

Edmund O'Donovan in Asia and Africa: Literary Journalism at the Edge of Empire

Andrew Griffiths

As a special correspondent concentrating on conflict and foreign affairs, and as a man who described himself as “a Red Indian in patent leather boots,” Edmund O'Donovan built his reputation on border crossings and on the exploration of liminal regions.¹ This chapter focuses on two episodes in his career. The first is O'Donovan's journey to Merv (today part of Mary, Turkmenistan), where he documented tensions in this region poised between Russian, Persian, and British spheres of influence.² O'Donovan's narrative was presented in two volumes and over 900 pages as *The Merv Oasis: Travels and Adventures East of the Caspian During the years 1879–80–81, including Five Months' Residence among the Tekkés of Merv*. The text is structured around his crossings of the Persian border in and out of the territory of the nomadic Turcomans. The second episode examined is O'Donovan's work in the Sudan in autumn 1883, covering Hicks Pasha's expedition against the Mahdist uprising for the London *Daily News*. In both episodes, borders prove to be ill-defined, fluid, and porous. The “linearization” of borders, superseding these vague frontier zones, was, Kerry Goettlich has argued, a process that rapidly accelerated in the late nineteenth century.³ When O'Donovan writes of “the almost *terra incognita* of Central Asia” and of the difficulties of discovering exactly where the borders of Persia lay, his frustrations indicate this late-nineteenth-century shift in expectations.⁴ O'Donovan's work offers a sense of the reality of imperial borders, borderlands and frontiers in this expansionist and boundary-defining phase of late-nineteenth-century imperialism.

Michael Foley has addressed O'Donovan's account of the Merv expedition, focusing on the effects of his Irish nationalist perspective and persuasively locating him within the tradition of literary journalism.⁵ For Foley, O'Donovan's place within the canon of literary journalism is attributable primarily to *The Merv Oasis*. Foley makes the case that the book was not only an entertaining narrative of a reporter's experiences but also “an important work in the development of the concept of journalism as an impartial, objective record of events.”⁶ That commitment to factual accuracy, combined with a “witty, ironic and understated” narrative style, places O'Donovan's work within the terrain of literary journalism as very briefly defined by John Hartsock: “true-life stories that read like a novel or short story.”⁷ This chapter argues that Edmund O'Donovan deployed the techniques of literary journalism to address the complex realities of life in the borderlands of central Asia.

O'Donovan's prose imagines clearly demarcated lines between empires and states but in practice often describes loosely defined borderlands and frontier zones. His combination of personal narrative with journalistic observation and analysis allows his work to accommodate the tension between the two. By taking this approach, O'Donovan exposes the limitations of imperial power in contested regions with limited connection to global/imperial communication networks. Terminology is important to this line of argument. Following Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, this chapter uses “frontier” to describe the edge of a state or empire expanding into an “empty” region, and “borderland” to designate a zone in one or more nations “that is significantly affected by an international border.”⁸ Both terms are distinct from “border,” which implies a clearly demarcated line. Critical ideas about frontiers

and borderlands have largely been developed by historians of the United States; they are equally applicable to the history of imperialism in Central Asia and Africa. Recent historians of British imperialism have often focused on connectivity and the emergence of a globalized world through the nineteenth century.⁹ Using borderlands and frontiers as a lens helps both to refocus attention on the limits of connectivity and the gaps in the global network, the very things that O'Donovan chose to engage with in the late nineteenth century.

O'Donovan's reports from central Asia describe borderlands in which affiliation and allegiance are arbitrary and central administrative control is purely nominal. These borderlands are also frontiers, zones of contact between settled states (Persia and the Russian Empire) and the territories of nomadic Turcoman communities. O'Donovan's reports from (and death in) the Sudan also illustrate the challenges inherent in projecting and maintaining imperial power in a geographically remote frontier region. In the regions O'Donovan describes, borders were experienced as processes—they produced dynamic effects on the lives of the people of the frontiers/borderlands. This has implications for O'Donovan's writing. When he writes about a border crossing, a double construction takes place. By investing significance in acts of border crossing, he constructs the border. In so doing, he also constructs an event worthy of his readers' notice. To borrow a concept from Daniel Boorstin, O'Donovan's border crossings are pseudo-events.¹⁰ Yet by the very act of crossing, he also draws attention to the actual permeability and impermanence of political borders in his dispatches, exploring the effects of the border on communities on both sides. The border is simultaneously magnified and diminished. Achieving this effect requires the ability to combine journalistic analysis of the geopolitical situation with engaging personal narrative. That stylistic flexibility, complicating structure and voice in order to examine the border at both literal and symbolic levels, is characteristic of literary journalism.¹¹

Edmund O'Donovan as Literary Journalist

With the exception of Foley's work, O'Donovan remains neglected by scholars. Little academic work has focused on his writing, despite a degree of celebrity at the time of his death that may be measured by the publication of notices or comment in regional and national newspapers and periodicals as diverse as the jingoistic *John Bull*, the campaigning *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, and the popular illustrated weekly, the *Graphic*.¹² O'Donovan features briefly in more broadly focused work on Victorian special correspondents by Catherine Waters and Andrew Griffiths. In these works, O'Donovan stands as an example of the special correspondent as a type, but his prose is not examined in detail.¹³ Relatively little work has discussed British (or Irish) travel writing in Asia, with most studies focusing on Africa, India, and the settler colonies. Those studies that do address nineteenth-century British writing about Asia tend to take that writing as source material for studies of geopolitics or imperial rivalry. Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game* and Martin Ewans's *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, in both of which O'Donovan's writing features, stand out as recent examples of this type of work.¹⁴

It is necessary, then, to place O'Donovan's writing in the context of his life and of the journalistic traditions in which he operated. Born in Dublin in 1844, he was raised in the atmosphere of the Gaelic revival and Fenianism. O'Donovan Rossa, the prominent independence campaigner and eulogist of dynamite campaigns, was a frequent visitor to

O'Donovan's childhood home. Edmund O'Donovan served a prison sentence for his involvement with the Fenian movement, for whom he wrote a pamphlet on the use of the rifle.¹⁵ His writing, then, cannot be read as straightforwardly pro-imperial in the manner of leading special correspondents like Archibald Forbes, G. A. Sala, or G. W. Steevens. This adds complexity to O'Donovan's position at Merv, where the Turcoman people regarded him as the representative of the British government and a conduit for the negotiation of an alliance. In his correspondence for the London *Daily News*, O'Donovan was an outsider scrutinizing British imperialism from within. That perspective informed O'Donovan's approach to his work as a special correspondent. As Michael Foley has argued, "O'Donovan came from a tradition of journalism in Ireland that saw impartiality as a form of protection." For a nationalist Irishman, "impartiality was itself subversive" in its implicit rejection of the imperial perspective.¹⁶ That impartiality was combined with a holistic approach to reportage, addressing not just politics "but also . . . science, geography and ethnography."¹⁷ In O'Donovan's work, the Irish tradition combined with the increasingly well-established practices of Victorian special correspondence.¹⁸

The rise to prominence of the special correspondent coincided with the emergence of the new journalism from the 1880s, with its emphasis on personal style and accessibility to readers. Isabel Soares has presented the new journalism of this period as "proto-literary journalism".¹⁹ Griffiths argues that "novelistic style" was a distinguishing feature of the special correspondent in the age of the new journalism and has gone further, making the case that that Victorian special correspondents, including Henry M. Stanley and George Warrington Steevens, merit a place in the history of literary journalism.²⁰ The distinctive writing of special correspondents was distinguished by such features as an emphasis on the projection of the writer as a character in their own narrative, vivid "word painting" to illustrate scenes and the provision of a vicarious experience for the reader.²¹ Kevin Williams has remarked on their self-mythologization and the critical importance of "vivid and engaging prose."²² Waters notes that the "fresh and bright and readable" reportage valued by Victorian reviewers gave the best of the special correspondents' writing "the peculiar ability [...] to survive the news it was devoted to reporting".²³ O'Donovan's writing style certainly fitted this template: "he writes lucidly, eloquently, strongly, and unaffectedly," noted one fellow special correspondent.²⁴

It is not necessary to search far in O'Donovan's work to identify examples of vivid, personally engaged prose. O'Donovan's intensely visual description of Persian fortified villages in *The Merv Oasis* is just one of many possible examples:

The hues which they put on in the evening are indescribably gorgeous. The clay walls glisten like gold in the slanting rays, and the flowers in the leaves of the trees above glow with gem-like tints till each village rampart with its battlements and towers, and the patches of deep blue sky beyond and between, looks like a mural crown set with rubies and turquoises.²⁵

If O'Donovan exoticizes and generalizes in this passage, the effect is certainly as vivid as any editor could require. The description is of a type rather than a specific example; literary style seems to have been prioritized over accurate representation. The strength of O'Donovan's writing, however, is in the ability to switch tone and engage the reader directly.

For example, he explains that the villages of the Persian-Turcoman border were not wholly picturesque:

To people at a distance, the petty miseries one undergoes in such a place may seem more laughable than otherwise; there they do not at all tend to excite hilarity in the sufferer. [...] Dinner involved a perpetual battle with creeping things, and was a misery that seldom tempted one's appetite.²⁶

The exoticism is diminished here, the comical aspects of the experience are acknowledged, and the reader is taken into the journalist's confidence. This type of literary journalism offers the reader a vicarious experience and invites the reader, explicitly in this instance, to adopt the writer's perspective. For O'Donovan, this was a deliberate strategy: the combination of personal experience with political analysis was central to his appeal to readers.

In the preface to *The Merv Oasis*, O'Donovan is at pains to emphasize these features of his writing:

I have on every possible occasion introduced illustrative anecdote and personal adventure, not only to lighten the general narrative, but also as the best possible method of conveying to my readers the nature of the surroundings amidst which I was placed, and the character of the people with whom I had to deal.²⁷

A notice in the *Quarterly Review* following publication of *The Merv Oasis* indicates the success of O'Donovan's strategy. "Even the interest of the personal narrative pales before that of the journeyings themselves," writes the anonymous reviewer. The book contains "wonderful pictures of social life in Persian towns and cities, or among the nomads of the wilderness" and "brilliant depictions of the scenery," all in addition to "revelations of the political condition of the Persian empire and its barbarous Eastern neighbours."²⁸

As Matthew Rubery and Waters have both argued, and as this mixture of personal narrative, visual description, and political analysis suggests, the writing of special correspondents certainly occupied a liminal space on the border between literature and journalism.²⁹ That liminality helps to explain O'Donovan's desire to assert the reliability of his information: "All the information contained in these volumes relative to the [Merv] oasis and its population is derived directly from the fountain-head."³⁰ O'Donovan's eyewitness status stands as the central claim to authority: as Norman Sims has observed, "literary journalists put themselves squarely in front of the reader."³¹ This combination of factual accuracy and vivid, novelistic style locates O'Donovan's writing firmly within the territory of literary journalism.

In Central Asian Borderlands

Edmund O'Donovan's reputation as a special correspondent was largely secured by his journey to, and residence in, the oasis city of Merv between 1879 and 1881. Contemporaries referred to him as "the man from Merv."³² Part of the city of Mary in modern-day Turkmenistan, Merv was surrounded by Russian, British, and Persian zones of control. Waning Persian power had left its borders ill-defined and poorly protected. The region was in a state of flux. Merv had nominally been subject to the Shah of Persia until a frontier agreement with Russia in 1881, ratified while O'Donovan was in the region, which included

secret clauses committing Persia to a policy of non-intervention in the affairs of Merv.³³ Russia was pursuing a policy of expansion in the Trans-Caspian region, progressively encroaching into Turcoman territory. Merv would be annexed by Russia in 1884. To the south, Britain sought to establish a pliable Afghan client state in the Anglo-Afghan War of 1878–80, as a buffer against Russian expansion. The nomadic Turcoman peoples inhabiting the region around Merv had the misfortune to find themselves in a friction zone created by the plate tectonics of imperial politics. O'Donovan's brand of literary journalism had the stylistic flexibility to address questions of great power politics and the lives of the region's people.

O'Donovan's two-volume account of his journey to and from Merv is constructed around two border crossings. The first volume recounts his efforts to reach the northeastern border of Persia and then to cross into Turcoman territories. The second volume relates O'Donovan's efforts to leave Merv and cross back into Persia. The long-form style was a product of circumstance. The remoteness of Merv and the conditions of his period in the city made it impossible for O'Donovan to send regular copy to his employers at the *Daily News*. Instead, he published his experiences as *The Merv Oasis* on his return to Britain, before embarking on a highly successful lecture tour. Without the limits on space imposed by newspaper editors, O'Donovan was able to pay attention to various aspects of the region beyond the immediately newsworthy matter of Russian expansion. He was also able to deploy a range of prose styles to communicate his experiences. The material conditions in which O'Donovan wrote encouraged a literary journalistic approach and shaped his representation of the central Asian borderlands.

The Persian border itself is uncertain and fluid, with a wide borderland subject to raiding by communities on either side and subject to pressure from Russian forces close to the Caspian Sea. Despite its centrality in O'Donovan's narrative, Persia's border is, for the most part, unremarkable, ill-protected, and difficult to identify: "I had to procure a pass to the limits of Persian dominions on the north, wherever they might be. The last was a hard point to determine."³⁴ Neither the Persian Prime Minister nor officials at the British embassy were able to pinpoint the exact border. Debates with Russian officers on the issue generated more heat than light.³⁵ O'Donovan later reflects that "[t]his was rather comical, for Persia had always laid claim to Merv as one of its dependencies."³⁶ Despite the clear difference between the extent of Persia's territorial sovereignty (that is, the actual reach of Persian legal jurisdiction) and the theoretical location of her borders, the border with Turcoman territory is accorded considerable significance in the text.³⁷ O'Donovan presents it as the boundary between civilization and barbarism, between modernity and primitivism, and between settled and nomadic communities. Crossing the border helps O'Donovan to lay claim to the status of explorer, in a manner familiar from imperial travelogues. Magnifying the significance of the act of crossing borders is a deliberate narrative strategy focusing attention on the author, while addressing political issues through personal encounters helps to identify O'Donovan's work as literary journalism.

O'Donovan achieves this magnification partly by presenting Persia as standing on the fringes of civilization and modernity. In the late nineteenth century, efforts to modernize state institutions and governmental practices were hampered by the government's limited power. Nonetheless, with typically Victorian faith in the narrative of progress, O'Donovan offers an

optimistic assessment of Persia's prospects: "The attempt to engraft European modes and procedures in the heart of a thoroughly Asiatic people promises well. The Shah has certainly done his best in face of the accumulated inertia of centuries, but even his nominally unlimited power has sometimes to recoil before the prejudices of the people."³⁸ In an unshakably Eurocentric tone, O'Donovan goes so far as to hope that "surrounded as it [Persia] is by nineteenth-century progress, something will in the end be done."³⁹ These lines seem to set O'Donovan firmly within the traditions of late-Victorian travel writing, with its sense of "optimism that the creation of wealth, progressive science-based change, and religious redemption might all be promoted to the mutual advantage of Britain and overseas areas."⁴⁰ Certainly, O'Donovan remarks on the potential for agricultural and economic development as he passes through rural Persia. He also observes evidence of the limits of the Shah's power in the nation's borderlands; residents of northern and eastern regions "are terribly in awe of their marauding [Turcoman] neighbours." Travel to a frontier town "was looked upon as a most perilous if not wholly insane undertaking."⁴¹ In O'Donovan's representation, Persia's Turcoman border was the frontier of civilization. It is his literary-journalistic combination of macro-scale analysis and personal witness that makes O'Donovan's claim persuasive.

The borderlands are shaped by cross-border contacts of various kinds. O'Donovan observes, for example, how trading relations shaped community behavior, judging that "The hospitality of the desert has been a good deal impaired, in the case of the Yamuds along the Persian border, owing to their contact with their more than usually mercenary Persian neighbours, and with the ready-monied well-paying Russian authorities."⁴² Living close to a border had a transformative effect, whether in this relatively benign fashion or in a much more hostile manner, as in the region where "[t]he whole face of the country is dotted in every direction with towers of refuge, like the peel towers that once existed so numerous in the towns on the Scottish border. The whole plain is filled with fortified villages."⁴³ Borders do not exist as lines in this text but as broad zones of "debatable ground" where the traveler could expect no "guarantee of security."⁴⁴ The references to peel towers and "debatable" land (another term historically associated with the Scottish borders) are significant. By these terms, O'Donovan indicates that he is traveling through a borderland on the frontier of modernity. His choice of language firmly frames the reader's perspective.

As those references to the history of the Scottish border suggest, the relationship between past and present—another border—is significant in the text. O'Donovan is able to slip seamlessly into a historical register. Agricultural practices in Persia's provinces are "decidedly Homeric," and recall images on "antique vases."⁴⁵ At the northeastern border city and pilgrimage destination of Meshed (Mashhad), a mosque reminds O'Donovan of a "Gothic cathedral," while a lone minaret suggests an old Irish round tower.⁴⁶ In a rhetorical move of the type analyzed by Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other*, the inhabitants of the borderland are banished to an earlier point in the Victorian teleology of progress.⁴⁷ To O'Donovan, that progress appears increasingly threatened as the border approaches. Navigating across a "dry, stony, trackless plain" by starlight, he follows a line of telegraph poles and reflects on the strangeness of "these vestiges of advanced civilisation in the midst of such surroundings!"⁴⁸ O'Donovan's choice of language is significant: presenting the telegraph poles as "vestiges" of the modern underlines the vulnerability of modernity in this

environment. The telegraph line becomes an emblem of the encounter between civilization and that “accumulated inertia of centuries”:

The condition of the line was such that it puzzled me to guess how messages could be transmitted along the wires. The insulators were dilapidated in a manner incomprehensible to me at first, but which was accounted for when I learned that they were regarded by the natives as excellent objects on which to test their skill as marksmen.⁴⁹

Modernity is physically threatened by a nomadic borderland community which does not share “the Western sense of property and sovereignty”; O’Donovan’s readers are reminded that these are not universal values.⁵⁰ O’Donovan’s link to the European sphere of cultural influence—and to his employers at the *Daily News*—grows more and more tenuous as he travels east towards the Persian–Turcoman border.

The second volume of O’Donovan’s Merv experiences begins with a mountain crossing affording a view deep into the territory of the Turcoman nomads, and another stylistic shift. Building on the sense of unease established at the end of the first volume, O’Donovan describes a powerful sense of foreboding about the border crossing. In a remarkably vivid description of his first glimpse of Turcoman territory, O’Donovan magnifies the significance of his departure from Persia:

Backing up the view was a vast spread of vague distance reaching away to the horizon—the dim, terrible Turcoman waste over which my road lay. At the height at which I stood, the scene was panoramic. Hill and dale, rock and plain, stood out with a stereoscopic distinctness which recalled the luminous vision of a camera lucida. Camel trains wound like worms along the thread-like roads. Here and there buffaloes were ploughing; and parties of horsemen rode to and fro. There were all the evidences of life, save that of sound, as we gazed over the huge, silent expanse. As I turned away from the mountain peak on our downward journey, I paused again and again to contemplate the unaccustomed scene, and more than once the thought recurred, whether it was not a picturesque grave which lay before me.⁵¹

The border crossing is presented as a matter of life and death. The landscape description fits neatly into the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” trope identified by Mary Louise Pratt.⁵² O’Donovan lays claim to the landscape by means of his description. The references to the stereoscope and the camera lucida, image-capturing technologies, and to the aesthetic category of the picturesque draw attention to the *capturing* and *ordering* qualities of O’Donovan’s imperial gaze. There is an assertion of ownership here that is not apparent in O’Donovan’s earlier descriptions of the Persian landscape. It is a complex assertion of ownership, however. Given O’Donovan’s history of resistance to imperialism, it should be interpreted as ownership of a personal, rather than an imperial, type. And while the premonition of death with which the passage closes helps construct the sense of heroic individualism that characterized the work of the special correspondents, it also undercuts that sense of ownership, foreshadowing ways in which the imperial gaze is reversed later in the text.

O’Donovan still had some distance to travel before crossing the actual border. Beforehand, he had to traverse a border district whose people “were fully as ready for a foray into the Tekké country as the Tekkés could be to raid on them.”⁵³ The regional governor was – in O’Donovan’s judgement – deliberately vague as to the exact location of the border.⁵⁴

Russian officials, fearing that O'Donovan was a British agent ready to act against their military moves in the region, created administrative delays.⁵⁵ The actual border crossing is an anti-climax. When O'Donovan finally leaves Persian territory, the much-heralded border crossing takes place in the "gap" between two chapters, the first ending with O'Donovan departing from Kaltachenar (Chenar), "the last village acknowledging the Persian authority in that direction," and the next opening with commentary on Askabad (Ashgabat), a town in Turcoman territory.⁵⁶ Askabad is temporarily depopulated, the inhabitants having fled from advancing Russian forces.⁵⁷ Despite the anti-climax of the crossing, O'Donovan emphasized the peril of his position: "Askabad was evidently no safe halting-place for me . . . Cossacks were still scouring the plain in pursuit of the fugitives".⁵⁸

Outside Persia, O'Donovan's position is precarious; it is also defined by others' perception of him. O'Donovan demonstrates this with another stylistic shift, this time to a self-reflective mode. His British citizenship trumps his former opposition to empire, and he is enlisted as a reluctant representative of the British state. On arrival at Merv, O'Donovan is the subject of debate about whether he is a guest or a captive, a hostile emissary of Russia or a representative of the British government. He becomes a great center of curiosity in the region, subject to the gaze of others:

The strange cut of my tunic and riding breeches seemed to create an unquenchable thirst on the part of those who had seen them once to see them again. During the first month of my residence at Merv I might be said to have lived in the interior of a much-patronised peep-show, in which I was the central—and, indeed, the only object of attraction.⁵⁹

The reversal of the imperial gaze is plainly an uncomfortable experience; before he is eventually permitted to leave, O'Donovan fears becoming "demented" from the "utter wearisomeness" of being "constantly intruded upon."⁶⁰ Oppressed by finding himself forced into the position of Other, O'Donovan "resolved to adopt the attire of the country."⁶¹ Intriguingly, after his return home O'Donovan embarked on a lecture tour, and provoked "much amusement . . . by arraying himself in Turcoman attire."⁶² Abetted by metropolitan audiences, O'Donovan reverses the gaze once more, transforming the clothing of the Central Asian steppe into pure spectacle. Perception and power depend on one's position relative to the border.

O'Donovan's position at Merv was secured by the consensus among the Turcoman leaders that he must be a representative of, or at least a conduit to, the British Government. This placed considerable demands on O'Donovan in this period of friction between empires. Fearing Russian attack and overestimating his power to summon British forces to their aid, "[t]he Mervli unanimously resolved to put themselves under British protection, and to hoist the British flag."⁶³ This decision made, O'Donovan reports being "told that I was to be . . . representative of the English nation, and intermediary between the Mervli and the English Padishah. I had over and over again protested that I had no pretensions to represent the British government . . . All my efforts were in vain."⁶⁴

By this strange turn of events, the once-imprisoned Irish Nationalist found himself compelled to represent the British Empire. Nevertheless, O'Donovan's position remained insecure; he was honored as a foreign emissary and admitted to the counsel of the ruling Khans but was not permitted to leave Merv for four months. Throughout this time, he was

conscious of the risk posed to his safety by the ascendancy of pro-Russian factions in the region's politics. When he did leave, he was permitted to do so on the understanding that he would represent Merv as an ambassador.

O'Donovan's eventual return to Persia brings a revealing description of border controls and an observation about the relationship between mapped borders and actual political control. He travels toward the border anxiously, expecting at any moment to be waylaid and compelled to return to Merv. "Whatever line may be drawn upon maps," reflects O'Donovan, "neither Chacha, Ménéh, nor Dushakh, is really on Persian territory. . . . Until the mountain ridges are reached the ground is independent territory. Once southward of the first Persian fort, I might consider myself as perfectly at liberty."⁶⁵ The theoretical border is of no consequence; what matters is the extent to which power and the rule of (Persian) law may be projected. The final extent of Persian power is marked by the ruins of "a gigantic wall . . . built of alternate horizontal bands of huge cut stone masses, and red brick, as one sees in the old ramparts of Constantinople." This structure has been replaced by "a wretched rubble wall . . . with a rude gate in the middle" and a "rude watch tower" where "some Persian soldiers were on guard."⁶⁶ The new border wall seems insubstantial and impermanent in comparison to the ancient structure. O'Donovan's description of the physical border infrastructure indicates the decline of Persian power. The switch of focus from the personal to the political and historical reflects his sense of security as he moves back into the Persian zone of control.

The decline in the physical architecture of the border matches a wider sense of anti-climax. Of the two major border crossings around which O'Donovan's Central Asian narrative turns, one is not described at all and the other is much diminished. This is despite the weight the text places on the border as a cultural fault line, imagined in binary terms as the point of contact between modernity and backwardness, between settlement and nomadic life, and between civilization and barbarism. Through its focus on O'Donovan's experiences and personal contacts the text also offers a more human perspective. By describing life in the borderlands, the text reveals the overdetermination of border lines. The complex play of style and voice that marks the text out as literary journalism accommodates a tension between the geopolitical and the human that reflects the political realities in the region.

Suspicious of Russian imperialism, O'Donovan sympathized with the Khans as they deliberate the best line of policy in difficult circumstances. His extended sojourn at Merv produced rich descriptions of the cultural practices of the Turcoman nomads. Through O'Donovan, readers learn about the construction of tented homes ("very similar to a gigantic parrot-cage"); law and justice ("On bazaar days the Khan in person . . . often inflicts summary punishment with his stick"); lack of military preparation (the Turcomans displayed "extraordinary *insouciance*"); and different concepts of time ("These good people, who begin counting at sunset, and again at dawn, dividing the entire cycle into twenty-four hours, were surprised at the absurd and unphilosophical basis on which we Westerns found our calculations").⁶⁷ In offering a glimpse of alternative ways of living and understanding the world, O'Donovan's literary journalism provides a space for the "neglected . . . transnational subjects" whose stories have been marginalized by histories "that privilege rootedness."⁶⁸ In the early 1880s, borders were rapidly closing in on these particular transnational subjects. Borderlands and frontiers in this portion of Asia were shortly to be replaced by linear borders

through annexation and treaty; as Kerry Goettlich argues, “the global linearization of borders . . . reached a climax in the late 19th century.”⁶⁹ With its simultaneous overdetermination and diminution of borders, O’Donovan’s text is shot through with the tensions produced by that climax. At the same time, he offers his readers an engaging first-person narrative.

Sudan and After

O’Donovan’s dispatches from his last expedition, to cover Hicks Pasha’s failed attempt to suppress a religious uprising in the Sudan, describe a frontier in a region notionally subject to a triple imperialism. Sudan was a possession of Egypt, itself formally still a part of the Ottoman Empire. In practice, executive power was in the hands of the British Agent in Cairo. Baud and van Schendel describe national borders as “imagined projections of territorial power”; the southern border of the Egyptian Sudan was just such a work of the cartographic imagination.⁷⁰ The Sudan south of Khartoum was a frontier region in which government existed only in pockets, allowing the charismatic Mohammed Ahmed, the Mahdi, to build support for his efforts to construct a society governed by Islamic law.⁷¹ The term “frontier” has typically described the zones along which nations or empires expand into “empty” territory.⁷² Southern Sudan qualified as a frontier in 1883 because a militant portion of its population rejected the European vision of a world divided into territorially defined states. Historians have devoted considerable energy to the investigation of imperial communications, outlining the global network or web of connections that existed by the late nineteenth century.⁷³ As a special correspondent, O’Donovan’s role was to provide a human connection in the “vast, complex and technical imperial news system.”⁷⁴ In the first days of November 1883, Hicks’s army vanished into a gap in the global network.

The little writing O’Donovan managed to send home was characteristically wide-ranging. Dispatches from his journey from Suakin to Khartoum covered topics as diverse as flora and fauna (O’Donovan was “most disquieted by the presence of enormous spiders”), geology, the state of trade and the practicalities of watering camels at desert wells.⁷⁵ At Khartoum, O’Donovan described the state of Hicks’s army. Underlining the notion that southern Sudan was a frontier zone, O’Donovan notes that “some of the regular battalions . . . looked upon their despatch to the Soudan as a form of exile.”⁷⁶ Once the march from Khartoum began, O’Donovan’s dispatches grew shorter. On October 8, 1883, his dispatch of September 30 had reached London; it is clear that conditions were worsening as the army proceeded deeper into the frontier zone: “The heat is intense. The camels are daily dying in considerable numbers, but we hope to be able to carry all the biscuits to the end.”⁷⁷ The soldiers marched in formation, prepared for attack. The *Daily News* filled space by printing more of O’Donovan’s description of his earlier journey to Khartoum. Just as had been the case with *The Merv Oasis*, circumstances favored a literary journalistic style, rich in personal impressions and descriptions. Once again, the difficulty of getting copy to the *Daily News* seems to have prompted them to include more descriptive, first-person narrative.

O’Donovan sent a final, brief message on October 10, which was published on November 20; the column had halted for three days while seeking a water supply. Extracts from a private letter to his editor, dated September 30, were also featured in the November 20 edition. The editor’s decision to include this material adds to the sense that this is both

personal narrative and factual journalism, with a highly personal address to the reader. O'Donovan reports that "the prevailing opinion is that we are running a terrible risk in abandoning our communications with the Nile, and marching almost 230 miles into unknown country." In the same letter, O'Donovan reports that he has been told that this will be his last opportunity of communicating with London for weeks.⁷⁸

Rudolf Slatin's memoir fills in a little of what happened next:

One passage in Colonel Farquhar's diary I well remember; he wrote, "I spoke to Mr O'Donovan and asked him where he thought we should be eight days hence? 'In Kingdom-Come,' was his reply." O'Donovan's journal was also written in much the same strain. . . . In another passage he [O'Donovan] wrote, "I make my notes and write my reports, but who is going to take them home?"⁷⁹

On November 23, 1883, the *Daily News* carried a report headlined, "Terrible Disaster in the Soudan. Hicks Pacha's Army Destroyed." Hicks's force had been ambushed close to El Obeid on November 3 and annihilated over two days of fighting; just a few camp followers survived.⁸⁰ O'Donovan is presumed to have died during these days, though there is no first-hand account of his death.⁸¹

So ended a career engaged with the borders, borderlands, and frontiers of European empires. From a marginal position as an Irish nationalist, O'Donovan made himself a household name among the late-Victorian newspaper-reading public. His identity as a special correspondent was built on border crossings and his texts are built around the act of crossing into unfamiliar territory. As a special correspondent writing literary journalism, he was both a transgressive figure and a familiar guide for his readers, paradoxically magnifying the significance of borders before showing how readily they could be crossed. O'Donovan's writing from the Merv expedition offers a glimpse of the borderlands and/or frontiers of Central Asia in the last months before border treaties and annexation by Russia regularized the borders. While O'Donovan's reportage from the Sudan was curtailed, the loss of the Hicks expedition clearly demonstrated the limits of imperial control and of imperial communications in the mid-1880s. Almost exactly fifteen years later, in autumn 1898, Kitchener's army established control over Sudan with a comprehensive and bloody victory over Mahdist forces at Omdurman and a tricky negotiation with a French outpost at Fashoda.⁸² O'Donovan's career as a literary journalist is a record of some of the last irregularities in the climactic late nineteenth-century phase of the "global linearization of borders."⁸³

Notes

¹ Bullard, *Famous War Correspondents*, 231.

² I have followed O'Donovan's rendering of place names for clarity, indicating in brackets the modern name where it seems helpful to readers.

³ Goettlich, "The Rise of Linear Borders in World Politics," 203–4.

⁴ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 2, 174; O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 11.

⁵ Foley, "The Reporting of Edmond O'Donovan," 221–36.

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- ⁶ Foley, "The Reporting of Edmond O'Donovan," 221.
- ⁷ Foley, "The Reporting of Edmond O'Donovan," 228; Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 22.
- ⁸ Baud and van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," 213, 215-16.
- ⁹ See Potter, *News and the British World*, 1-11; and Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks," 124-41.
- ¹⁰ See "Extravagant Expectations" in Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America*, 3-6.
- ¹¹ Sims, *True Stories*, 12.
- ¹² "Foreign Intelligence," 815; "The Disaster in the Soudan," 295; "The Disaster in the Soudan: Portraits of Some of the British Officers," *Graphic*, 3.
- ¹³ See Waters, *Special Correspondents*, 190, 205, 217-18; and Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire*, 36, 48.
- ¹⁴ Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, 404-5, 442; Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 80.
- ¹⁵ Hourican, "Edmund O'Donovan."
- ¹⁶ Foley, "The Reporting of Edmond O'Donovan," 221-22.
- ¹⁷ Foley, 223.
- ¹⁸ For a fuller account of the links between Irish specials reporting on empire and the development of Irish journalism, see Foley, "Colonialism and Journalism in Ireland," 373-385. Helen O'Shea has also written about work of Irish special correspondent John Augustus O'Shea in highlighting the contribution of Irish soldiers and administrators to British imperialism. See O'Shea, "Cyprus on the Brain," 213-245.
- ¹⁹ Soares, "Literary Journalism's Magnetic Pull," 130.
- ²⁰ Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire*, 39; Griffiths, "Literary Journalism and Empire: George Warrington Steevens in Africa, 1898-1900," 61-65; Griffiths, "An Anglo-American Encounter in Africa: Henry M. Stanley in Abyssinia, 1868," 19-22.
- ²¹ For a full discussion of the specials' style, see Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire*, 8-47.
- ²² Williams, *A New History of War Reporting*, 17-18.
- ²³ Waters, *Special Correspondents*, 56.
- ²⁴ O'Shea, "Explorers I Have Met," 104.
- ²⁵ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 386.
- ²⁶ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 459.
- ²⁷ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, ix.
- ²⁸ "The Merv Oasis. By Edmund O'Donovan," 195.
- ²⁹ Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers*, 11-13; Waters, "Much of Sala and but Little of Russia," 319.
- ³⁰ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, vii-viii.
- ³¹ Sims, *True Stories*, 18.
- ³² Waters, *Special Correspondents*, 205.
- ³³ Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 85-86.
- ³⁴ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 11.
- ³⁵ O'Donovan, 259.
- ³⁶ O'Donovan, 361.
- ³⁷ For a fuller discussion of the distinction between "territorial sovereignty" and "linear borders" in the study of international relations, see Goettlich, "The Rise of Linear Borders in World Politics," 207-11.
- ³⁸ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 358.

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- ³⁹ O'Donovan, 358.
- ⁴⁰ Bridges, "Exploration and Travel Outside of Europe, 1720–1914," 59.
- ⁴¹ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 431–32.
- ⁴² O'Donovan, 227.
- ⁴³ O'Donovan, 383.
- ⁴⁴ O'Donovan, 199.
- ⁴⁵ O'Donovan, 439.
- ⁴⁶ O'Donovan, 492, 498.
- ⁴⁷ See Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 11–21.
- ⁴⁸ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 1, 403.
- ⁴⁹ O'Donovan, 403.
- ⁵⁰ Campbell, "Travel Writing and its Theory," 269.
- ⁵¹ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 2, 29.
- ⁵² Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 201–5.
- ⁵³ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 2, 31.
- ⁵⁴ O'Donovan, 38.
- ⁵⁵ O'Donovan, 54.
- ⁵⁶ O'Donovan, 66.
- ⁵⁷ O'Donovan, 65–73.
- ⁵⁸ O'Donovan, 72.
- ⁵⁹ O'Donovan, 125.
- ⁶⁰ O'Donovan, 392–93.
- ⁶¹ O'Donovan, 141.
- ⁶² Waters, *Special Correspondents*, 206.
- ⁶³ O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis*, vol. 2, 86.
- ⁶⁴ O'Donovan, 271.
- ⁶⁵ O'Donovan, 453.
- ⁶⁶ O'Donovan, 454–45.
- ⁶⁷ O'Donovan, 139, 161, 149, 167.
- ⁶⁸ Hämäläinen and Truett, "On Borderlands," 346.
- ⁶⁹ Goettlich, "The Rise of Linear Borders," 211.
- ⁷⁰ Baud and van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," 211.
- ⁷¹ James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 274–75.
- ⁷² Baud and van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," 213.
- ⁷³ For an overview of this field, see Potter, "Webs, Networks and Systems," 621–646; and O'Hara, "New Histories of British Imperial Communication," 609–25.
- ⁷⁴ Griffiths, *The New Imperialism, The New Journalism and the Fiction of Empire*, 28.
- ⁷⁵ [O'Donovan], "The Soudan Expedition," September 22, 1883, 5.
- ⁷⁶ [O'Donovan], "The Soudan Expedition," September 21, 1883, 5.
- ⁷⁷ [O'Donovan], "The Soudan Expedition," October 8, 1883, 5.
- ⁷⁸ [O'Donovan], "The Soudan Expedition," November 20, 1883, 5.
- ⁷⁹ Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, 242.
- ⁸⁰ Green, *Armies of God*, 165.
- ⁸¹ O'Donovan is commemorated in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral on a memorial to the six war correspondents killed in Sudan between 1883 and 1885. Bullard, *Famous War Correspondents*, 246.
- ⁸² Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa*, 539–56.
- ⁸³ Goettlich, "The Rise of Linear Borders," 210.

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