June 11, 2006

'THE PLACES IN BETWEEN,' BY RORY STEWART

A Walk Across Afghanistan

Review by TOM BISSELL

PITY the contemporary travel writer: routinely viewed as a kind of overstuffed guidebook author, struggling to explain exactly what he or she does. Specialists pounce on the tiniest "mistakes," and ideologues condemn the whole enterprise as colonialism with a thesaurus. Meanwhile, there's no single go-to word for what this most curious and searching of writers seeks to produce. Travel narrative? Peripatetic memoir? Adventure yarn? Not that this even matters, since — or so the prevailing wisdom goes — the best journeys have already been made. All that's left is a specious sort of experiential plagiarism.

Not quite. Rory Stewart's first book, "The Places in Between," recounts his journey across Afghanistan in January 2002. Even in mild weather in an Abrams tank, such a trip would be mane-whitening. But Stewart goes in the middle of winter, crossing through some territory still shakily held by the Taliban — and entirely on foot. There are some Medusa-slayingly gutsy travel writers out there — Redmond O'Hanlon, Jeffrey Tayler, Robert Young Pelton — but Stewart makes them look like Hilton sisters.

Paul Theroux once described a certain kind of travel book as having mainly "human sacrifice" allure, and how close Stewart comes to being killed on his journey won't be disclosed here. He is, however, sternly warned before he begins his walk. "You are the first tourist in Afghanistan," observes an Afghan from the country's recently resurrected Security Service. "It is mid-winter," he adds. "There are three meters of snow on the high passes, there are wolves, and this is a war. You will die, I can guarantee." For perhaps the first time in the history of travel writing, a secret-police goon emerges as the voice of sobriety and reason.

Recalling an American journalist who wondered if Stewart thought what he was doing was dangerous, he writes, "I had never found a way to answer that question without sounding awkward, insincere or ridiculous." He's then asked if he has read "Into the Wild," Jon Krakauer's account of a well-meaning young man's doomed trek into the Alaskan wilderness. It is, Stewart is told, more than a little pointedly, "a great piece of journalism."

So is "The Places in Between" — a pipsqueak title for what is otherwise a striding, glorious book. But it's more than great journalism. It's a great travel narrative. Learned but gentle, tough but humane, Stewart — a Scottish journalist who has served in both the British Army and the Foreign Office — seems hewn from 19th-century DNA, yet he's also blessed with a 21st-century motherboard. He writes with a mystic's appreciation of the natural world, a novelist's sense of character and a comedian's sense of timing.

Stewart's travels in Afghanistan were part of a much longer journey, a walk across Iran, Pakistan, India and Nepal. The author and book to which he's doomed to suffer comparison is Robert Byron, whose "Road to Oxiana" details a journey across Persia and Afghanistan in the 1930's. (No doubt mindful of this, Stewart name-checks Byron twice.) But Stewart has little to worry about. In literary terms, he's Byron's equal, and in
matters of temperament and compassion, he's arguably Byron's better. While Stewart's chapters are typically short and episodic, every one has a haiku-like intensity.

Stewart is a rarity among travel writers: he's not much interested in telling us about himself. He says he promised his mother this would be his last journey and he'd come home if he didn't get killed, and that's about as confessional as he gets. (You have to suspect that he wasn't entirely straight with his mother: his second book, "The Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq" will be published in August.)

Stewart clearly loves the people of Afghanistan, to whom he has partly dedicated this book. Despite sometimes being "greedy, idle, stupid, hypocritical, insensitive, mendacious, ignorant and cruel," he explains, these people never attempted "to kidnap or kill me" — even though Stewart "represented a culture that many of them hated." Thanking people for not killing you: this is defining deviancy down.

But Stewart, who speaks Persian, has no orientalist illusions; he romanticizes nothing and no one. Rather, he has written a kind of tonic to mindless Taliban-hating. He doesn't pardon the Mullah Omars who replicated seventh-century conditions at the end of a weapon the prophet could scarcely have dreamed of, and he's rightfully devastating on the remnants of the hard-core Taliban, describing them as "bullies with a strangled and dangerous view of God and a stupid obsession with death." But the average citizens of Afghanistan, some of whom found themselves working for or aiding the Taliban, he beholds with admirable calm.

When Stewart meets one former Taliban commander, the man is living in comparatively high style, which amounts to owning a water pump, a wood-burning stove and an outhouse. Is this man worth hating? Is he someone who imperils Western freedom? What about his countrymen who have never seen a television or wandered very far from their villages? Can they really be expected to understand why two collapsed buildings in Manhattan have resulted in a sky prowled by American jets?

This is more political than Stewart allows himself to be. Ideologically, he's well behaved. At worst, he's agnostic on the question of the American-led invasion, though a late passage in the book offers a blistering, if mostly forgiving, critique of the foreign workers and diplomats, some of them Stewart's friends, who work "12- or 14-hour days drafting documents for heavily funded initiatives" on "democratization" and "sustainable development." Stewart's most moving achievement is his determination to empathize with men — the book is, unavoidably, a Turkish bath house of masculinity — few have made any effort to understand.

Early in his trip, thanks to a noncommittal blessing from the warlord Ismail Khan ("A big journey," Khan adjudges his mission, "which I would like to support"), Stewart picks up three Afghan traveling partners with predictably tangled loyalties. He grows to like these men, despite their fondness for threatening to shoot children, even as they cause him almost as much trouble as their protective presence otherwise curtails. During a hilarious dinner with a village headman, one of his companions confidently announces that Stewart is from Ukraine, speaks Russian, is a doctor and works for the **United Nations**. Later, a radio station in Herat announces that "Agha Rory" will be awarded $2 million once he reaches his destination. By this time, Agha Rory has become his mendicant protectors' bipedal A.T.M. Stewart resentfully walks them all into the ground, and they take their exhausted leave of him.
Armed only with a wooden staff tipped with a metal nub scavenged from an old Soviet armored personnel carrier, Stewart meets a new friend who will help him complete his journey — a retired fighting dog "the size of a small pony" whose teeth have been knocked out and whose ears and tail have been snipped off. Stewart names him Babur, in honor of the descendant of Tamerlane who retreated from modern-day Uzbekistan across Afghanistan on his way to found India's Mogul dynasty. Babur's 16th-century autobiography, the "Baburnama," is among the books Stewart packs, and "The Places in Between" details the haunting continuities between Babur's meticulous impressions and what Stewart experiences.

The inclusion of a canine companion threatens to transform Stewart's journey into "Travels With Charley While Dodging Kalashnikov Fire," but Stewart is admirably allergic to sentiment. At one point, about to collapse from cold and exhaustion, "half buried in deep powder," he looks up to see Babur barking at him. "His matter-of-factness made me feel that I was being melodramatic. If he was going to continue, so would I."

The book is replete with fascinating, if fearfully context-dependent, travel tips. If you are forced to lie about being a Muslim, claim you're from Indonesia, a Muslim nation few non-Indonesian Muslims know much about. Open land undefiled by sheep droppings has most likely been mined. If you're taking your donkey to high altitudes, slice open its nostrils to allow greater oxygen flow. Don't carry detailed maps, since they tend to suggest 007 affinities. If, finally, you're determined to do something as recklessly stupid as walk across a war zone, your surest bet to quash all the inevitable criticism is to write a flat-out masterpiece. Stewart did. Stewart has. "The Places in Between" is, in very nearly every sense, too good to be true.

Tom Bissell is the author of "Chasing the Sea" and "God Lives in St. Petersburg." His new book, "The Father of All Things," will be published next year.