



All the Roads Are Open: The Afghan Journey

Annemarie Schwarzenbach, Isabel Fargo Cole

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In June 1939 Annemarie Schwarzenbach and fellow writer Ella Maillart set out from Geneva in a Ford, heading for Afghanistan. The first women to travel Afghanistan's Northern Road, they fled the storm brewing in Europe to seek a place untouched by what they considered to be Western neuroses. The Afghan journey documented in *All the Roads Are Open* is one of the most important episodes of Schwarzenbach's turbulent life. Her incisive, lyrical essays offer a unique glimpse of an Afghanistan already touched by the "fateful laws known as progress," a remote yet "sensitive nerve centre of world politics" caught amid great powers in upheaval. In her writings, Schwarzenbach conjures up the desolate beauty of landscapes both internal and external, reflecting on the longings and loneliness of travel as well as its grace. Maillart's account of their trip, *The Cruel Way*, stands as a classic of travel literature, and, now available for the first time in English, Schwarzenbach's memoir rounds out the story of the adventure. *Praise for the German Edition* "Above all, [Schwarzenbach's] discovery of the Orient was a personal one. But the author never loses sight of the historical and social context. . . . She shows no trace of colonialist arrogance. In fact, the pieces also reflect the experience of crisis, the loss of confidence which, in that decade, seized the long-arrogant culture of the West."—*Süddeutsche Zeitung*

All the Roads Are Open: The Afghan Journey Details

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Regina says

Though in times overly romanticising, an impressive read. For a deeper understanding it is worth reading the afterward first. Especially Schwarzenbachers thoughts about travelling expressed often in poetic words and her observations of the beginning industrialisation of the regions she travelled through got me.

Schwarzenbacher's travel companion Ella Maillart's book about the trip, *The Cruel Way*, has to be the next read...

Barbara says

Una donna insofferente, l'ansia costante di viaggiare, di raggiungere nuove mete.

Un racconto a metà strada tra le considerazioni personali, quasi un diario intimo e la descrizione dei luoghi visitati.

Incredibile pensare alla grande ospitalità offerta alle due donne in viaggio dal popolo afgano, ospitalità data senza riserve sia da personalità di rilievo che dalla popolazione più povera, in un paese in cui le donne non avevano alcuna rilevanza sociale, ma a questo punto la scrittrice si sofferma su un pensiero che può lasciare perplesse: "...ma queste donne erano davvero infelici? Si può desiderare solo ciò che si conosce. Ed era giusto, necessario, istruirle, informarle e far nascere in loro il pungolo dell'insoddisfazione?"

Aldilà del femminismo più sfrenato che opporrebbe subito una risposta al vetrolo, bisogna sempre considerare le circostanze che portano una popolazione a stabilire il proprio ordine morale e sociale prima di partire per crociate che raramente portano a qualcosa di buono. L'emancipazione parte da lontano e credo non possa essere imposta in alcun modo, è un processo lento che deve toccare le coscienze, partire dal basso e non essere imposto dal di fuori.

Mely says

Travelogue of a visit to Afghanistan by Swiss German lesbian radical shortly before WWII. Lots of lovely landscape descriptions, people exoticized if in a well-meaning way, more focus on architecture and landscape than people. (It is so odd to me, how little she mentions people even when she's talking about cities.) I probably wouldn't have read it if it hadn't been translated by a friend, and it's very slow, but I liked the prose enough that I am interested in Schwarzenbach's fiction.

Colleen Clark says

I found this book while browsing at Politics and Prose in Washington, DC. Hooray for bookstores.

I had never heard of Schwarzenbach nor Ella Maillart, her companion on this trip. Indeed, this narrative is newly (2011) translated into English.

It's the narrative of a trip by car, driven mostly by Schwarzenbach herself, in 1939 from Switzerland to India.

Both women were Swiss and both were already published travel writers. Maillart was born in 1903 and Schwarzenbach in 1908.

This account is Schwarzenbach's and she does not mention Maillart specifically; she refers to a companion or says "we." A lot of the writing is discursive and poetic. It's definitely not a travel diary. Although it's just 130 pp it covers a lot of geographic, sociological, and personal territory. For example she writes about the Hindu Kush from the perspective of her living in the Alps. She writes about Afghan women. And so forth.

The 6 sections are entitled Mt. Ararat - from the Balkans to the border of Iran; The Steppe - driving across Iran to Herat, Afghanistan; The Women of Kabul; The Bank of the Oxus - where she did some archaeology in Afghan Turkestan near Mazar i Sharif; Two Women Alone in Afghanistan; and Onward to Peshawar (now Pakistan, then still part of British India) - first over the Kyber Pass and later up the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal.

An exotic book about exotic places.

Pi. says

Este libro es un grande suspiro. Esta mujer transpira tristeza pero a la vez todo es bonito.

Dan ganas de ir a Afganistán (por supuesto).

Chiara Rasi says

"Why do we leave this loveliest country in the world? What urges us to go east on desert roads?" Is it the desire to explore remote lands, getting to know different and more archaic cultures, escaping the ferocity of war, or we need to forget our own problems and afflictions? This book is all this together, and much more. A woman describes her adventurous journey through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and more east, up to India. Seas, mountains and deserts. But this journey is nothing like a holiday of a rich spoiled young lady (which she could have been, giving her family background). It's desolate and sad landscapes to get lost into, because where can you find the peace of mind if not in a desert?

Margaret says

This was not what I expected/wanted it to be which is why the low rating. It was more disappointed expectations maybe. If you want to read about a young woman's travels through Asia, this isn't it. It was more a musing on somethings that she had seen and felt as opposed to a travelogue. But if you don't want details, it might warrant 3 or 4 stars.

BrokenTune says

This a combined review of All the Roads Are Open: The Afghan Journey and The Cruel Way: Switzerland

to Afghanistan in a Ford, 1939. Quotes are taken from *The Cruel Way*.

"The gist of our dialogue had been that if she was mad I was mad too: I was unwilling to let myself be strangled by that prudent life that everybody advocated. I also was convinced that— whether we succeed or not— it is our job to search for the significance of life."

The Cruel Way and *Alle Wege Sind Offen* (published in English as *All the Roads are Open*) are two accounts of an incredible road trip. In 1939, Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Ella Maillart - both women were Swiss journalists and experienced travelers - set off from their native Switzerland on the eve of WWII to escape the madness of Europe and drive (yes, drive) across Europe, Turkey, Persia (Iran) to Afghanistan (and India if they can reach it).

Though, the wish to escape was probably more AS' motive. EM quite openly discusses that her motive was to help her friend (AS) to shake a morphine addiction and to recuperate from bouts of depression - descriptions of both are described quite vividly and (as far as I can tell) earnestly in *The Cruel Way*.

Maillart's book (*The Cruel Way*) was published in 1947 (five years after AS' death), and on request of AS' family, Maillart disguised AS as the character Christina.

Schwarzenbach's account *Alle Wege Sind Offen* was published in 2008, though some of her articles were published during the trip.

I originally started reading *Alle Wege sind Offen* - a journal of her third and last journey from Switzerland to Afghanistan. When I reached the part where she non-nonchalantly mentions that she drove the car into a ditch, I was curious to see what impact this had on her travels and most of all how her travel companion, Ella Maillart, experienced the accident - and whether it would be mentioned in Maillart's book.

It made sense to read both in parallel. Reading both books in parallel was like being told the story in 3D.

It was also quite gut-wrenching. AS' writing is lyrical and reflects her anxieties and weariness. I'm not sure this is deliberate. It feels more like her writing is inevitably the only true way she can express herself. EM hints at this in her book, too.

"She was harassed by her fight with the doctors: they would not understand that writing was life and food to her, that the regenerative cure of enforced rest applied to dyspeptics and hysterics could not suit her."

EM's writing is a contrast to that of AS - no aloofness to be found here. She's fairly grounded and practical. Because of that, more of the actual circumstances of the trip are revealed.

"Our descent was impressive. The track had been hacked out half-way down a sandy slope. Christina drove, sitting towards the mountain— which was lucky: from my seat it looked as if our off-side wheels were in the void. At some places the crumbling soil was stiffened with a row of faggots. While we skidded round sharp curves, the glistening shale reminded me of the icy track the ski-racers had rushed down six months ago at Zakopane. I said nothing: to this day I am sure that Christina never guessed how soft that ledge was."

Having read the two accounts and looking at how not only the lives of AS and EM but how the world they describe would change shortly after their accounts end, makes for tough reading.

"I am thirty. It is the last chance to mend my ways, to take myself in hand. This journey is not going to be a sky-larking escapade as if we were twenty— and that is impossible, with the fear of Hitler increasing day by

day around us. This journey must be a means towards our end. We can help each other to become conscious, responsible persons. My blind way of life has grown unbearable. What is the reason, the meaning of the chaos that undermines people and nations? And there must be something that I am to do with my life, there must be some purpose for which I could gladly die or live! Kini . . . how do you live?"

The reward for having read both books is that I get a better understanding of the world they traveled, a world that would disappear shortly after the trip. That I learned much about the attitudes of travelers and people they meet, attitudes sometimes so liberal and forward thinking that it is surprising and terrifying to know that only a few decades later it would seem that the countries they have traveled in had always been closed to visitors.

Justin Evans says

I confess, my enjoyment of this has much more to do with Schwarzenbach's life than it does the actual text, which is less expressionistic than the (slightly absurd) 'Death in Persia,' but also not noteworthy in itself. If the author had been a dull school-master, there'd be no reason to read it. The author was not a dull school-master, and it's published by Seagull with all that publisher's usual finery and attention to detail, so I imagine I'll pick it up again at some point.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Abigail says

Sto amando questo libro alla follia..

Fiona says

Whilst reading this particular travelogue I found it useful and so very fascinating to refer to The Literary Archive of the Swiss National Library.

<http://www.nb.admin.ch/aktuelles/0195...>

More than 7000 photos from Annemarie Schwarzenbach's estate are also available in the NL's archive database, HelveticArchives. I find that these resources breathe such life into her writings.

<http://www.helveticarchives.ch/suchin...>

Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Ella Maillart with their 18 hp Ford Deluxe Roadster, June 1939.

“And so one day I wanted to break away, not knowing exactly from which fate, seeming to grasp only that I had been struck by calamity, as anyone can be, and now must stand apart, silent. How do the others live, I asked myself, how do they bear this land and the day to come, how do they bear it?”
