

SAUDI-BRITISH SOCIETY

THE RAWABI HOLDING AWARDS 2015

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY IONIS THOMPSON

It's a great pleasure to be up here, looking down on you instead of down there looking up at others on the podium. It's a great pleasure and also a great honour: I'm treading in the footsteps of people far more distinguished than I am and far more worthy of the award.

I want first to thank Abdulaziz al Turki most warmly for initiating this award in 2007 and continuing to award it every year since. I would like to thank Sherard for proposing me as a recipient this year and Committee for supporting me.

Tonight I would like to talk about Saudi-British friendship. My association with the Kingdom began in 1976 when my husband was appointed to advise the Industrial Development Fund. We families of those advisors arrived in a Riyadh just beginning its great expansion of the 70s. Life at that time was quite far simpler and more unsophisticated than it was when we returned in the late 80s. But it was a time of great friendships, wonderful experiences in the desert and enormous fun. Explorations into the desert at weekends began then and continued when we returned to Riyadh in the late 80s and early 90s. Eventually in 1994 I made a record of these trips for those who came after in a book *Desert Treks from Riyadh* which, to my great astonishment, shot up the best-seller lists – in Riyadh. It has recently been republished by Gilgamesh Publishing and has been translated into Arabic.

It was in those journeyings of ours up and down the Kingdom, from Jubba in the North (with its amazing rock art) to Najran in the South (with its crenellated wedding-cake-like mud palaces), the Red Sea coast in the West, in and out of the Empty Quarter, that we witnessed the legendary hospitality for which Arabs are famous. I'd like to give you some examples of this. We once visited in the Asir mountains of the West the village of al Munki – you won't have heard of it – an exceptionally pretty village on a hill with tall tower houses crenellated at the top, each floor a room painted with bright strips of primary colour. As soon as we arrived, people rushed out of their houses vying with one another to invite us for lunch. We accepted one of these invitations and sat with the family on cushions in one of these beautifully decorated rooms and were given lunch. On another occasion, at Eid, we were again with a group of friends travelling in the Asir when my husband made a courtesy call on the Emir of Al Baha. On hearing that he was camping in the vicinity with a group of families the Emir absolutely insisted on all of us coming to his Eid Majlis, together with all the local dignitaries. In we bounced, men, women and very grubby children who behaved particularly badly during the Majlis, to our embarrassment. The Emir, however, smiled patiently and invited the adults among us to his evening Eid feast, again including us women, which was a great honour and kindness. Can you imagine the converse: how many people in this country would invite a group of strangers to share their Christmas lunch. On another occasion we met someone who pressed us to join him for dinner, taking a sheep from his flock to show what

he would kill and cook for us. When we refused as we needed to be back in Riyadh before midnight he grabbed the sheep by the horns, opened the back door of our 4W drive and tried hard to press the sheep into the car with us. This to me was the epitome of generosity.

A few years ago I was asked to lead a tour of Saudi Arabia under the auspices of this society. Our group had a splendid leader in Badr, a local guide who knew the historic sites of the Kingdom like the back of his hand. His idea was that we should not just visit ancient places but to meet the people who lived in the towns and villages we passed through. He took us to his father's farm right in the middle of the wonderful Nabataean site of Medain Saleh, sat us on rugs under the palm trees and served us an excellent lunch. Near Sakkaka al Jouf he found a local family who were happy to welcome strangers into their home and answer their questions about life in Arabia today. The women of the group went with the women of the house, men with the men of the house. We badgered our hosts with a series of intimate intricate questions about their way of life, which they answered patiently. The reason we women were able to do this was that the girls of the family were studying English at university – indeed one was studying not just English but Chaucer and Beowulf. This shows how advanced some women's studies are even in outlying parts of Saudi Arabia.

I taught English as a foreign language all over the place and this gave me an unequalled opportunity to meet Saudi women from all parts of society. I gave lessons in the philanthropic organisation, al Nahda, in private homes (where a morning lesson was occasionally interrupted by the whole class getting up to dance to Arabic music, their hips swaying in a way I never mastered but very much enjoyed), to princesses in palaces and to young women in very poor homes indeed where the only furniture was one chair and a small wooden table. In this way I made friends with Saudi women whom I could never otherwise have easily met and was always treated with great affection and courtesy. It was something rather special about Saudi Arabia that a teacher would be invited to dinner in the homes of her students: an experience which gave me an unparalleled view of Saudi homes which too few expatriates experience.

We were able to counter this cultural experience one New Year's Eve when we introduced Saudi friends to the joys of Scottish Country Dancing: it was good to see Saudi enthusiasts for the Reel of the 51st.

On our return to this country after some 12 years there altogether, intrigued by some of the archaeological mysteries we had observed in our desert travels, I took a course in Arabian archaeology at UCL, went on some digs in nearby Sharjah, and became Hon. Sec. of the Society for Arabian Studies (now the British Foundation for the Study of Arabia). In 2004 I became Hon. Sec. of the SBS, which continued my interest in the Kingdom and its people. It has been a fascinating experience arranging events which bring the people of our 2 communities together. We've heard from Saudi students in London and hosted members of the Majlis as-Sura. But probably the best of all our events in bringing a closer understanding of the Kingdom was the private visit we arranged to the exhibition at the BM entitled *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* in 2012. This gave a truer picture of Islam than many non-Muslims would ever otherwise have had. The next big exhibition we hope to see in this

country, which has been touring the world, *Roads of Arabia*, will open eyes when it arrives in England to the part played by Saudi Arabia on the periphery of empire and the treasures to be found in its prehistoric sites.

Saudi-British friendship goes back a long way, of course. Early Western friends of the Kingdom were mostly British. St. John Philby and Capt Shakespear were particular friends of King Abdulaziz, and travellers like Thesiger loved the desert and its people, as we did.

The explorations we undertook and the friends we made in those years will never be forgotten and I do hope Britain and Saudi Arabia continue to be as good friends in the future as they have been in the past.

The ME is a sadly different place from what it was in the heyday of our time there. I will allocate some part of my generous award towards alleviating the sufferings of women and children.