

Medicine, Sexuality, and Barbarism: Orientalist Discourses in O'Donovan's Travels

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Abstract

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of Tsarist Russia into Central Asia drew intense European interest, particularly in regions perceived as strategically significant, such as Turkomania. While most local populations offered little resistance to Russian advances, the Turkmen mounted a determined opposition, culminating in the Battle of Geok Tepe. Concerned that Russian expansion might threaten British interests in India, the Daily News dispatched Edmond O'Donovan, a prominent war correspondent, to report on the conflict. Traveling through Persia en route to the war zone, O'Donovan was barred by Russian authorities from reaching Geok Tepe and instead journeyed to Merv. There, the Turkmen, believing him to be a British agent, detained him respectfully and symbolically appointed him as one of their three leaders, hoping he could secure diplomatic or military support. He remained among them for five months before being sent to Tehran to pursue this mission, which he ultimately abandoned upon his return to England. O'Donovan's experiences were later published in the two-volume travelogue *The Merv Oasis*, which, while providing valuable historical observations, reveals a pronounced Orientalist perspective. In Persia, he depicts local medical practices as primitive and fatal, emphasizing allegedly superstitious ethno-medical methods and sensationalizing homoerotic behavior. In Turkomania, he portrays the Turkmen as barbaric, gluttonous, pleasure-seeking, and culturally primitive. This essay argues that O'Donovan's travelogue, despite his background as an Irish nationalist and anti-colonial activist, reproduces familiar Western Orientalist tropes, constructing the East as a morally, socially, and scientifically inferior space to be observed, interpreted, and ultimately judged by European standards.

Keywords: Ethno-medicine, Homoeroticism, Primitive, Barbarian, Pleasure Seeker, Overeater

Introduction

Nineteenth-century European travel writing occupies a central position in the production and circulation of colonial knowledge about non-Western societies. Far from being neutral records of foreign lands, travel narratives functioned as powerful discursive instruments through which cultural difference was interpreted, categorized, and often hierarchically organized. As Edward Said (1979) has influentially argued, such texts participated in the broader project of Orientalism by constructing the Orient as Europe's cultural opposite: irrational, backward, sensual, and in need of Western guidance. Within this epistemological framework, travel writers did not merely describe the societies they encountered; rather, they actively produced representations that reinforced imperial ideologies and legitimized Western superiority.

Edmond O'Donovan's travelogue *The Merv Oasis* (1883) emerges from this tradition of imperial travel writing, yet it occupies a paradoxical position. Although O'Donovan himself belonged to the colonized Irish community and was deeply involved in anti-imperial activism, his narrative reproduces many of the dominant Orientalist tropes circulating in Victorian discourse. His encounters in Persia and Turkomania reveal a persistent tendency to portray his travelees as culturally inferior, morally deviant, intellectually deficient, and socially primitive. These representations are articulated

through recurring thematic patterns, particularly in his depictions of indigenous medical practices, sexual behavior, and everyday social life.

This essay offers a textual analysis of O'Donovan's travel narrative with a focus on three major discursive constructions: the representation of Persian ethno-medicine as superstition, the portrayal of Persia as a locus of sexual deviancy, and the depiction of the Turkmen as barbaric and primitive. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Orientalist critique, the study examines how O'Donovan mobilizes anecdotal evidence, selective observation, and cultural misinterpretation to reinforce Eurocentric assumptions about non-Western societies. By situating his narrative within the ideological context of nineteenth-century imperial discourse, the essay argues that O'Donovan's text exemplifies how even writers from marginalized European communities could internalize and reproduce colonial modes of knowledge production.

Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that O'Donovan's travel writing does not merely reflect personal experience but actively participates in the symbolic construction of the Orient as Europe's inferior Other, thereby contributing to the epistemic foundations of imperial domination.

Travel Writer and His Journey

Edmond O'Donovan was born in Dublin in 1844 into an educated family. His father, John O'Donovan, was a renowned antiquarian, archaeologist, and scholar of Irish folklore, language, and literature. Despite financial difficulties, his father sent him to a prestigious Jesuit college to study medicine, though he failed to complete his degree. He later worked as an assistant librarian at Trinity College, where he joined the Fenian movement, an Irish revolutionary organization seeking independence from British rule. His active participation in Fenian uprisings led to six months' imprisonment in 1866 ([Foley, 2012a](#)).

After his release, O'Donovan entered national politics and attempted unsuccessfully to win a nationalist seat in the British Parliament. Disillusioned, he travelled to France and America. Upon returning to Europe in 1870, he joined the French army during the Franco-Prussian War, where he was captured and imprisoned in Germany. Following his release, he resumed his political activities and later became a leading figure in the Fenian movement in northern England. At the same time, he established himself as a journalist, contributing to major Irish and British newspapers such as *The Freeman's Journal*, *The Times*, *The Standard*, and *the Daily News*. He reported on the Carlist War in Spain, the Russo-Turkish War, and the Bosnian uprising

against Ottoman rule, which secured his reputation as a prominent war correspondent ([Foley, 2012a](#)).

In 1879, when Tsarist Russian forces under General Mikhail Skobelev advanced toward the fortress of Geok Tepe to subdue the Teke Turkmen, the *Daily News* dispatched O'Donovan to Central Asia. The newspaper selected him because of his knowledge of Persian and Arabic, his familiarity with Jagatai (a Central Asian lingua franca), and his expertise in geography, botany, and engineering ([Foley, 2012a](#)). He first travelled to Georgia and Baku, where he became aware of Russian plans to annex Turkomania. He then proceeded to Persia, visiting several cities, including Asterabad, Rasht, Tehran, Semnan, Shahrood, Bojnord, Kuchan, Sabzevar, Mashhad, and Deregez. In his travelogue, Persia appears as a space dominated by disease, insecurity, chaotic caravanserais, and exotic bazaars. However, he occasionally attempts to present himself as an objective observer of the region.

O'Donovan's entry into Turkomania became possible after he obtained a passport from the governor of Mashhad with support from the British embassy. Although he initially sought to reach the battlefield at Geok Tepe, Russian authorities prevented him from doing so, forcing him to divert to Merv. There, he was detained by local Turkmen who suspected him of being a Russian spy. However, after receiving confirmation from Persian officials of his British affiliation, they granted him limited freedom and

symbolically appointed him as one of the three leaders of Merv. Believing that his presence represented implicit British support, they hoped he would secure diplomatic protection against Russian expansion.

O'Donovan remained in Merv for five months. Despite his desire to leave, he was eventually sent to Tehran as the Turkmen's representative. Yet once he departed, he abandoned his mission and returned to England. During his stay, he mapped the region and documented the Turkmen's social life, customs, food, medicine, and political organization. In 1882, *The Daily News* rewarded him with a substantial sum, which he donated to the Fenian movement. He published his experiences in *The Merv Oasis*, which became an immediate bestseller and introduced Merv to Victorian audiences (Foley, 2012b). O'Donovan died in 1883 while accompanying the Anglo-Egyptian army in Sudan.

Ethno-medicine

One of the recurrent issues addressed by Western travelers in their encounters with non-Western societies is indigenous ethno-medical practice. Their attitudes toward such practices have historically been ambivalent (Arnold, 1988). Prior to the eighteenth century, Western travelers did not generally dismiss local medical systems; on the contrary, when afflicted by illness, explorers and merchants often relied on indigenous healers,

believing that local physicians were “better acquainted with diseases and their remedies of the place” (Arnold 11). However, during the nineteenth century, following major medical developments in Europe—particularly the emergence of biomedicine and germ theory (Headrick, 2010)—Western travelers increasingly rejected non-Western medical systems as superstition and charlatanism (Andreeva, 2007). Travel writing thus became a medium through which indigenous medicine was represented as a sign of cultural backwardness (Michaels, 2003).

Paradoxically, despite their claims to scientific rationality, many Western societies continued to practice folk medicine during this period. For instance, members of the British working class carried rabbit's feet to ward off disease (Cleall, 2012, p. 91). Yet travelers rarely acknowledged such parallels; instead, they emphasized the supposed irrationality of non-Western practices while aligning themselves with the discourse of scientific modernity.

Like many nineteenth-century travel writers, Edmond O'Donovan adopts a dismissive stance toward Persian ethno-medical practices. In his account, he describes the methods proposed by local healers for treating insect bites and presents them as absurd and dangerous:

Some people of the town, hearing of my illness, called to see me, and I was overwhelmed with advice as to the best treatment for my malady. By one I was

advised to eat some clay of the place... Another recommended making up a few of the insects themselves in bread and swallow them... But the oddest remedy of all was proposed by a mullah... He brought with him a large net like a hammock... I was then to be hung from the branch of a tree... I declined... I heard previously from my friend General Schindler... that he once saw this method of cure tried on an old woman, who... was found to be dead ([O'Donovan, 1883, 394](#)).

O'Donovan deploys this episode as a synecdoche for the Persian medical system as a whole, portraying it as barbaric and irrational. He contrasts these practices with European drugs such as quinine and purgatives, which he presents as efficient and scientifically grounded. In the colonial context, such medicines were not merely therapeutic but ideological instruments, used to assert Western superiority and legitimize imperial intervention ([Arnold, 1988](#); [Headrick, 2010](#)). By emphasizing their effectiveness, O'Donovan implicitly constructs Western medicine as a civilizing force while depicting Persian practices as in need of correction and replacement. In a similar vein, O'Donovan warns his readers against consulting Persian physicians, whom he portrays as superstitious charlatans:

Several would-be physicians wanted badly to prescribe for me, but as I knew that every one of them carried an astrolabe in

his pocket... and also... a brass basin in which to roast the fiend who had possession of me, I declined their aid with thanks ([O'Donovan, 1883, 445](#)).

Operating within the discourse of Orientalism, O'Donovan systematically suppresses Persian medical knowledge and fails to acknowledge its historical achievements. As Abdel-Malek observes, Orientalist discourse consistently ignored or denigrated non-Western contributions to science and learning ([Sardar, 1999, 60](#)). Notably absent from O'Donovan's account are references to major Persian medical figures such as Rhazes and Avicenna, whose works were grounded in empirical observation and influenced European medicine for centuries ([Hamed et al., 2013](#)). He also overlooks the long tradition of herbal medicine in Persia, which employed medicinal plants and oils to treat a wide range of ailments ([Ameri et al., 2014](#)). This selective representation reflects what Kabbani (2008) describes as the Orientalist tendency to emphasize only those features that confirm Western expectations and prejudices (71).

The Orient as a Locus of Sexual Deviancy

Since "sex and travel are hardly unfamiliar bedfellows" ([Mahn, 2017, 46](#)), it is not surprising that sexuality occupies a central place in Western representations of the Orient. Orientalist discourse constructed Eastern societies not only as erotically accessible but also as morally deviant and sexually

aberrant ([Said, 1979](#); [Laisram, 2006](#)). Persia, as an Oriental space, was frequently depicted in such terms.

For instance, Richard Burton attributed homosexuality in Persian culture to social restrictions on heterosexual relationships, arguing that young men resorted to same-sex relations due to lack of access to women ([as cited in Kabbani, 2008, 103](#)). Similarly, drawing on Chardin's travel accounts, Matthee (2005) claims that Persian coffeehouses functioned as "houses of sodomy," where dancing boys served as sexual objects for male patrons (170).

O'Donovan reproduces this discourse in his depiction of a banquet in Kuchan, which he labels a "Bacchanalian scene." His narrative emphasizes excessive drinking, physical intimacy between men, and the presence of a young boy presented as a sexual object. Through this episode, Persia is not represented as a space of romantic eroticism, as in the works of Nerval or Flaubert, but rather as a site of moral degeneration and uncontrolled homoerotic desire.

However, O'Donovan's interpretation reflects a fundamental cultural mistranslation. In Persian culture, physical gestures such as kissing and embracing between male friends signify respect, loyalty, and affection rather than sexual desire. His reading is shaped by Western norms, where such behavior is often sexualized. As a result, he projects Western categories of sexuality

onto practices that carry different meanings in their cultural context.

Moreover, O'Donovan strategically censors explicit details, assuming that his Victorian readership would find them shocking. This selective silence allows him to suggest pervasive sexual corruption without providing evidence, thereby reinforcing stereotypes while avoiding confrontation with his audience's sensibilities. He also omits the fact that Islam explicitly condemns pederasty and regards it as a serious moral transgression under both Qur'anic law and Sharia.

Through this narrative strategy, O'Donovan constructs Persia as a space of deviance, immorality, and decadence. By invoking the image of the Roman Bacchanalia, he situates Persian society within a pre-modern moral universe and implicitly contrasts it with Victorian sexual discipline. In doing so, he not only entertains his readership but also reaffirms Western moral superiority and freezes Persian culture within a timeless framework of Oriental excess.

Orientalist Image of the Turkmen

Edmond O'Donovan's original objective was to reach Geok Tepe to document the asymmetrical conflict between Tsarist Russia and the Turkmen. However, due to Russian restrictions on foreign journalists, he was prevented from entering the battle zone and instead redirected his journey to

Merv. During his stay there, O'Donovan exhibits a distinctly Orientalist attitude toward his new subjects. He represents the Turkmen in a consistently derogatory manner, depicting them as uncivilized, pleasure-seeking, gluttonous, and intellectually primitive.

O'Donovan characterizes the Turkmen as barbarians, asserting that "plundering expeditions [against their Persian neighbors are] an everyday occurrence" (1883, 167) and that they openly engage in "traffic in human beings" (37). This representation of Turkmen society as inherently violent and predatory reproduces a familiar trope in Western travel writing. Similar depictions appear in the works of earlier travelers such as Arminius Vambéry, Blocqueville, Baillie Fraser, John Ferrier, and Fred Burnaby. More broadly, this discourse draws upon a long-standing Western imaginary in which Central Asia and Tartary are positioned as the antithesis of civilization, a region historically associated with Genghis Khan's Golden Horde and, by extension, with barbarism and savagery.

In addition to violence, O'Donovan portrays the Turkmen as indolent pleasure seekers whose lives revolve around leisure and intoxication. He claims that smoking the hookah "constitutes an important element in the life of a Turcoman" and that "not half an hour passes" without it being prepared, even during the night (1883, 100). He further asserts that opium consumption and alcohol use are widespread,

stating that "opium smoking and arrack drinking are common and widespread" among the Turkmen (130). Such descriptions construct Turkmen society as morally undisciplined and culturally stagnant, reinforcing the stereotype of the Orient as a realm of excess and self-indulgence.

Another recurrent trope in O'Donovan's narrative is gluttony. As Thomson (2011) notes, Western travelers frequently deployed food and appetite as markers of cultural inferiority. O'Donovan follows this pattern when he asserts that "eating is the main object of a Turcoman's life" (1883, 348) and describes the "insatiable appetite of an ordinary Turcoman" as socially repellent (349). Through such generalizations, bodily excess becomes a metaphor for moral and intellectual deficiency.

Finally, O'Donovan represents the Turkmen as intellectually primitive. To illustrate this claim, he recounts an incident in which local men are unable to correctly interpret an illustrated English newspaper. The image depicts a soldier returning from the Afghan war, surrounded by women offering him a wreath. After prolonged observation, one Turkmen man identifies the central figure as a fish:

After fully three quarters of an hour of deep study and meditation, a Serdar who was present nudged my elbow and, laying his finger upon the middle of the illustration, exclaimed baaluk [fish] (1883, 413).

This anecdote functions as a narrative device through which O'Donovan implies cognitive inferiority. By presenting his subjects as incapable of basic visual interpretation, he reinforces a hierarchical opposition between Western rationality and Oriental primitiveness. Such representations align with the broader Orientalist epistemology that constructs non-Western peoples as developmentally deficient and in need of external guidance or domination.

Conclusion

A war journalist par excellence, Edmond O'Donovan, as a representative of the *Daily News*, undertakes a journey to Geok Tepe in Turkomania in order to report the lopsided battle between the Tsarist Russians, armed to the teeth, and the Turkmen. Before embarking on his main destination—the Geok Tepe region, the battle zone—he spends several months in different cities in Persia. After his stay in Persia, he moves toward the conflict area; however, when he reaches its vicinity, the Russians do not permit him to enter, in an attempt to conceal the scale of their carnage from European observers. Disappointed, he proceeds to Merv, where his Turkmen travelees capture him, believing that he is a British agent and, through his mediation, capable of liberating them from their formidable nemesis. His captors appoint him as their representative to persuade England to support them politically and militarily

in their confrontation with Russian intruders—an expectation that ultimately does not materialize.

After his departure from the Orient, O'Donovan publishes his travel book in which he records his travelers' mores and customs, observations, and experiences in both Persia and Turkomania. A scrutiny of his book in light of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism demonstrates that his travelogue is strongly shaped by Orientalist cultural baggage, even though he himself belongs to the oppressed and colonized Irish community and actively participates in anti-colonial activities with his compatriots against their imperial foe. When in Persia, like many of his predecessors, he reiterates the trope of homoeroticism. By doing so, he draws a rigid cultural boundary between sexually healthy and morally restrained Victorians, on the one hand, and lecherous and licentious Orientals, on the other. To pander to his English and Western readers' sense of sexual morality, he censors the most shocking scenes of what he terms obscene indecency.

Besides emphasizing the alleged sexual depravity of Persians, the traveler also targets their ethno-medicine and represents it as primitive, fatal, and superstitious. This deplorable medical image of his Oriental destination is incompatible with the sophisticated medical traditions of Persia, which date back to medieval times. In this context, he ignores or suppresses Persian medical achievements altogether. Although he does not

explicitly advocate imperial intervention, he nevertheless expresses a strong belief in the necessity of Western medicine as a remedy for Persian modernization.

With reference to his Turkmen travelers, O'Donovan portrays them as Europe's cultural alter ego. For him, they are despicable savages characterized by monstrous appetites. Moreover, from his perspective, the Turkmen are primitive people who derive immense pleasure from plundering and excessive smoking. He is deeply pessimistic about their socio-cultural and economic improvement unless the Russian "civilizing mission" liberates them from their miserable condition, of which, he suggests, they themselves are unaware: "the Russian conquest of the Akhal Tekkes [Turkmen] will certainly be beneficial ... for Central Asia" (1883, 37).

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