Lesley Blanch was already a distinguished traveller and journalist when her first book, *The Wilder Shores of Love*, was published in 1954. It was immediately acclaimed as a classic, and became a worldwide bestseller. It told of four nineteenth-century women of contrasting backgrounds and temperaments who sought in the East the adventures and emotions which were rapidly disappearing from the industrialized West.

Her following book, *The Sabres of Paradise*, which took six years to complete, with research in Russia and Turkey, was the biography of Imam Shamyl, the religious leader of the Caucasian tribes who fought the invading Russian armies in 1834 to 1859. It combines biography and history with beautiful descriptions of the Caucasus and the campaigns in which both the young Tolstoy and Lermontov participated. Four years later she published *Under A Lilac-bleeding Star*, a selection of travel pieces, in which she discussed some of her predecessors, compulsive romantic travellers whose ground she too had sometimes covered. *Pavilions of the Heart*, “a light book”, is about the houses or rooms where great loves have been lived: George Sand and Chopin at Nohant, Liszt at Woronince, et cetera. *Round the World in 80 Dishes*, a cookbook containing some of the dishes she savoured on her travels, preceded *Journey Into The Mind’s Eye: Fragments of an Autobiography* published in 1968. It tells how she was visited in her nursery by a mysterious Russian whom she simply calls “The Traveller”, a friend of her family who periodically appeared laden with gifts – Fabergé eggs, icons, et cetera. Later he became her lover. One day he vanished, never to return. The Traveller is the origin of Lesley Blanch’s passionate and life-long involvement with Russia and Russian literature.

In 1983 her biography of Pierre Loti revived an interest in the “unjustly neglected” French writer and launched a number of reprints of his books in France. Her most recent book which was published last year is *From Wilder Shores: Tables of My Travels*, in which she describes her experiences of food through a life of travel, whether with bedouins in the desert or the President of the United States at the White House.

Lesley Blanch was born in London in 1907, the only child of upper middle-class parents, and was educated at St. Paul's School, “but above all at home.” She studied art at The Slade before becoming a journalist and later the Features Editor of Vogue, “something generally dubbed chi-chi, something you never live down!” An early marriage was short-lived and soon forgotten; then in 1946 she married French diplomat and Goncourt Prize-winning author Romain Gary, a naturalized Russian,
INTERVIEWER
You were born into an upper middle-class family. Were your parents wealthy?

LESLEY BLANCH
No. They were always broke. My father was a very clever and cultivated man, but he didn't do anything. He spent his time in museums and galleries, discussing things like Chinese porcelain and early oak furniture, about which he knew a great deal. They had been quite well-off, especially my mother, but the money trickled away gradually. My mother was not strictly beautiful, but seemed so. She was extremely elegant and artistic, and extremely frustrated too. Having married she had decided to become a devoted wife, and everything she touched she made lovely – houses, plants, food; she had magical hands.

INTERVIEWER
As an only child you must have been much cherished.

LESLEY BLANCH
I suppose I was, but I was also smacked every day as a matter of course: “Has she had her smacking today? No? There!” Whack! I was frightfully naughty and a great tease. I did everything to annoy people, and I still do!

INTERVIEWER
You went to St. Paul’s Girls’ School, which is considered the best in England, but in your autobiography you say that you were educated by reading and listening to your “elders and betters.” Who were they? Who instilled the love of literature in you?
LESLEY BLANCH
My parents, The Traveller, and anybody who came into the house. My parents didn't suffer fools gladly, so our visitors were interesting, and I always was surrounded with books and pictures. I fell in love with Russia through The Traveller, and learned a bit of Russian. I don’t know it well, but I’m not lost when I go to Russia. I used to go to London University when it was at Somerset House and listen to Prince Mirsky’s lectures on Russian literature.

INTERVIEWER
Presumably you were not expected to work, so how did you start? Did you know you wanted to write?

LESLEY BLANCH
I was certainly given the idea that I had to earn my living double quick! I went to The Slade and studied painting. Among my contemporaries were Oliver Messel, Rex Whistler and others who became famous later. I picked a living doing book jackets and private commissions before I started journalism. For example I knew something of Pushkin’s life and times, so I would write an article on that, a subject not generally known. My father fell ill and there was no money left, so I worked very hard. All the Fabergés the Traveller had given me were sold. Eventually I became Features Editor of British Vogue and had to write about everything except fashion – books, people, plays, travel. That was in the late thirties. During the war, I wrote propaganda stuff for the Women’s Services.

INTERVIEWER
You met Romain Gary during the war. Where?

LESLEY BLANCH
In London. He had joined de Gaulle and become an airman, a navigator with the Lorraine Squadron. He had no money and no home, but I had a charming old house in Chelsea and some beautiful things in it. It was all new to him and he was amused by it on leave. He used to lie in bed – a Louis XVI piece saved from the bombing of an earlier house – and say: “You mean that Staffordshire rabbit was in your nursery when you were six? Quelle continuité!” He was Russian by birth and I fell in love with him partly because I found again The Traveller in him. I would recite old rhymes in Russian, or give him cucumber pickle and endless glasses of tea, and he felt at home, somehow he found his Slav roots again.

INTERVIEWER
You are very much in the tradition of the romantic English woman traveller who falls in love with the East and goes off, enduring all sorts of hardships. It started with Lady Hester Stanhope, didn’t it?

LESLEY BLANCH
No. She was not a really romantic figure, any more than Isabella Bird Bishop, the travel writer. Perhaps Hester Stanhope had a romantic life, but she was not really a romantic in herself. England has always had a tradition of such involvements with the Middle East and the Arab/Islamic world. It was a superb setting for heroic and romantic living. Unfortunately it has been marred now by the Israeli-Arab conflict. I
am probably one of the last of a breed who knew something of those lands as they once were.

INTERVIEWER
What made you choose those particular four women in *The Wilder Shores of Love*?

LESLEY BLANCH
They were essentially romantic and adventurous creatures who fled the early nineteenth-century menace of machinery and industry, and I felt at one with them. Jane Digby – Lady Ellenborough – was wildly romantic, had endless love affairs, and ended by marrying a sheikh and living beside him in the desert. Isabel Burton married Richard Burton, the great Arabist who translated *The Arabian Nights*. He was her Oriental landscape. These women sensed the whirring wheels of industrialization approaching, and escaped to find fulfilment, as women, in the East.

INTERVIEWER
Isabel Burton is chiefly famous for her final act of burning her husband’s writing on Eastern eroticism, for which she will be blamed by posterity.

LESLEY BLANCH
It is silly to blame her. She burned a bit of what the West sees as pornography, but what does it matter? There is no shortage of Western pornography available today, and as she thought she was saving his soul, being an ardent Roman Catholic, rather than a prude, why blame her?

INTERVIEWER
Isabelle Eberhardt was a curious case: highly promiscuous, dressing as a man and dying of her excesses – physical and perhaps spiritual. In the book you say that like her you could “live and die in the Sahara.” For most people the Sahara is just an infinite expanse of hot sand, rather monotonous and dangerous.

LESLEY BLANCH
If they say that, it means they have not understood! I can’t explain the attraction of the desert except to say that it is wild and mysterious and magical as my garden here is on rather greener terms. I don’t like a tame countryside. In England only Cornwall and Scotland have a few wild places left, which I love. You can keep Surrey and the good-style Cotswolds! But then I don’t belong in England. I don’t belong anywhere – it is rather restful!

INTERVIEWER
After *The Wilder Shores of Love* you wrote a long preface to Harriette Wilson’s memoirs, *The Game of Hearts*. She was a famous courtesan – the great Duke of Wellington was one of her clients. She tried to blackmail him, which elicited the famous reply: “Publish and be damned!” What interested you in her?

LESLEY BLANCH
Her delightful immorality. For the first edition I wrote a long preface of some fifty pages in which I spoke about prostitutes and their place in society, which I think very necessary. It was stupid to close down the brothels, because prostitution goes on but now it can’t be controlled, whereas if brothels were permitted, and properly
supervised from the point of view of health and hygiene, they would be agreeable places, free of blackmail and scandal. Homosexuality has now become perfectly acceptable – about time too – though I think that demanding women, particularly in the United States, have made it so impossible for men that they have to turn to each other.

INTERVIEWER
It took some six years to write your next book, which you told me you consider your best: *The Sabres of Paradise*, the story of the Imam Shamyl. Your husband Romain Gary admired it greatly, and called it a masterpiece, didn’t he?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes. Praise from him was praise indeed!

INTERVIEWER
It has a very rich texture and is beautifully written, and it was a great success everywhere – France, Germany, Russia.

LESLEY BLANCH
And I have just heard that a Daghestani man, an officer in the Soviet Army, has translated it into Daghestani language, which is interesting. Well, there had been nothing else on this splendid subject, except in Russia. I wrote it in Los Angeles in the late fifties. My husband was then the French Consul General there. I used to get up at three or four in the morning and write, and my research often took me away, sometimes to Turkey and the Caucasus. But when I finished it there seemed to be something missing, a gap, and I decided I must go back to Istanbul, where Shamyl had lived briefly in exile after his defeat. My husband thought I was mad, and discouraged me. We always had to give a huge party on July 14th for the French citizens of Los Angeles – there were about eleven thousand of them there. Hundreds used to come to this annual affair. It kept me busy twenty-four hours, but I left the next day. I had a feeling that I had to go and find Shamyl’s family. I arrived in Paris and went straight to the Turkish Embassy, but they could tell me nothing. I came down to our house in the Midi, but there was no boat leaving, and the Orient Express was not running, while the planes were all full. Eventually a seat was found for me on a plane leaving from Rome the next day. I stood up all night in a crowded train laden with suitcases, cardboard boxes, nuns and sailors, in suffocating heat. From Rome, where I only just caught the plane, I reached Istanbul. I went to the old Park Hotel: “Oh Madame Gary, why didn’t you let us know you coming? We have no room!” But they knew me well, and turned someone out to give me a bed. I threw myself down, exhausted, but could not rest. I had to go to Besiktas, along the Bosphorus (where Shamyl had once lived). The area was different then – old dilapidated houses and beggars, a most desolate place. Today it has been tidied up and rebuilt. I asked the beggars, Shamyl? Shamyl Imam? One of them finally pointed to a dead-end alley. I went down it and found a broken-down door and pushed it open. A woman looking very Caucasian with slanted eyes and dark hair came out, tight-lipped. She spoke French and I asked her if it was possible that Shamyl had ever lived there? She gave me a look like a steel dagger and said: “Why do you want to know?” I said I was writing a book about him. She looked me up and down and said: “He died in Mecca.” “I know,” I said. Then she said something which I contradicted, and she responded by saying: “I see you know your subject, you can come in.”
She was Shamyl’s great-granddaughter, and she was leaving that very night for Jakarta where her husband was the Egyptian Ambassador. She had only come over for her sister’s burial. So you see, another couple of hours and I would have missed her! Hence my premonition that I had to leave immediately after that exhausting party in Los Angeles. She said: “I’ll stay,” and did. We became great friends. She gave me all sorts of papers and letters and unknown material. I became a friend of the whole family. My husband had been so discouraging about ever finding any more material that I couldn’t resist sending a telegram: “Floating on the Bosporus with Shamyl’s great-great-grandson.” Apparently he showed it to his secretary: “Ma femme! Quel numéro, ma femme!”

INTERVIEWER
When you left England in 1946 after your marriage, you were en poste in Bulgaria for two years, I think. And later you wrote Under a Lilac Bleeding Star, which is a Bulgarian saying, isn’t it?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes. There they say that a compulsive traveller is “born under a lilac bleeding star.” I have travelled all my life, so it fits. Of course that meant leaving my husband often you might say far too often. He had other women of course, all men do. They are so proud of their... aptitudes!

INTERVIEWER
What about you? As a very attractive, and they say, sexy woman, you must have had lots of offers on your travels?

LESLEY BLANCH
Naturally. And I liked having adventures in far away, wild countries. Everywhere I travelled I collected lots of friends, and yes, I did have lovers too.

INTERVIEWER
You went to Bulgaria after the war, when the country was in turmoil. Were you happy there?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes, very, although there were problems: practically no food and many dramas. There were three armies of occupation – American, British and Russian. I learned to speak Bulgarian of a kind, pretty quickly. We made many friends. Best of all I got to know the gypsies. We had no money and I had no chic clothes, but I remember I had some scarlet damask curtains which I had brought from England to brighten a leased apartment; so I took them down, and the gypsies came and made me some chalvars (wide Turkish trousers) which I still have, and still wear at home. They would crouch on the floor and sew. They would not take any money: “Oh no, not from you! You are one of us!” they would say. “Will you come to my daughter’s birthday feast, christening? Will you dance at my son's wedding?” Of course, I would and did. I remember they were always sitting on the ground in their mahallahs or camps, picking nits from their heads and putting them in a saucer! But the sun shone, then, and I adored their seducing music.
INTERVIEWER
When you went back to Paris from Bulgaria, your husband worked at the Foreign Office, Le Quai d’Orsay. Did you get to know the intellectuals? It was the heyday of the Existentialists – Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus, et cetera....

LESLEY BLANCH
Romain knew them all. I knew Camus, but not very well. I spoke French rather badly. I am not an intellectual in their way. I loved Malraux – he was a really romantic figure. Nancy Mitford was a great friend, just settling there, and becoming a part of the Paris scene. Both Romain and I revered de Gaulle, though I never met him. He wrote me a lovely letter about *The Sabres of Paradise*, and I have heard he said that it was remarkable that a woman should be able to understand the battles so well and describe them so vividly. True, I used to have my bed covered with maps, working out the campaigns.

INTERVIEWER
It is sometimes difficult for two writers to live together. Apart from practicalities, there is the question of professional jealousy and competitiveness. Was Romain Gary jealous of the success of your first book?

LESLEY BLANCH
He didn’t like it at all. His friends couldn’t believe it because they thought him such a great man, but he was jealous all the same.

INTERVIEWER
What about you? Were you jealous when he won the Goncourt for *The Roots of Heaven*?

LESLEY BLANCH
Oh no! I wanted him to be successful and fulfilled. It never entered my head, never! Sometimes I got fed up with his implacable selfishness, but we had a lot of laughs together, and I took on all the chores while he, convinced of his genius, devoted himself to his writing.

INTERVIEWER
Considering the modus vivendi you had achieved with Romain Gary, were you surprised when he wanted to divorce you and marry Jean Seberg?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes. And I said I would not give him a divorce for a year, to see how it went. But finally they married, and had a son, whom I sometimes see. He is a very handsome boy.

INTERVIEWER
Did you feel bitter about the split?
LESLEY BLANCH
Only in the sense that we had become very great friends, and had worked out a way of living together in which I took on all the chores and complications and mechanics of life. We understood each other perfectly about work and had the same sense of humour, and we both loved animals. He used to say, “Lesley doesn’t mind my infidelities, she is very eighteenth-century!” And then we had just begun to have some money, which we never had before.

INTERVIEWER
What did you do after your divorce?

LESLEY BLANCH
We both continued to live in Paris and not overlap. But fifteen years later I came down here and bought this place and made this garden. At the end of his life Romain wanted to buy a house in this area. He always loved the Midi. He said to a friend: “I played my cards wrong, I should have stayed with Lesley-she let me do what I liked.”

INTERVIEWER
Were you surprised when he committed suicide?

LESLEY BLANCH
No, I wasn’t surprised. We both believed in euthanasia and the right to choose one’s death in dignity. He didn’t want to grow old: “Oh you are so young and enthusiastic! You don’t mind anybody knowing you are sixty!” he would shout down the dinner table, advertising the fact! He spoke English perfectly, with only the faintest Russian accent.

But knowing how the English-speaking people find a French accent irresistible – rather like darling Charles Boyer’s – he would turn on a strong French accent for any attractive woman next to him at a dinner table. It made me laugh, and he would catch my eye and laugh too.

INTERVIEWER
Journey Into The Mind’s Eye, which you subtitled Fragments of an Autobiography, and which includes an account of your travels in Russia, notably your trip to Siberia on the trans-Siberian train, was written partly in memory of The Traveller. When did you first go to Russia?

LESLEY BLANCH
In the early thirties. I went to Moscow and Leningrad because of my interest in Pushkin. By the way, I have just heard from a friend that there is now a metro station near where he fought his fatal duel, and it is faced entirely with black marble. Isn’t that wonderful? When I first went there Stalin was starting his purges. There were few tourists, and as I spoke a little Russian the authorities didn’t bother with me much. I wasn’t aware of the persecutions, but one saw it was a grim and harsh life all round. There were still children hunting in packs, the Bezprezoni, looking for food. There were still some droskies, and I would take one and go to museums or the traktirs – cafés. I saw Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk at the Bolshoi, or was it the Mariinsky? – and met the composer on the stairs. I recognized him from his photos and introduced myself. He invited me to a party in the Green Room after the
performance. There was a samovar and cakes, and several of the performers and
people I didn’t know who were all very welcoming.

In the fifties, after Stalin’s death, I went back and travelled in the Caucasus.
Things were easier there, and under Khrushchev too, just as now everything is
changing with Gorbachev. I think he is wonderful! The capitalist world is stupid not
to hold out a hand to him – to give him a chance.

INTERVIEWER
Was your husband ever with you on those journeys?

LESLEY BLANCH
No. He didn’t feel the same interest in Russia as I did, although he was Russian,
Russian-Jewish, but I thought of him as just Russian, and that is what he liked in me:
making a Russian home for us, with cabbage soup and samovar and piroshkis. Later
he passionately wanted to be French, because he was grateful to France and de Gaulle
was his hero. But you can never become French, can you? I can’t, anyway.

INTERVIEWER
People like you who are passionate about Russia and Russian literature are usually
disappointed by the Soviet Union. But in your book you seem to approve of it. In the
passage relating to your trip to Siberia you write most poignantly and vividly about
the plight of the convicts in the nineteenth century with their chains and fetters
dragging through the frozen steppes, yet hardly mention the millions and millions
who perished in Stalin’s concentration camps, in worse conditions. How come?

LESLEY BLANCH
I think the Russian Revolution was an inevitable move in the context of the twentieth
century, just as Khomeini’s Islamic revivalism is today. It is something, a phase, to be
gone through. I don’t think it will kill Persia, and it hasn’t killed Russia. You might
remember what the Tzarina Alexandra said: “Russia can only be ruled by the knout” –
the whip. Yes, that very English, rather silly stubborn lady who was killed in
Ekaterinburg in 1918, said that. I don’t know what conclusions to draw from that.

INTERVIEWER
You had travelled in Persia in the past and in 1974 went back to write the biography
of Queen Farah. Did you get the impression that a revolution was inevitable?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes. That book was a commission – the only one of my books I have written on that
basis; otherwise I have always chosen what I wanted to write. But I loved the
Shahbanou. She was a most charming woman, and she did an enormous amount for
Persian culture and the arts, such as the Museum of Carpet, which she created, and the
Museum of Qajar Paintings. She used to buy old houses to save them from demolition
– because of course they were all being pulled down to be replaced by hideous
modern buildings. She once said to me: “Look at this photograph of the Gates of
Qazvin – I was only a few years too late to save them!” I got to know her rather well,
and we often talked very freely, but then she would be called away to some duty, and
my time was up. She was – and is – a remarkable human being.

The destruction that followed the fall of the monarchy was in a sense
inevitable. However, the world’s treatment of the Shah is one of the most ignoble
episodes of modern history. Only Sadat was loyal. The craven attitude of the French, the Americans, and the British... When you think that some African leaders who are reported to have cut up children and made chops and steaks out of them still live in great comfort in Europe, one realizes how political manoeuvres stink.

INTERVIEWER
You told me that you alternate long, serious books with short, light ones. After *The Wilder Shores of Love* you wrote the *Harriette Wilson* introduction and a cookbook, *Round the World in 80 Dishes*. I know what an accomplished cook you are, having sampled your cuisine, but what made you write a book about it?

LESLEY BLANCH
I wrote it for a child in America. He was the son of the friends with whom I was staying in Long Island, and one evening he disappeared for a while and came back with a very good omelette he had made. So I wrote a little book for him, and did the illustrations myself. I enlarged it for England, where people still lived on rations and couldn’t travel to taste exotic cooking. Nowadays cookery books are serious business, but I can’t be serious about it. Sometimes when I’m writing I start cooking to relax, but usually I forget about it until the smell of burning tells me it is ruined. There goes another saucepan and my dinner, I say.

INTERVIEWER
The “light” book that came after *The Sabres of Paradise* was *Pavilions of the Heart*. What gave you the idea?

LESLEY BLANCH
I thought that houses in which people have lived and loved were interesting. I put in certain things people already knew about, for example Liszt’s life in Woronince, a chateau in Poland, and lesser known ones such as the Portuguese nuns. The book ran into trouble: the editor, Tony Godwin, who was a wonderful man left the firm for the States, then the art editor got pregnant and left, and the girl who replaced her had never heard of Delacroix, and one illustration was printed upside down! It was a mess. I tore into the editorial director, who being a gentleman had to stand and take it, while I being no lady just let fly! I insisted on a brief Errata, saying that a proper one would be as long as a lavatory roll. But the writing is nice, so I’m not ashamed of it.

INTERVIEWER
Your biography of Pierre Loti, which was published in 1983, has led to a revival of interest in him and his work. What made you choose him, since there are other biographies of him done by Frenchmen?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes, but not good ones in English. He was an interesting character, and I shared his deep love of Turkey. He was not just a mawkish and sentimental writer as some think. Remember, people like Henry James and Marcel Proust admired him greatly. He wrote beautifully and had very sensuous rhythms. The French say, “Oh yes I read him at school, the book about his love affair with the Turkish woman, *Aziyadé*, and so on.” But his travel books are marvellous; and the one he wrote on China, reporting on the Boxer Rebellion is terrifying. It took me three years to write this biography. I always read all I can about my subject to get a balanced view before I begin, and I always try
to find the families concerned. I had the luck to meet his daughter-in-law. She had lived beside Loti in the same house and didn’t like him. In fact she skinned him alive for me! Anyway, the book was a great success in France, although at first the French were dubious about my enterprise, because they thought that an English woman, speaking French in a rather careless way as I do, writing about their author, couldn’t possibly get it right. But *La Revue des Deux Mondes* gave it six pages, it won a prize and it set off a whole new interest in him. I get many fan letters: *Le Figaro* asked me to write about his mother, and *Paris Match* wanted me to write about his house; *Le Figaro* invited me to a cruise they were having in Turkish waters to give a lecture on Loti, but I declined that. I like to travel alone.

INTERVIEWER
One of the things I enjoyed about *The Wilder Shores of Love* and *Loti* was their brevity. Today biographies are so very long and contain a great deal of unimportant information, don’t you think?

LESLEY BLANCH
Oh yes, typical American style! I hope I’m more succinct. Lately there have been endless full-length books about each of the four women of *The Wilder Shores*. I keep getting asked to review them! The other day I was sent one about Isabelle Eberhardt. It is very worthy and well researched, but rather pedestrian and redundant. But when you get a man like Paul Bowles, who has lived in North Africa and has lately translated some of Isabelle’s short stories, and knows what he’s talking about, then it is very interesting. He knows what the Sahara means, the magic of it, the feel of it, and what she felt.

INTERVIEWER
There was an error of attribution in *Loti* about a poem by Auden which you had said was by Eliot, and I remember how every reviewer picked it out – irresistibly!

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes, it makes them feel superior. I suppose I forgot to check it at the last minute. Editors don’t check things any more, and typesetters are worse. It also often happens when you are your own proof-reader. You know your rhythm, you’ve been writing it for years, so you’re skipping along and don’t catch a fault. The proof-readers today are hardly any better than the typesetters, who don’t care what they’re printing. I remember a secretary I had once – I wrote a review of the ballet *Swan Lake* and she typed Swan Cake! I said, “But Miss Jones ‘the elaborate convulsions of Swan Cake’ doesn’t make sense!” She was very pretty and pert, and said: “No, Mrs. Blanch, nothing you write makes any sense to me!” I cherished that.

INTERVIEWER
You have written only one novel, *The Nine Tiger Man*, which was very well received when it appeared. Your autobiography, *Journey Into The Mind’s Eye*, reads like a novel too, especially the story of The Traveller. Were you not tempted to write more fiction?
LESLEY BLANCH
No, because I can’t invent. For biography I have to remember, and then work round a character. In biography you don’t invent anything, but you interpret. However, that doesn’t mean that you don’t use your imagination.

That novel was a landscape – the landscape of Rajput India which I adored. I had pulled a ligament in my leg and had to stay on an island in Jaipur. The Indians were very kind; they used to heave me about in a boat and take me round the island. You could hear the leopards coughing at dusk in the far hills, and the parakeets flew round turning the sky green. The whole thing was extraordinary. One day I saw what I thought was a log, but it was a crocodile. I had heard the story of a group of English women being put on that island during the Mutiny and not daring to escape because of the crocodiles – just stuck there, with no news and fearing the worst. From that I imagined the whole novel. That story evolved, but no other ever has.

INTERVIEWER
It is interesting that your husband was the opposite: he only wrote fiction, and won the Goncourt twice, the second time under a pseudonym. What do you think of his work now?

LESLEY BLANCH
I don’t read novels. Few last. Romain was not a disciplined writer, but he had wonderful ideas, and sometimes wrote wonderful stories. The one about the strolling players, for example. I thought *The Roots of Heaven* was fine. It had a momentous theme, like his autobiography, *Promise at Dawn*, which he wrote in Hollywood and gave me to read in instalments as he went along. Of course he invented a certain amount of that, but basically it was true.

INTERVIEWER
Speaking of Hollywood, did you enjoy living there? Who were your friends? Did you mix with the film world?

LESLEY BLANCH
Yes. We both loved it. And we knew everybody: Aldous and Maria Huxley, Stravinsky and his wife Vera, George Cukor, who became a great friend, Gary Cooper, Charles Boyer – everyone. James Mason, Sophia Loren, David Selznick . . . Later I worked for George Cukor at M.G.M., which was fascinating. I wrote *The Sabres of Paradise* while based in Hollywood. At the time Cecil Beaton was there too, for *My Fair Lady*. We used to escape up to the hills for a picnic sometimes: “Where are we all going to dinner tonight?” Cecil would ask wearily, and I would say to so-and-so’s – usually some film star. “Oh Jesus! She’ll be wearing a tiara!” he would say. In Hollywood you have to know the failures as well as the successful people. The failures were especially interesting; they knew all the seamy side of Hollywood. They lived downtown where nobody chic would dream of being seen. The snobbery was enormous there, but as I didn’t mind being seen at the wrong address, I would drive down beyond Hollywood and Vine and find a sort of synthesis of the past. People sitting in their verandas, in rocking chairs: an old cowboy in boots would say: “Yes, Ma’am, I used to round up the cattle for so-and-so,” naming a star like John Wayne or Hoot Gibson. I knew John Wayne, and liked him very much, despite his ghastly politics.
INTERVIEWER
What about failed women?

LESLEY BLANCH
They wore baby dresses and heavy make-up, and looked like wrecks. They had been lovely and were often full of good stories. Few grew old well.

INTERVIEWER
It is amazing that living there and having an entrée into the film world, you didn't have your books made into movies. They seem made for it, especially The Wilder Shores of Love and The Sabres of Paradise.

LESLEY BLANCH
M.G.M. bought one story from The Wilder Shores, but nothing came of it. Cukor bought The Nine Tiger Man, and I believe Fox has it now. Periodically people buy options for radio, television, films, but they never come to fruition. It is one of those things.

INTERVIEWER
Your prose is very poetic and graceful. Did you read, or still read, a lot of poetry?

LESLEY BLANCH
No. I'm not very keen on poetry. I had a grounding in English poetry because it was part of my home life, and I still read Byron, some Browning, and of course Blake, and always Donne. I also like Stevie Smith. When I was very young I was plunged most unsuitably into the Restoration playwrights. I was introduced to Russian authors by The Traveller and read them a great deal, first of all Pushkin. I was very fond of some of the minor Russians nobody else reads: Aksakov, Saltykov, Shchedrin, et cetera. I was brought up on Herzen. I have two sets of his work: Constance Garnett’s translation in small volumes, published in 1925, which I take with me everywhere. Now he has been discovered and is properly lauded by the Oxford intellectuals.

INTERVIEWER
Herzen was a liberal. Are you, politically speaking, a liberal?

LESLEY BLANCH
Of course. I should say I’m rather pink. I know great wealth produced industry and patronage of the arts and all that, but that was a different world. Today when I see the prices of houses and clothes and food I wonder how the young are going to live, and in what surroundings. Greed is destroying the planet through over-exploitation of natural resources. Look what we are doing to the seas, the forests, the animals! Here in the summer people throw their dogs out on the roads and go off on holiday. The late Duchess of Windsor knew that, and the cruelty of it, and she used to send people to collect them and give them shelter or find them homes. She is still a very much maligned woman. I knew the Windsors in Paris and remember them with affection.

INTERVIEWER
What about French literature? Who do you read and like?
LESLEY BLANCH
I read the classics. I love Gérard de Nerval, Merimée, Stendhal, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Gobineau’s *Contes Asiatiques*, et cetera. In English I also read nineteenth-century writers, *Kilvert’s Diary*, Queen Victoria’s Letters, and such. I love *The Babur Nameh* [memoirs of the Emperor Babur]; Dean Stanley’s book on the Eastern Church is superb. I particularly enjoy Lampedusa’s writing – not only *The Leopard* but all his shorter pieces. These are some of my favourites.

INTERVIEWER
You also have read American writers, and were – still are – friends with some of them. I remember you telling me once about Carson McCullers, a favourite of mine. Can you tell me about her?

LESLEY BLANCH
I knew her very well in New York. She liked my books and I had not read hers, but I caught up and read them then. She is marvellous about the Deep South, and gave me a taste for books of that region. So I read Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner. I enjoyed the society of Truman Capote as I loved his books. I remember a party given by Leo Lerman at his house in the east Eighties, and I was sitting between Edith Sitwell and Marlene Dietrich, and Truman was lying across my lap with his head on one hand and his feet on the other! And I thought if this is American literary life, I’m enjoying it!

I also love American folk music – just as I love the folk or traditional music of the Middle East, Persia, Asia, or elsewhere I travel. I write to music: it isolates me, but my tastes are catholic: Bach, Wagner, reggae or pop – if good.

INTERVIEWER
Did you ever witness Carson McCullers’ drinking bouts?

LESLEY BLANCH
She was very fragile. I remember one day taking a friend from England to see Carson. She was living up the Hudson, and we arrived for lunch. She said: “I guess you’re thirsty? Would y’all like something to drink?” She produced a large teapot and we thought it was rather odd to serve tea at that hour, but out of the teapot came neat gin, served in teacups *before lunch*! She was a very sick woman, and extremely neurotic too.

INTERVIEWER
What about older American authors – Henry James, Edith Wharton, et cetera?

LESLEY BLANCH
I have read them, and admire them greatly. By the way, a contemporary American writer I think supremely good is Gore Vidal. For his irony, wit, style, and the way he tears through American institutions. I am by nature an iconoclast myself and enjoy his bombshells. He is an old friend I cherish particularly.

INTERVIEWER
Do you have a routine for work? When do you work?
LESLEY BLANCH
I used to write early in the morning – I was rather matinale. When I was writing *The Sabres* in Hollywood and I was running a house and doing lots of entertaining, I used to write when I came back from a party, then have two or three hours sleep, get up at five and write till eight. Alternatively I would get up at three and work till seven, then get into the car and go up into the hills around Los Angeles to have breakfast in some cowboy café. But it was irregular work – Romain and the house came first.

INTERVIEWER
Nowadays you can write any time you wish, do you write more slowly?

LESLEY BLANCH
Sometimes it rattles off quickly. But there are certain types of work over which I get le trac [stage fright]: journalism and reviewing books. I hate the time limit and the clock. It is no good just skimming a book, you are reviewing. I read it carefully and write about it with care, whether panning or praising.

INTERVIEWER
Do you like writing? I mean the actual process – you write so beautifully and it reads so easy.

LESLEY BLANCH
Oh no! It’s hard! Painful! I sometimes write a page fifteen times. I use children’s exercise books with lines. There are twenty lines on a page, and I can see that each page represents about 220 words, so I know how I’m going. I throw out the notebooks after the first draft is typed. The pleasure is when you feel you have done something good. I will “die with my eyes closed,” as the old Oriental saying goes, for having written *The Sabres of Paradise*, because by so doing I’ve fulfilled a true desire.

INTERVIEWER
What about travelling? Did you like travelling rough or in comfort?

LESLEY BLANCH
I like impromptu travelling, roughing it one moment and the next going to dinner at an embassy. They usually know I’m there, and I take a stylish sort of dress with me and turn up looking terribly mondaine, having perhaps slept in the bus the night before. Then everybody asks one to endless lunches and dinners which if one accepted one would stop doing anything else. I have always particularly enjoyed going to the British Embassy in Turkey. It is such a historic place: it’s where Lord Stratford de Redcliffe gave a ball after the Crimean War and the Sultan, to mark his gratitude, left his palace for the first time and watched the dancers with great interest. Travelling, I like not to know what’s going to happen next, when you don’t know when and where you are going to sleep or what or who you will encounter.

INTERVIEWER
I know that for the moment you don’t undertake long, difficult journeys because of a broken knee, which luckily has healed almost completely. But where would you like to go next, if possible?
LESLEY BLANCH
I love Afghanistan more than anywhere else, perhaps, but how to go back now? I long for the Middle East too. Afghanistan is so unspoiled, so savage still, and the men are so handsome. You go over those appalling mountain passes and suddenly come across a little Chai-Khaneh [tea house] with a samovar, and a few grubby cushions, and you want to stay there forever. I never wanted to leave. I wanted to take a little house and live there, but they said I would never stand the winter; it gets to forty degrees below zero. I would have caught pneumonia and died, uncomfortably.

INTERVIEWER
Who are your favourite travel writers, past and present?

LESLEY BLANCH
Lucie Duff-Gordon’s Letters from Egypt is one of my livres de chevet. She lived and died there, and she adored the Egyptians. She became consumptive in 1850, and went to Luxor where later she died. But her understanding of the country and its people, and her description of the camaraderie she shared with them are marvellous. I feel a special affinity with her – I too feel very close to Egypt.

Tolstoy’s description of the Caucasus in The Cossacks is superb, as are Lermontov’s, though he is more cynical. I love Robert Byron – another cynic. He sent everything up, but he is supremely good. Lord Curzon is marvellous on Persia and Central Asia. Of today’s writers I think Peter Levi writes of his travels very well. He is a poet and an Oxford don. Some travel books are full of information, worthy, but I wish they combined it with fine writing, which is what you enjoy in Gérard de Nerval on Turkey, for example, or Flaubert on Egypt, or Loti everywhere. All these young travel writers nowadays give you masses of information, historical research and so on, but not much style. Dervla Murphy is so intrepid that one forgets she has first done her homework. Recently I read a curious book, Philip Glazebrook’s Journey to Kars; it is like no other, and records the sort of haphazard travelling which I myself like to do.

INTERVIEWER
Life is so precarious today that even the young, like my children and their friends, frequently have intimations of mortality. Do you think of death? It seems an incongruous question, not to say crass, to ask one so youthful and lively. Do you believe in an after-life? Or indeed in God?

LESLEY BLANCH
I don’t know. God is within us, if He is anywhere. Something like conscience. Sometimes I feel that heaven would be where I could meet all my animals again. People might be too complicated. For example, suppose a man has had two wives, one after another, and has loved them both deeply. Will he meet them both again? What would he do?

INTERVIEWER
En effet, the logistics of heaven don’t bear thinking about!

LESLEY BLANCH
I don’t want to die as long as I am well in my body and my mind. There are too many things I like doing. Life is a present; one can’t have enough of it, can one?