

## 16. EPS – Economia Politica Società Travels with Ibn Battutah\*

**Tim Mackintosh-Smith\*\***



Ibn Battutah 1325 Image courtesy Picasaweb

Yemen-based writer Tim Mackintosh-Smith talks to TGD about *Landfalls*, the third and final volume of a trilogy describing his journeys round the world in the footsteps of the inveterate 14th century Moroccan traveller Ibn Battutah.

### **TGD – Can you tell us about your latest book?**

*Landfalls* is the last of three books that describe my travels in pursuit of Ibn Battutah, a famous 14th century Moroccan traveller who was also a student of Islamic law and a judge. His book, “*The Rihlah*” (The Travels) recounts the story of his journeys across the globe which lasted some 29 years. He went off on the pilgrimage to Mecca at the age of 21 in 1325 and he just kept on travelling. It was a bit like a gap year between school and University that got completely out of hand and went on for 29 years.

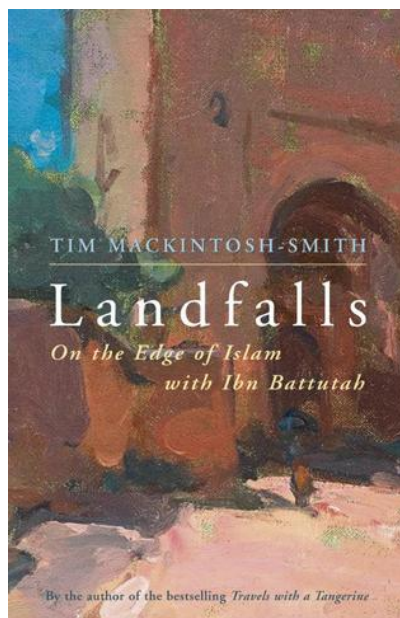
### **How long have you been following in Ibn Battutah’s footsteps?**

I first read Ibn Battutah’s book about 15 years ago, so I have been involved with him for some time. I have been actually following in his footsteps around the world for nearly 14 years now.

### **Can you tell us about the two previous books in the trilogy on Ibn Battutah’s travels?**

The first book was *Travels with a Tangerine* which followed Ibn Battutah from Morocco to Turkey and the Crimea. The second book, *The Hall of a Thousand Columns*, is all to do with the Indian part of his journey. Ibn Battutah spent ten odd years in India where he had some tremendous

adventures, but everything fell apart when he left India and set off as an ambassador to China, bearing a huge, diplomatic gift: thousands of bolts of cloth, silver, gold, slave boys and slave girls and just about everything else. The gift was put on to a ship near Calicut in the south of India but the vessel was lost in a storm. Ibn Battutah himself ended up on a beach after the shipwreck with “nothing but a prayer carpet and a slave boy” – at which point in the story the slave boy promptly bolted! Here begins the last part of his travels and this is where my latest book, *Landfalls*, takes up the story. This begins on an island off the Tanzanian coast and covers the Maldives, Sri Lanka, China, West Africa, Andalusia and home again for Ibn Battutah to Morocco.



### **Ibn Battutah spent some time in the Maldives?**

He went to the Maldives as a tourist, but the locals inveigled him into being their Chief Justice. All that went completely wrong when he decided to plot a coup. He fell foul of just about everybody and had to run away. He ended up wandering around the Indian Ocean, going to Sri Lanka and finishing up in China. He then did a complete about turn and headed home to Morocco, after which he took a quick trip down into the Sahara.

### **How did your interest in the Arabic language begin?**

I studied Arabic at University partly because I was originally a Classicist but I got rather fed up with the fact that it was impossible to say anything new on the subject. It had all been done before and I wanted to do something more challenging.

### **Who influenced you in this direction?**

My father was a great collector of travel books and he was very fond of people like Freya Stark, who went off travelling in Arabia. So I grew up with these travel books from the 30s and 40s all around me. I was inspired to go to the Yemen particularly by Freya Stark. As well, in the mid-70s in London there was the World of Islam festival – they had made a mock-up of the *souq* in Sana'a and that convinced me! I thought, I have to go there!

### **Both you and Ibn Battutah are inveterate travellers.**

Ibn Battutah and I are quite similar, inasmuch as we both set off for the East at the age of 21 and we have both spent a lot of time there. Ibn Battutah was certainly an Arab, but he was very much a “westerner” too, being from Morocco which was the edge of the known world at that time.

**I heard that you also met Wilfred Thesiger?**

Yes, about 20 years ago I did some translating for Wilfred Thesiger. I was in Abu Dhabi at the right time and he was there on one of his visits, being a great friend of the late Sheikh Zayed. He was there looking up old friends including some from the Yemen who had settled in Abu Dhabi. His Arabic was a bit rusty so I translated for him.

**What sort of man was he?**

When I met him he was doing what we all do really. He had settled into telling the same old stories, but in a very brilliant way. I remember the oft-repeated rabbit – or perhaps it was the hare – story, where they had been travelling for weeks on end and were low on food. They finally shot a hare, but as the hare was being cooked some other travellers arrived and greeted them with an *ahlan wa sahlán* and as custom would have it, they offered them something to eat and the hare disappeared before their eyes much to their sorrow, having not eaten anything decent for weeks.

Thesiger was there with some beautiful old men, who were once clearly very handsome boys and they too were telling these same old stories over and over. They were like characters from the Odyssey – it was almost like talking to someone who had been with Ulysses on the island with Calypso.

**Back to Ibn Battutah. What sort of a man was he, at the distance of 700 years?**

I am still fond of Ibn Battutah, despite having spent so much time with him so to speak, mainly because he is a very real person. He did at times try to project a persona but he always failed. He was quite a complex individual: he could be small-minded and self-important while at other times quite a spiritual man. However he was also most certainly a very randy fellow. On his travels, he was trying to make money, trying to make connections, and trying to get laid (which he succeeded in doing left, right and centre!) but as I said, at the same time he does have a deeply spiritual side to him. He will even hare off up the Meghna river in Bangladesh, where I did not follow him, just to see a holy man.

**What kept him moving for 29 years?**

Someone once said that nobody is on just one journey, we are all on a variety of journeys at the same time Nobody is travelling just for one reason. He travelled for three main reasons: enjoyment, enlightenment and to make money. But he was propelled by a very deep faith in Providence. In a sense, wherever he happened to be or whatever he was doing, he felt that he was where he was supposed to be, that he was fulfilling his own fate. This is something that many people don't get when they read Ibn Battutah. He has two important meetings at the beginning of his travels. He meets two holy men in Egypt who tell him that he will travel to the Far East, something that he had no intention of doing at the time. In a way he decided not to stop travelling until he had fulfilled this fate.



Map of Ibn Battutah's travels Courtesy  
the Internet Medieval Source Book

### **So fate and travel are intertwined?**

In this case, yes. There is an element of intelligent design in travel and a strong element of destiny. This is not just blind fate, but more of an attempt to fulfill the fate you are destined to have, a fate that has been revealed to you. To a believing Muslim of the 14th century he would have felt that this was very important. We might call it optimism now, but he would have seen it as putting his faith in Providence.

### **There are moments when Ibn Battutah appears to be something of a charlatan and a hypocrite.**

He wasn't a charlatan. Some people have cast doubt on the veracity of his account, as he failed to even mention the Alhambra or monumental palaces in the Far East for example, but this was probably much to do with a certain "palace fatigue". He would have seen scores of such palaces on his travels. In this day and age we find it surprising as there are so few of these palaces left, but for Ibn Battutah, the world was covered with them.

He does get things wrong however, which is not surprising, especially as he was writing many years after the events he describes. But this is excusable – it could happen even in my case: if I went to China for a few months for example, I would not necessarily know the name of the Prime Minister upon leaving the country. In Ibn Battutah's time, information was very much at a premium, unlike in our day and age, where we are bombarded with information. He lived in an era of information poverty, whereas we are suffering from overload.

As for the charge of hypocrisy, he does at times come across to the reader as a hypocrite, I even called him a "dickhead" in the Maldives, which rather horrified my editor, but he really was just that! He was intent on getting his end away (quite simply thinking with his dick) but in Ibn Battutah's case this was done purely within the confines of the tenets of Islamic law. At the same time, he was ordering divorced couples who were still living together to be hung. He was a mixture of a flogging judge and that actor Terry Thomas!

### **Where has Ibn Battutah taken you that is truly memorable?**

When I write, I write in terms of crescendos. In this book the crescendo came when Ibn Battutah (and I) went to West Africa, to a very small village

out in the sticks in Guinea. In his book “*The Rihlah*”, he mentions a musical instrument which is clearly a type called a bala or balafon – a bit like a marimba. This very instrument is still there in that village in Guinea and, as far as I can work out, is the same one that Ibn Battutah saw 700 years ago. It’s thought of almost as a sacred relic, and they call it the Sosso Bala.

Seeing the actual instrument was interesting but meeting the people that look after it – who are taking care of this relic of folk history that goes back to the 14th century and beyond – was even more fascinating. It was extraordinary seeing something that Ibn Battutah mentioned in his book. The folk memory and the written record came together at that point – for me that was the perfect crescendo.

### **Anywhere else?**

In my India book, Ibn Battutah witnesses a woman becoming a Sati, burning herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. I found the place where that happened and it appeared completely unchanged. These were fascinating moments, when I stepped into history from 700 years ago. It was a bit Proustian. Proust talks about fragments of existence withdrawn from time and the fact that time is not as rigid a dimension as we imagine it to be. This is especially true when travelling. It is fascinating to read someone in the 14th century describing a scene that you can actually step in to in the 21st century – in a sense, time melts away. These are almost little epiphanies.

### **Travelling in the margins of Islam you saw some of the rigid codes of Islam adapted to local cultures in a way that would have horrified some of the hard-liners of Islamic Law.**

Yes, Ibn Battutah was horrified with what he saw on occasions too, but Islam, like all religions, is a fluid moving body of thought and Ibn Battutah was part of that. Ironically, Ibn Battutah was shocked by Ibn Taymiyyah in Damascus, one of the spiritual ‘ancestors’ of Wahhabi Islam. Ibn Battutah was a member of the Maliki school of Islam and he was convinced that he was absolutely right in what he thought. However Ibn Battutah was not overly rigid – it is clear that he was not immune to the way other people thought.

Just going back to the Sati episode in India: when Ibn Battutah describes it, he does so using Islamic legal terms. He explains to his readers that Sati is not a duty but could be seen as a commendable act. This was surprisingly open-minded – many other observers of Sati have not managed to bring such open-mindedness to bear. Despite being shocked, he managed to explain why Hindus performed such acts to his Muslim audience, without dismissing it out of hand.

### **The hermit of Guangzhou must be worth a mention?**

The meeting with the cave-dwelling hermit at Guangzhou in China is a pivotal moment of the trip. This is where many elements of Ibn Battutah’s journey come together – the hermit reveals that they had already met, on a tiny island off the west coast of India. This stitches his whole world together, and defines the intelligent design of travel. In Islamic thinking, caves have an extra temporal dimension, as if they were a portal to another world, so this episode has a rather mystical quality.

**You also have an illustrator for your books and a fellow traveller at times.**

Martin Yeoman is an old friend who really cut his teeth as a travelling artist. He spent a lot of time on the hippy trail in the 70s and ended up penniless. He started doing portraits on the streets of Lahore and when he came back to England some of his works were seen by Sir Brinsley Ford (a great collector and connoisseur) who admired his work. Martin has always been a travelling artist. He has sometimes accompanied the Prince of Wales.

**Living where you do, you are constantly being asked why you haven't taken that final step and become a Muslim. You speak Arabic and understand the faith but remain a Christian – are you weary of having to constantly explain yourself?**

Well, people have stopped asking me partly because my stock response tends to be “What has that got to do with you”? I am a strong believer in proper Islam and proper Christianity being very similar at heart. People who have faith tend to be similar to each other. When I was in Spain in Ronda I was looking at a church which was built on the site of a mosque. The mosque was oriented towards Mecca but the church faces east – there is a 20-degree difference. We all worship the same god but we have different angles on him, that sums it up for me.

**What about the classics: Burton and Doughty? You have given Burton short shrift I heard.**

As an Arabist he was a bit of a fraud and he got a lot wrong. A few years ago I had to write an introduction to his book *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Madinah and Mecca*. I had read and enjoyed it years before, but rereading it I thought to myself: I can't recommend this person at all! He is a bastard! He stays with a very hospitable and nice Indian in Cairo and launches into a diatribe about how unmanly and treacherous the Indians are. He is also a bit of a thug: he beats people up on the boat over to Saudi Arabia. However he does occasionally have moments of sublime transcendence where his grimace relaxes and he becomes a great describer of events. Edward Lear is a far better travel writer. Tennyson actually wrote some verse to praise Lear's diaries of travelling in Greece and Albania: “I read and felt that I was there”, which is the greatest compliment for a travel writer. This is what I am aiming for in my writing.



Tim Mackintosh-Smith Photo ©Jamie Wightman

### **Have you been influenced by other travel books or travel writers?**

Again, Freya Stark – she was a woman who went off and did her own thing in Arabia. Wilfred Thesiger too of course. I am currently re-reading Adam Nicolson's *Sea Room* – a wonderful book. I am not sure it could really be described as a travel book, but it is about truly being in a place. Norman Douglas too is a wonderful writer, and far too little known – he wrote superbly about Italy, in his books *Old Calabria*, and *Siren Land* for example.

Then there are earlier writers, like Samuel Johnson and Boswell, with their travels in the Highlands and Laurence Sterne in his *Sentimental Journey*. Sterne said much about travel that is still true today: “The man who either disdains or fears to walk up a dark entry, may be an excellent good man, and fit for a hundred things; but he will not do to make a good sentimental traveler”.

In short, you always have to be prepared to walk down that dark alleyway. You don't necessarily have to put your life in danger, but you do have to be open to things that are strange and new.

\*Courtesy [The Global Dispatches](#)

\*\***Tim Mackintosh-Smith**'s first book, *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land*, won the 1998 Thomas Cook/*Daily Telegraph* Travel Book Award and is now regarded as a classic of Arabian description. His two books on Ibn Battutah's adventures in the old Islamic world and in India, *Travels with a Tangerine* and *The Hall of a Thousand Columns*, were received to huge critical acclaim. His journeys in search of Ibn Battutah have also been turned into a major BBC television series that has fascinated viewers round the globe. For the past twenty-five years his home has been the Yemeni capital San'a, where he lives in a tower-house on top of the ancient Sabeaean city and next door to the modern donkey market.