

William Gifford Palgrave

by Asfandiyar Ali Nadeem

My name is Asfandiyar Ali Nadeem and I am proud to say that I am in the prestigious Palgrave House at the British International School Riyadh. The students are divided into four competitive houses called Palgrave, Pitts, Blunt and Doughty. They are all named after famous British explorers to Saudi Arabia.

To go back to the early days of my subject, W. G. Palgrave was born at 22, Parliament Street, Westminster, on January 24th, 1826. He was the second son of Sir Francis Palgrave, K.H. and Elizabeth Turner, one of the daughters of Mr. Dawson Turner, a banker of Great Yarmouth. Even before he went to school, Gifford Palgrave showed signs of unusual ability. Among other honours he won the school gold medal for classical verse, and proceeded to Trinity College, Oxford, where in 1846 he obtained a First Class honours degree in Literature and Humanities and a Second in Mathematics. His devotion to college rowing probably prevented him from attaining equal honours in both subjects.

The East soon caught his imagination. He went straight from college to India, and served for a time in the 8th Regiment, Bombay Native Infantry. Shortly after this he became a Roman Catholic, was ordained a priest, and joined the order of Jesuits, working energetically as a missionary in Southern India. Eventually returning westward, he continued his labours in Syria, and accumulated that vast fund of knowledge of Arabic and Eastern lore, which made him an almost unequalled master of these subjects. It was his intimate acquaintance with Arab literature and eastern life and thinking which led to his employment by the French Emperor, in 1862 and 1863, on a dangerous journey of exploration in Central and Eastern Arabia on which, allegedly, he dressed in Syrian clothes and was described as an

Arab doctor. This gave him the opportunity to publish the history of his adventures, a narrative that immediately placed him among the best known and most distinguished of eastern travellers.

He wrote two novels that are regarded among the best of Eastern travel literature. The courage with which he proceeded to Riyadh, the capital of Nejed, the centre of Wahabee power and fanaticism (though provided with a treacherous letter of supposed safe-conduct, designed to send him straight to the executioner) the skill with which he baffled his foes; the flight from Riyadh; the shipwreck on the coast near Muscat, in the Sea of Oman – all these and many more thrilling incidents make the two volumes among the most popular travel books of his day. Interest in the books extends beyond the story of the journey itself to the brilliant passages and store of information on Eastern life and Eastern history.

In 1868 he married Katherine, the daughter of George Edward Simpson, of Norwich, by whom he has left three sons. He was appointed a consul and in 1878 in Bulgaria, where he later became Consul-General. In 1879 he was moved to Bangkok, but the climate of Siam told heavily on his health, exacerbated by his many hardships and dangerous adventures. In 1884 he was appointed Minister Resident and Consul -General to Uruguay, where he died peacefully in 1888.

After 136 years I am proud to represent a glorious name in history and desperately try to live up to the expectations that are required when you are in Palgrave House!

*From the never of those years,
From the waste whose dews are tears,
Thus we pluck the evermore
Of the sunlight Eden shore*

- Sir William Gifford Palgrave

