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Author(s): G. Rex Smith

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ROBIN LEONARD BIDWELL
1929–94

Robin Bidwell died suddenly at his home in Coney Weston, Suffolk, on 10 June 1994. From 1968 until his retirement in 1990, he had been Secretary of the Middle East Centre in the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Cambridge and wrote much on the subject of French and British colonial history.

Educated at Downside and Pembroke College, Cambridge, Bidwell gained a first in history. His first taste of the Middle East came when he was posted as an Intelligence Corps sergeant to the Suez Canal Zone in Egypt. He became a political officer in the Western Aden Protectorate in 1955, where he remained until 1959. His real Middle Eastern travels began thereafter when he was appointed as Oxford University Press travelling editor for the Middle East. His claim, when in 1965 he returned to Cambridge on a Hayter Scholarship to work under the late Professor Bob Serjeant, was that he had visited all the countries of the Middle East and North Africa without exception. His research on the French administration in Morocco earned him his PhD in 1968.

Bidwell had the wonderful gift of being able to write for both scholar and layman with equal facility. He had the innate skill too of being able to handle archives which he used a great deal in all his many publications. His *Affairs of Kuwait* and *Affairs of Arabia* were published in 1973. His lifelong fascination with those who had travelled to the remote and forbidden regions of Arabia produced *Travellers in Arabia* in 1976. His delight shortly after its publication was enormous when he received a personally signed letter from HMV *Britannia* expressing royal appreciation for his literary efforts. Bidwell's *The Two Yemens* is an enormous *tour de force* in which he unravels in great detail the history of both North and South Yemen from the nineteenth century down to the early 1980s. Ostensibly for the general reader, it draws on numerous written and oral sources and remains the standard scholarly text on the subject, written by an historian with a tremendous feeling for his subject. Although Bidwell was not himself a prolific article-writer—his monographs are, however, numerous—he negotiated with Serjeant in the early 1970s to bring into being the first journal devoted solely to the study of Arabia. *Arabian Studies* was born in 1974, a distinctive journal which continued to provide, despite the occasional financial difficulties, a unique blend of heavy-weight scholarship and the lighter efforts of the amateur researcher. Bidwell fortunately saw the first issue of its successor, *New Arabian Studies*, published in 1993, before his death.

Perhaps because of his lack of Arabic—he never really progressed beyond the *shufti bint* standard which he must have first acquired in the British Army in Egypt!—perhaps for other reasons, Bidwell remained under-appreciated and under-used in Cambridge. What little undergraduate teaching he undertook was well received and it was well known that he kept his audience captivated and entertained, as well as well informed, with the ready supply of anecdotes, both personal and second-hand, which figured in his lectures. He

was an effective and caring PhD supervisor who maintained a steady flow of excellently trained modern Middle Eastern historians, even if he had to have them registered in the Faculty of History in Cambridge to do so.

Bidwell was a man of tremendous fun and puckish humour. Nothing was sacred and beyond his ubiquitous wit. His very distinctive laugh reverberated wherever he was to be found. His Arabian and Middle Eastern adventures provided the background for many an amusing hour or so with friends. A great raconteur, he excelled when comfortably reinforced with a hot curry and a pint of good ale, his tales always peppered with cricketing imagery. Stories of his spoofs abound and it might be wise to take some with the proverbial pinch of salt. My own particular favourite is the completely fictional answer he provided in a Cambridge history tripos paper. Short of a prepared question in a mediaeval history paper, he simply invented an answer in which, I recall, 'Alfred the Web-footed' figured extremely prominently! When deprived of his company, his friends looked forward to his letters. In them when business was finished, he turned to news of his family, of the latest amorous adventure of his dog, of the recent scandal in the village. A great sports follower, he loved his cricket and his rugby. His old, faded MCC tie was brought out from time to time and the Varsity game at Twickenham every December only missed if he happened to be out of the country.

Bidwell married late in life. He and his wife Margaret delighted in their daughter, Leila. The family settled in the pleasant village of Coney Weston in Suffolk where they integrated well into the community, members of which turned out in force for his funeral.

Bidwell's lasting memorials are surely three: his greatly readable scholarly works; the journal *Arabian Studies* (latterly *New Arabian Studies*); and the Middle East Centre library in Cambridge which he created and nurtured with such tender loving care over the years.

'God rest him', he would utter himself. His family, friends and readers utter this same wish now.

G. REX SMITH