

# How a Victorian trip to Palestine spurred modern ornithology—and left it with imperial baggage

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Palestine's natural splendor offered a landscape ripe for scientific "discovery," description and expropriation by European imperial powers

in the 19th century. And in the 1860s, an English vicar named [Henry Baker Tristram](#) claimed its birds.

Tristram was a co-founder of [Ibis](#), the ornithology journal published since 1859 by the British Ornithologists' Union. His articles on Palestinian ornithology began with the first issue when he contributed a list of birds he'd collected during a brief visit there the previous year. The list included a species previously unknown to Western science, which was named in his honor as Tristram's grackle (now more commonly known as Tristram's [starling](#)).

Tristram made a major contribution to the study of birds. At that time, ornithology reflected imperial priorities and was concerned with collecting, describing, and mapping. His observations of Palestine's birds, in particular, laid the groundwork for the modern ornithology of the area.

However, his exploits in Palestine, still honored in the name "Tristram's starling," also show why honorific bird names like this have come under increasing [scrutiny](#).

Tristram returned to Palestine for a fuller investigation in 1864. He traveled south from Beirut with a group of fellow naturalists and a large baggage train. The account of his ten-month-long journey was published in 1865 as [The Land of Israel](#).

This book, and the several [others](#) he wrote about Palestine, formed part of a growing wave of popular tourist accounts of the Holy Land. They fed the interest and shaped the perceptions of British readers fascinated by the area's historical and Biblical remnants, its living inhabitants, and the missionary efforts to achieve conversions to Christianity.

Unusually, Tristram and his companions traveled far off the well-beaten

tourist and Christian pilgrimage routes throughout Palestine. The Land of Israel includes detailed descriptions of Palestine's diverse ethnic groups, their domestic, religious, military and economic traditions and practices, and their relationships with one another.

## **Imperialism**

Tristram's descriptions of Palestine's people in many ways reflected typical British imperial views of "natives," not least in his use of the terms "childlike" and "savage," and his comparison of Bedouins to "red Indians." His racializing and [religious views](#) were also shaped by his inclinations as a natural historian—he categorized those he observed according to type and deviation from type.

At best, his characterizations are paternalistic; at worst, deeply offensive. The terms "debased" and "degraded" repeat often. Of one group near Jericho he writes: "I never saw such vacant, sensual, and debased features in any group of human beings of the type and form of whites."

Of some Bedouin further south, he observes that "they were all decidedly of the Semitic type, and, excepting the color and the smell, had nothing of the negro about them. They must, however, be far inferior to the races they have supplanted."

Occasionally, he acknowledges Ottoman oppression and neglect as the cause of poverty, but in most cases links it to "Moslem fanaticism" and "Oriental indolence." Although there are exceptions, Muslim settlements and their inhabitants are almost invariably "filthy," "squalid" and "miserable."

Of religious sites, he notes many instances of churches which have been "perverted" into mosques. One of his most offensive observations is of a Bedouin sheik, Abu Dahuk: "like all his followers, he is very dark—not

so black as the commonalty, but of a deep olive brown. This may partly arise from the habit of these people, who never wash. They occasionally take off their clothes, search them, slaughter their thousands, and air themselves, but never apply water to their persons." The odor, he remarks, "is unendurable."

Conversion to Christianity appeared to redeem this degradation. In the Galilee he notes: "Christianity had here, as elsewhere, stamped the place and its substantial houses with a neatness and cleanliness to which the best of Moslem villages are strangers."

Conversion also seemed to him to transform racial attributes. Of two Protestant converts he observes that "so much had religion and education elevated them, that they seemed of a different race from those around them." Among Bethlehem's Christians, he particularly admires "the handsome faces of the men and women, and the wondrous beauty of the children, so fair and European-like."

Tristram describes Jewish ethnicity in typical missionary terms. The Jews were a "decayed and scattered people," with "musty and crumbling learning." At a Protestant missionary tent in Tiberias he notes that "the Polish Jews, very numerous here, were willing to listen ... but the native Jews, with whom were mingled a few Moslems, were occasionally very violent in their expressions." The Jews, he concludes, "are a stiff-necked race."

During his months in Palestine in 1864, Tristram shot hundreds of birds for his collection, and shot many more during subsequent visits. His surviving collection in the Liverpool World Museum includes, among others, the original 1858 [type specimens](#) of Tristram's grackle, and 17 Palestine sunbird skins.

Tristram depended on many people—servants, dragomen, muleteers,

cooks, collectors and guards—for their expertise, labor and protection, and sometimes even for [saving his life](#). He also depended on them for help with obtaining specimens. But for that help with collecting he only names one person: "Gemil, with a little training," he writes, "would soon have made a first-rate collector."

Those British imperial values that colored Tristram's view of Palestine's people enabled him to name and claim its natural resources for [western science](#), and for personal glory. They also gave him license to propose that the land itself should be claimed: "Either an European protectorate or union with Egypt seems requisite to save Palestine from gradual dissolution," he remarked, "unless, which seems hopeless, the Arabs can be induced to cultivate the sod."

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