hour of five to six as a tea interval. If, however, you are pressed perhaps you will address yourself to that gentleman," and he indicated [the self-made tea magnate] Sir Thomas Lipton, "who is taking my duty; you will find him most willing to accommodate you in any little commissions of a confidential character which you may see fit to entrust to him." Boyle then paid his bill, and stepped into a cab unobtrusively, but not too quickly to hear the sound of a fracas, the impact of a fist and the thud of a ponderous body on the marble floor.

If this story—a world away from mere history—does not make the reader want to acquire *Orientations*, nothing will.

The author's mood darkens somewhat in the fascinating section on his time in Jerusalem. It becomes more somber still in Cyprus, where Storrs did much good on either side of a breakdown in his mental health. He encountered violent demonstrations in favor of union with Greece that culminated in the burning down of Government House and the loss of his entire art collection. In his memoirs, he sometimes tries to make light of this: "I can say of the collection, as of the by-product of a more celebrated leisure, that there was much sport in its making"—a reference to the Earl of Gloucester's boast at the opening of *King Lear*, which would be ruined by further explication. But, in truth, he was shattered, writing that "the background of life has gone; the atmosphere; the past." The English establishment knew it: among the many expressions of sympathy he received was a letter from Queen Mary enclosing a piece of Chinese jade "to commence your new collection with."

Storrs's diplomatic service ended in a Northern Rhodesian anticlimax. It was an odd appointment, and it cannot have been a congenial time, for, beyond a single footnote, Storrs says nothing in his memoir about this final chapter. He was invalided out from the post after only two years, in circumstances of which the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* abjures an explanation. His public and intellectual activities thereafter continued in lower relief. These postdate *Orientations*, which instead ends with a touching epilogue, the equal to any of his narrations. It contains a heartfelt summation of all that was "beautiful in the world's fruit" to him, but Storrs typically punctures the mood of seriousness by adding those things that he is not sorry to have lived without: they include golf, liqueurs, and the music of César Franck. The concluding note is one of gratitude, the final gesture, of this least "Orientalist" of English imperialists, the offering up of an Arab prayer. Here as always, Storrs is not un-self-conscious, but we should not cavil: that is why he wrote so well.

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