

nineteenth centuries. Not least because even now most women would think twice before journeying alone in the Middle East. Not only was she the greatest woman traveller of her time – she was the first European woman to risk crossing the dangerous Syrian desert to reach the oasis of Palmyra – but, once in the Middle East, she was also unafraid of getting involved in explosive local politics. She was a trailblazer who inspired other intrepid women, such as Lady Jane Digby el Mezrab, Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, the sort of women who would think nothing of saddling up a camel and disappearing into the desert for months at a time.

Even before her travelling days, Lady Hester had a remarkable life. Born in Kent in 1776, Hester Lucy Stanhope was the child of a short-lived marriage; her mother, another Hester (daughter of Lord Chatham, “the Great Commoner” and Pitt the Elder’s sister), died when she was four. Her hard-drinking bachelor uncle, Pitt the Younger, was England’s youngest-ever prime minister at the time. He liked to tease her that she would never marry as she wouldn’t find a man as clever as herself, but she had no lack of admirers – counting even the greatest dandy of them all, “Beau” Brummel, among them. She survived an eccentric upbringing and would probably have made a society match if the three men closest to her had not suddenly died, leaving her homeless. First went Pitt, racked with gout and spectacularly bankrupt; then gallant General Lieutenant General John Moore, the man she probably intended to marry, who, along with her favourite younger brother Charles, died on the battlefield. Gossip swirled; people said she was suicidal, promiscuous and pregnant – or even worse, poor.

But Stanhope was nothing if not pragmatic. “A poor gentlewoman is the worst thing in the world,” she observed in one of her many letters. She realised that the annual pension of £1,200 (about £70,000 today) that had been Pitt’s dying legacy made her a virtual pauper in the eyes of her peers, but that it would go much further abroad – she had no intention of living modestly in London. She set off for the Mediterranean, soon to be lured via Istanbul to the Middle East, and her reinvention began.

Earlier this year, I went back to the Middle East to see with my own eyes where Stanhope’s journeys had taken her and where she had lived. My visit coincided with American troops invading Baghdad. As we circled Beirut in our Cyprus Airways plane, I wondered whether the timing of my trip was wise. At Lebanon’s borders, Israeli-Palestinian clashes were intensifying; inside the country, Hezbollah’s anti-Israeli, anti-American rhetoric was gathering popular support. There were rumours of a possible US strike against Syria after reports that fleeing Iraqi officials were being offered refuge in Damascus. I wondered what Stanhope, who had been on the frontline of numerous wars (most

notably the Napoleonic wars, skirmishes between Bedouin Arabs and outbreaks of civil war in Lebanon) would have made of my worries. Stanhope became a protector of the local Druze people. Mehemet Ali, the ruler of Egypt and Stanhope’s erstwhile friend, grumbled: “The Englishwoman has caused me more trouble than all the insurgent people of Syria and Palestine.” When he invaded Lebanon in 1832, she defied him, hiring her own army of Albanian soldiers. For six years she offered shelter, food and help to Syrian and Lebanese refugees.

On my first night in Beirut, I met a friend for a drink in the city’s restored downtown district, awash with flashy bars, boutiques, restaurants and luxury home-furnishings stores. On my last visit, this had been a deserted no-man’s-land, with buildings flattened, their rubble honey-combed with shrapnel; today, apartments here can cost £1 million. The scene could not have been more different from the one Stanhope saw on her arrival. She wrote in a letter: “The people are savage and extraordinary; the women wearing a great tin trumpet on their heads and a veil suspended from it.” Obviously, Stanhope, who created her own fashion sensation by dressing like a Turkish man, knew what she was doing. She took to her new appearance with glee, from the tip of her trademark turban-bound fez to her long leather stockings and yellow kid ankle boots. Some years before she fell out with Mehemet Ali, she had visited him in Cairo, dressed to impress in an Ottoman outfit complete with matching garb for her horse that cost £300 (about £16,000 today). She wrote to a friend: “I can assure you that if I ever looked well in anything, it is in the Asiatic dress.”

For much of the time I spent retracing Stanhope’s footsteps, I was based in the predominantly Shiite village of Joun, close to her house, a few miles inland from the seaside city of Sidon. As I drove around, the car would always be flagged down by Hizbollah volunteers canvassing for donations. Checkpoints, tanks and paramilitary soldiers were a constant presence; some days, there were gun skirmishes in the nearby Palestinian camps. It seemed a world away from the refuge that Stanhope created here, importing fruit trees and wild roses from England, along with condiments from Jermyn Street. In the village below the mountain, over orange blossom cordial and generous invitations to lunch, I would be treated – in rapid-fire bursts of Arabic, French and broken English – to stories of Lady Hester, whose fiefdom here everyone called Dar el Sytt, or “place of the lady”.

One great source was Walid Jumblatt, the charismatic Druze leader of Lebanon’s popular Progressive Socialist Party, best known as the playboy-turned-militia commander during the

civil war. As feudal warlords go, few are as flamboyant as Walid, who still retains his own militia and comes from a clan that ruled vast stretches of the region during the seventeenth century. I had come to ask Walid about his ancestor, sheikh Bashir Jumblatt, a powerful man who ruled over vast stretches of Lebanon and Syria during Stanhope’s time, and who had become one of her friends and protectors. Today, Walid Jumblatt still lives with his family in the magnificent stone palace built by the sheikh at Moukhtara. I was ushered through courtyards tinkling with fountains to the main reception room, where Stanhope herself had dined with the sheikh.

His direct descendent strode in – a tall man with a shock of leonine hair and a moustache, all easy affability in jeans and loafers. The Jumblatts

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wanted to compare notes about Lady Hester. “Everyone used to talk about her 50 years ago; everyone knew who she was. But now nobody knows about her,” said Jumblatt’s mother, May. “Was she really a spy sent by William Pitt? Or was she like that Philby: a traitor, a double agent?” They were eager, two centuries later, to gossip about this amazing woman.

What had really sealed Stanhope’s reputation as a legend was becoming the first European woman to enter Palmyra, an oasis in the middle of the Syrian desert, where the ruins of Queen Zenobia’s ancient city can still be seen. At that time this journey through hostile Bedouin territory was regarded as almost unthinkable dangerous, certainly unheard of for a woman. This fact alone made it irresistible to Stanhope, but she was also tempted by all she had heard about Zenobia, who claimed to be a descendent of Cleopatra, and was famed for her beauty, political shrewdness and her energy – not unlike Stanhope herself. I had to see it for myself, but a few days later, at the checkpoint going into Syria, I felt my nerves fray as four brawny guards grimly scrutinised the brightly coloured visa stamp in my passport. Asked to explain where I was heading and why, as a war raged nearby, my reasons suddenly sounded preposterous. For a moment, I felt like a spy myself.

Driving towards Palmyra, I felt the warm desert wind blowing through my hair. The landscape seemed barely changed since Lady Hester’s time, when she came looking for Queen Zenobia’s legacy – another woman searching for stories of a remarkable life.

*Kirsten Ellis’ biography of Lady Hester Stanhope will be published by HarperCollins*



Left, Kirsten Ellis at the Royal Geographical Society. Above right, Frederic, Lord Leighton’s *Gathering Lemons*, set in Damascus

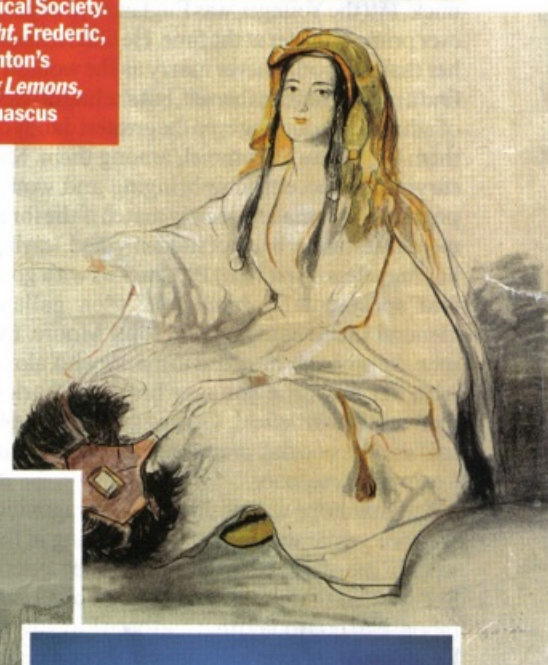
books

## wild at heart

The greatest woman traveller of her time, Lady Hester Stanhope created her own oasis in a hostile nineteenth-century Middle East. Author Kirsten Ellis retraced her footsteps

It’s 10 years since I first heard about Lady Hester Stanhope, the English eccentric who lived in the Chouf mountains of Lebanon almost two centuries ago. I was on my first trip to the Middle East and picnicking with friends among the ruins of Lady Hester’s fairytale palazzo-style house in southern Lebanon. My friends – two Lebanese sisters, a Polish countess and a filmmaker – were visiting their family house which they had not seen for more than a decade, thanks to the chaos of the civil war that had raged since 1975. They told me stories about Lady Hester, the mysterious Englishwoman who lived here for more than 20 years in the early nineteenth century. The clear blue sky was scented with pine but filled with the echoes of muffled gunfire as we picked wild asparagus and yellow daisies from her garden. A fig tree was growing in what was once her bedroom, its stone-cut windows framing a breathtaking vista of the Mediterranean; dragonflies hovered over her grave, desecrated in the recent civil war.

As I began to research further into Lady Hester’s life, I was impressed by her fearlessness. She had pushed the boundaries of what was considered possible – or acceptable – for a woman in the late eighteenth and early >



Clockwise from above, “Djonnî”, the Lebanese residence of Lady Hester Stanhope; a pencil and watercolour sketch of Lady Hester by Sir David Wilkie; ruins at Palmyra; Lady Hester Stanhope, in around 1820, in an Ottoman outfit, complete with matching garb for her horse

