

ANDREW LYCETT

## QUEEN OF THE EAST

STAR OF THE MORNING:  
THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF  
LADY HESTER STANHOPEBy Kirsten Ellis  
(HarperPress 464pp £25)

But being well informed just fuels the chronic indignation she seems to have felt since her (forceps) birth. Jenni was reared like all her generation on the rigid principles of Dr Truby King, fed every four hours, left to cry uncuddled, put out in the fresh air, rain or shine. Her mother, like all 1950s housewives, ran her home with ruthless efficiency. 'Take off those shoes,' her mother would bark, 'I've just washed the floor.' 'Don't sit there, I've just plumped those cushions.'

Jenni was indubitably in love with her handsome dad: 'My mother knew it too.' Mother was elegant and slim. Having hefty wrists and ankles and chubby chops, her only daughter 'knew I would never be able to compete'. When her parents went to India, Jenni, left with her grandmother, cast off Alice bands and twinsets, took to black eyeliner and miniskirts and saw forbidden films. A schoolfriend got pregnant by a Lawrentian miner and consigned herself to domestic slavery in a terraced house. All Jenni wanted was to escape Barnsley. Her first love affair, with a Turkish boy, enraged her mother and she left, alone on a bus, for Hull University, where she was bolsy, hated her posh roommate, affected a broad Yorkshire accent and put up a poster called *The Orgasm*. When her mother railed at her fatness, Jenni went on speed and lost four stone. She took up fancy feminist ideas – why didn't her father lift a finger at home? As a student thespian she was raped by a visiting professional actor, an experience briskly dismissed as 'one of the things you put down to experience', but she hopes he rots in hell. She married, divorced, shackled up with a new bloke and had children out of wedlock: she was destined to go on upsetting her mother until the end.

When her mother lies dying, too weak even to hold a spoon, she finally says sorry that she hasn't always shown her daughter love, and tells Jenni she is beautiful. 'It is the first time she has ever paid me an unconditional compliment', Jenni noted in her diary. 'I am 56 years old. I weep all the way home.' It is left to Jenni to upbraid hospital staff for deficient care, and to find a habitable nursing home: 'So you've decided to dump me', says her mother. As always, doing her best isn't good enough. Mother begs her to help her die: 'I resolve, again, to campaign for a law which would enable doctors to assist in suicide.'

When established writers write memoirs they play a cagey sort of game, deploying varying degrees of honesty. The personality memoirists – into which category Jenni Murray must fall – are free to be more honest, explicit, confiding, confessional. Serialised in the *Daily Mail*, this memoir is ideal for the *Woman's Hour* woman. The programme goes on confronting the demographic conundrum of our time: who will care for the elderly population, and nurture the crotchety aged parents we are not disposed to care for ourselves? Listeners, luckily, have forthright Jenni Murray, bruised but not bowed, to tell it like it is.

To order this book at £11.99, see LR bookshop on page 24

IT WAS THE George Cruikshank cartoon that never appeared and the one meeting in her peripatetic career that the wildly adventurous Lady Hester Stanhope funk'd. In July 1816, Caroline of Brunswick, the estranged wife of George, Prince of Wales, was paying a supposed pilgrimage to the Holy Land (in reality, a forced long vacation from her adopted British homeland together with her lover, Bartolomeo Pergami).

The Princess had reached the old crusader city of Acre, close to where Stanhope was living at Mar Elias, a disused monastery in Druze country near Sidon. Word went out that, like most travellers who arrived in those parts, she wanted to meet the extraordinary titled English woman who had turned her back on a life of Georgian privilege and taken to lording it over the Levant, where

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31

LITERARY REVIEW August 2008

she was regarded with mystical awe as the 'Queen of the East' – a role she hammed up by sporting theatrical versions of Arab dress (often male Arab dress).

But Stanhope was wary of an encounter with an unpopular member of the royal family. Suspecting that the meeting between the two flamboyant 'Queens' would be treated with mirth in the public press, she upped sticks and sailed along the coast to Tripoli.

At least that is the version that Kirsten Ellis presents in her intense and readable biography. The author does not entertain another possibility: that Stanhope had taken umbrage at the Princess's widely rumoured affair with Stanhope's kinsman Admiral Sir Sidney Smith.

Not that Stanhope had the right to adopt a moral stance, since she had enjoyed a series of unconventional liaisons of her own. Since living in Lebanon she had developed a taste for dashing Frenchmen – a penchant made more titillating and dangerous because of the political delicacy of Anglo-French relations at the time (just after the Battle of Waterloo). She was also happy to take Arabs into her bed. But she was not known for her consistency either. At that moment she was supporting Sidney Smith in his campaign to abolish the Barbary slave trade, yet at Mar Elias she owned a number of black slaves.

She had been born in March 1776, the product of two closely related but politically differing families, the Stanhopes and the Pitts. Her father Charles, the third Earl Stanhope, was a free-thinking scientist who raised his children in Rousseauian style and supported the French Revolution. He married his cousin Hester Pitt, daughter of the great eighteenth-century Prime Minister William Pitt, the first Earl of Chatham, and sister of a successor in that office, William Pitt the Younger, who batted down the political hatches against Jacobin influences.

As a spirited teenager Hester enjoyed royal and society connections through her uncle. She was drawn emotionally to ne'er-do-wells such as Lord Camelford and Lord Granville Leveson-Gower, whose rejection led her to attempt suicide. Her wit encouraged Pitt to remove her from the radical influence of her father (known as Citizen Stanhope) and install her as his hostess. But she scorned the triviality of the *bon ton*. Although not barricades material, she was excited by the heady internationalism of the Napoleonic era. So after a failed romance (Ellis describes it as erotically charged but not consummated) with a Venezuelan revolutionary, and seeing no future in Britain after Pitt's death, she decided to follow her instincts, hire a doctor companion (Dr Charles Meryon) and live abroad.

The plan was to spend a year in Sicily. In Gibraltar she met Michael Bruce, a rich adventurer of the type she

found irresistible. A relation of James Bruce, the Scottish explorer, he was bound for Greece with the Marquess of Sligo to visit their Cambridge acquaintance Lord Byron.

Lady Hester tagged along. She did not impress Byron, who commented acidly on 'that dangerous thing, a female wit'. But she had fallen deeply in love with Bruce (eleven years her younger) and together they continued to Constantinople, Egypt and Palestine, where she was curious to test a prophecy that she was destined to lead her chosen people back into Jerusalem as 'Queen of the Jews'.

So began the second stage of Lady Hester's life: twenty-seven years in Lebanon, until her death in 1839. In the event her most dramatic entrance was when she braved Bedouin rivalries and travelled across the Syrian desert to Palmyra, where she was feted as a reincarnation of Zenobia, the local queen who had resisted the Romans.

Her greatest achievement was to be accepted as inviolable by fiercely squabbling local pashas. Having sent the dotting Bruce home, she was targeted by visiting French adventurers, dabbling as spies and keen to turn Arabs against their Ottoman overlords and so open up the road to India. But she was anyone's equal in clandestine operations. Once she excavated a crusader's trove, believing it was better to be regarded as a treasure hunter than a spy. When she discovered a remarkable statue of the god Serapis, she had it shattered and thrown into the sea, to prove her disdain for financial reward.

Meanwhile she herself was getting heavily into debt. Increasingly reclusive, living in squalor and surrounded by unhappy servants and feral cats, she dabbled in the occult as a quasi-Sufi.

With Lorna Gibb's biography only three years old, Stanhope's remarkable life is hardly uncharted. But the exploits of headstrong proto-feminists in alien cultures make for good copy and, perhaps, a good film. Ellis writes clearly and objectively, if a trifle too reverentially, and refuses to be swayed by her subject's emotional extravagances. She is excellent on historical detail, particularly the interplay between international and local politics around the Mediterranean.

Interestingly, Lesley Blanch chose not to include Stanhope in *The Wilder Shores of Love*, her enchanting book about European women who found contentment in the Middle East. 'She was not so much seeking fulfilment as a woman,' wrote Blanch, 'as seeking escape from her own nature; she craved power rather than love. To me she always remained a puppet, strutting grandiosely, for ever posturing before an alien landscape she persisted in regarding as her backcloth.'

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Hester: full of eastern promise

32