

SAUDI-BRITISH SOCIETY

THE RAWABI HOLDING AWARDS 2013

Acceptance Speech: Peter Harrigan

Thank you Sherard for your kind words. And thanks to Mr Ibrahim and Rawabi Group Chairman Sheikh Abdulaziz Al Turki for providing this generous prize. But most importantly thanks to the Saudi British Society for thinking I deserve such an award. It is a surprise, but a great honour for me to accept it. I would also like to congratulate my fellow award winner the Late Rt Hon Lord Charles Denman who is represented here tonight by his son Richard.

Lord Denman, ladies and gentlemen. Dear Friends.

For 35 years I have had the immense pleasure of enjoying all that Saudi Arabia has to offer. For that I owe most to my long suffering Saudi friends I have never tired of these remarkable people and their country's memorable landscapes and rich culture.

The changes which I have seen over the past three decades have been mind boggling. On a recent visit I struggled to drive 300 miles in Riyadh navigating bold new urban highways and streets, entirely new districts, skyscrapers and constructions sites. Everywhere I drove was in parts of the capital that simply did not exist when I first arrived in 1980.

Riyadh now is a city of six million. In the next 20 years it will be in the world's top 25 largest metropolitan centers.

But what I've enjoyed most during my time in the Kingdom are the vast spaces that beckon beyond the ever-expanding urban centres. And I thank the Saudi people for first showing me the wonders of their country and its seas, islands and reefs. I like the modest understated minimalists most. I admire most my Saudi friends who toss bed rolls, water, tea, the essential coffee and dates and some meagre provisions into a truck or fishing boat. Yalla! You are in free fall...and the adventure begins.

Of the 14 features I've contributed to Saudi Aramco World Magazine it was those themes like camels and Bedouin trackers that I enjoyed researching, photographing and writing on most. Readers' responses have made me recognise how the country and its people spark international curiosity and a thirst for understanding.

My old friend and mentor Peter Voll who passed away last month was an American pioneer in educational travel and former head of Stanford University's Travel program. He led study groups to Antarctica, Siberia, chartered the first cruise ship around Arabia, and organised the first educational tour groups to Saudi Arabia.

Whenever we were travelling together in the region he would invariably remind me that in his 50 year travel industry career spanning most of the globe his view was "Saudi Arabia might be frustrating at times but for me and real travellers seeking education there is nowhere else on the planet that makes such an exciting, bewildering and rich destination."

Saudi Arabia is complex. It's like an iceberg: we only observe the small portion sticking out of the ocean. This is what makes it so fascinating and intriguing.

One of those fascinations is of course the Arabian horse and as some of you know fate and chance have led me to write, speak and publish about these wonderful four-legged purebred desert Arabians. But I must confess I've always been a camel man. For me the camel sums up much of the essence of Saudi Arabia: it too is stereotyped, maligned and misunderstood. Yet words in the Holy Koran show amazement for it and Arab poets have long sung its praise. My unfulfilled dream still is to publish a glorious book on the camels of Saudi Arabia. For without the camel the desert Arab tribes and their dromedaries; the horse, saluki and falcon would not have thrived.

Sir Ahmed Mohammed Hassenein (an Oxford educated, Egyptian fencer and explorer) wrote in *The Lost Oasis*: "The qualities of a camel are seldom if ever appreciated on a slight acquaintance. The camel is as clever as a horse, if not more clever, and in some ways is more human."

And just like the camel, Saudi Arabia does not need cynics or apologists. I learnt about those cynics and loaded stereotypes in my early days. They would retort: 'desert – you mean that place you pass on the way to the airport.' So instead I sought to express my emerging interest in what might lie beyond those compound walls -- something our British employers then would frown over.

What I found was a Saudi Arabia that needs and appreciates straightforward, pragmatic, curious and well-meaning friends. I believe all of us here fit into this category of engaged centrists.

The stereotype is of Saudi Arabia as an arid sand desert in a cultural wilderness too. On both counts, this is far from the truth.

In a few weeks time tenders for Riyadh's visionary public transport system will be submitted to the Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA). The project's scale is such that the tenders will be delivered in trucks.

A six-line metro with nearly 100 stations is planned totalling over 100 miles in length with lines in deep tunnels, subsurface, on and above ground. London's 73-mile long Crossrail, currently Europe's largest infrastructure project, now being tunnelled just a few hundred yards from here; has already been 10 years in the making. In Riyadh, where construction work is soon to start, the first metro lines will start operating in five years' time, likely before Crossrail carries its first passengers. Riyadh's metro system will be integrated with a network of bus rapid transit systems due to start operations next year. Creating the capital's new public transport system is taking a budget equivalent of America's total spending on transportation over the next five years.

Now Jeddah, Makkah and Dammam are following Riyadh with plans for their own metro systems. A national railway system is now under construction as part of a wider regional network.

Four economic cities around the country (100 km north of Jeddah, Hail, Madinah and Gizan) are under construction funded by the private sector. New planned high tech districts are springing up within and around existing cities. Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District is nearing completion less than five years after construction started and is larger than Manhattan. A nano-technology district is soon to open in the capital and King Abdullah

Sports City is under construction 60 km north of Jeddah. The new Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University (PNU) in Riyadh is the world's largest and most modern women's institution of higher education in a self-contained higher education city with its own light railway.

Culturally, one of many stereotypes suffered by Saudis is that they are austere and lacking in humour.

Again the reality is very different. The Ramadan special TV social comedy *Tash ma Tash* brought it into the limelight 20 years ago and new comedy programs pushing boundaries have followed. Humour has always been evident not far from the surface – albeit in the usual understated style. Hilarious video clips of Saudi life proliferate virally. Stand up comics are one of the latest rages.

As well as those stand-up comics there are filmmakers, artists, photographers, internationally award winning authors, and yes even girl bands. They are all now found in the Kingdom, evidence of new and unconventional ventures by a vanguard of youth.

Haifa al Mansour's film *Wadjda* is about a 10-year-old girl living in a Riyadh suburb, who wants a bike. It has received critical international acclaim around the world and looks set to become a classic of Middle Eastern cinema.

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction supported by the Booker Prize Foundation is one of the most prestigious and important literary prizes in the Arab world. This year (2013) the Saudi novelist Mohammed Hassan Alwan is on the shortlist. Saudi writers took two prizes over the last three years.

Saudi art is attracting serious international collectors and exhibitions. Ahmed Mattar's work called *Magnetism* was a hit at the British Museum's Hajj Exhibition.

A major driver of Saudi's international acclaim is the King Abdullah Scholarship program with 145,000 young Saudis studying in more than 30 countries.

King Abdullah's daughter, Princess Adelah, has a son among 3,000 Saudis studying in China. In a recent interview, Princess Adelah said that young Saudis now studying abroad will "absolutely" change Saudi Arabia "to the better."

Over a third of those enjoying the scholarships abroad are women. More than half of Saudi graduates are females and the number of women actively participating in the Saudi workplace is rising fast. Women are now entering new fields like engineering and are becoming lawyers. They have key positions in health, science and research. Just this week came the announcement that Saudi women will now work in thousands of pharmacies.

Of course there are challenges. Recall that now famous Saudi newspaper cartoon showing a set of car keys attached to a hand grenade. It's still fizzing.

On a political level, Saudi Arabia was ranked 184th on the world's list of the percentage of women in its fledgling parliament the Majlis al Shura. Then, like Qatar, it had no women in its appointed parliament.

However things changed: last month King Abdullah nominated 30 Saudi women for the new four-year Shura. It propelled Saudi Arabia up more than 100 places to 80th place. That's well ahead of the USA, Ireland, Russia, India and Brazil for the percentage of women in parliament. Saudi women also hold important diplomatic posts in Canada and the United States and are fast emerging leaders in the regional and international business community.

The Saudi press is enthusiastically covering the developing role of women in Saudi society. It is one of the big stories and conversations.

My favourite headline in my hoard of Saudi English language newspaper clippings announces the drive to provide women jobs by removing non-Saudi male salesmen from thousands of lingerie stores. The headline reads: "FOREIGN MEN TOLD TO GET OUT OF WOMEN'S CLOTHING."

Saudi Arabia is now confidently projecting outwards as seen with the blockbuster exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* at the British Museum (2012) and the Arabian horse exhibition *From Arabia to Royal Ascot* at the same museum.

The Saudi Equestrian team thrilled and charmed the world at the London 2012 Olympics at Greenwich with stylish world class showjumping and picked up the Olympic Team bronze medal. The Saudis are now sponsoring the Nations Cup, renamed *Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup*.

The *Roads of Arabia* exhibition launched at the Louvre and which is now on tour in the USA showcases the rich archaeology, treasures and history of Saudi Arabia. It reveals that what is now Saudi Arabia was not a closed peninsula: it was intricately connected to the rest of the ancient world.

This remains the crucial point today. Young Saudis are hyper-connected through social media. The country's mobile penetration rates are an astonishing 190 per cent which means that, on average, almost every Saudi has two phones. A higher proportion of Saudis use Twitter and YouTube than almost any other nation on earth. Google reports Saudi Arabia has the world's highest volume of image-sharing. Like its majority young generation who are shaping its future, Saudi Arabia is far from an isolated backwater – it is vitally connected.

Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Turki, states that through the Rawabi Holding Award his aim "*is to encourage us British to enhance our knowledge of this remarkable country, especially in the wake of the rapid growth and great prosperity and change being witnessed.*"

Mr Ibrahim will you please thank Sheikh Abdulaziz for reigniting my own and indeed our combined enthusiasm and interest in Saudi Arabia and its heritage and future.

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