

Review: Britain in the Gulf: Review

Author(s): J. C. Wilkinson

Review by: J. C. Wilkinson

Source: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 134, No. 4 (Dec., 1968), pp. 552-554

Published by: [The Royal Geographical Society \(with the Institute of British Geographers\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1796385>

Accessed: 17-09-2015 11:11 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Geographical Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

and tired, but not apparently to a greater degree than on previous voyages. On the other hand, Prof. Beaglehole shows that the debacle on the shore of Kealahou Bay was due in large part to Cook's rash and over-confident proceedings. The train of events leading to his death, however, does have an air of inevitability; the unfortunate accident to *Resolution's* foremast head, after the first successful visit to Hawaii; the decision to return thither for repairs; the distinctly less rapturous reception; the increased amount of thieving; the scarcity of local supplies. It does not seem necessary, in these circumstances to accept that his reaction to the theft of the cutter, a serious loss, was due to deterioration in health or character. It is regrettable that his own Journal ends a month before these events, so that what might have proved enlightening evidence on this point is lacking. Prof. Beaglehole considers that, contrary to some opinions, Cook had been deified by the Hawaiians on the first visit; if so, this may well have contributed to complicate the nature of his reception on the unexpected return. However, all the contemporary evidence from which the reader may draw his own conclusions is gathered here. One effect of this wealth of material is, paradoxically, to push Cook rather into the background—the men whose versions of events are so meticulously recorded are such varied and interesting characters in their own right. Captain Cook is plainly Prof. Beaglehole's hero—indeed, unless this were so, one can scarcely conceive that he could have completed the arduous task of documenting the three voyages, now so efficiently completed. His conception of the man is accordingly cast in an heroic mould; the reluctance to accept the command, the labours during the 'long, tedious and disagreeable voyage' (as Gilbert regarded it), the deification, and the return to death at the hands of the people, are an almost classical sequence. One awaits with pleasurable anticipation the appearance of his biography of the great navigator, when the results of a lifetime's research will be focussed into one grand perspective.

G. R. CRONE

BRITAIN IN THE GULF

BRITAIN AND THE PERSIAN GULF 1795-1880. By J. B. KELLY. *Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. xiv + 911 pages; maps. £10 10s*

WHILST MANY WRITERS have been fascinated by the story of the Persian Gulf it has been the opening up of the official British archives in the post-war years that has provided the material for scholastic studies of the British connection with the Gulf. The first modern historian seriously to study these sources has been Dr. J. B. Kelly. Over a number of years we have been treated to several publications based on his researches, but it is only with this book that we have the major work for which many have been waiting. With its appearance some students of the Persian Gulf may now regret not allowing a longer gestation period between the doctoral conception and the birth of a book. The wise have steered clear of Dr. Kelly's special territory, but those who failed to do so probably regret ignoring the warning growls in some of his reviews.

The main lines of British policy in the Persian Gulf can be followed in J. G. Lorimer's *Gazetteer* and a number of précis on Persian Gulf affairs by J. A. Saldanha, all originally official secret compilations made at the beginning of this century. For a general study of the Gulf these are invaluable works, but by their very nature they are selective and inevitably interpretative. The dangers of treating them as primary sources are amply illustrated by Dr. Kelly's work. Through a meticulous use of the original reports and correspondence he has thrown entirely new light on many aspects of the British impact on the Persian Gulf that do not emerge in these official summaries of events.

Whilst Dr. Kelly concludes his book with the words 'Above all, it [the British position in the Gulf] has rested upon the exertions and sacrifices of the men who brought peace, justice, and the rule of law to the Gulf in the nineteenth century, and

in so doing wrote one of the most honourable pages in the history of the British Empire', he has no hesitation where necessary, in showing up the weaknesses of individuals and in criticizing the sometimes disastrous attitudes of the various groups who directed policy in the Gulf. Of particular interest is the light he throws on the character of Col. Lewis Pelly who, through his powerful sponsor, Sir Bartle Frere, had such extraordinary power as Resident in the Gulf in the 1860's that the people of Muscat believed he must have been related to the Queen of England. Pelly's baneful influence was felt at a crucial period both in the internal affairs of the Arabian States bordering the Gulf and in the evolution of British policy towards these States: 'His tenure of the Residency was to be marked, not only by indecorous quarrels with other political officers, but also by ill-judged or inept acts of policy, which were to involve his government more deeply than was wise in the politics of the Arabian shore, with consequences that are still being felt today.'

One of the most important aspects that comes through in this book is the effect British policy had on the State of Muscat and Oman in contrast with the maritime shajkhdoms of the Gulf proper. Throughout the nineteenth century British intervention in the affairs of the Gulf States was confined to the policy of ensuring tranquillity on the high seas, and also, for much of the time, with the suppression of the slave trade. The major problem in pursuing these policies was how to achieve the objectives without becoming physically involved in military expeditions by land.

Broadly speaking, there were five main political groupings bordering the Gulf with which the British had to deal—the Ottoman Empire, Persia, the Wahhabis, the miscellaneous maritime shajkhs and Oman. British dealings with the Ottoman Empire and Persia involved a far wider spectrum of interests than local issues in the Persian Gulf. Thus Dr. Kelly's accounts of the expeditions of Mehemet Ali towards the Gulf and the British-Persian war of 1856-7 are probably of greater interest for the light they throw on British relations with the two major empires of the present-day Middle East than for his immediate subject. From the local Gulf point of view it was the affairs of the last three groupings that most affected the stability of the maritime peace and here the dictum of non-intervention by land resulted in policies that were often anomalous. It is largely out of these nineteenth century policies that the extraordinary pattern of States or putative States that border the Arabian coast of the Gulf today has arisen. Having early on rejected the idea of placing many of the minor shajkhdoms under the general tutelage of the Sultan of Muscat and Oman, Britain found herself increasingly involved in a series of *ad hoc* arrangements with them which inevitably involved some form of guarantee for their independence. Thus the perennial Persian claim to suzerainty over Bahrain, never taken very seriously in the nineteenth century has proved to be one of the major stumbling blocks facing British withdrawal from the Gulf today and, as with so many of the other current political problems there, the historical background is to be found in Dr. Kelly's book.

The real threat in the nineteenth, and for that matter part of the twentieth centuries to these Arab shajkhdoms lay less in their internecine quarrels, severely curtailed by the maritime truces sponsored by the British in the first half of the last century, but from the political situation in the Arabian mainland. The ever-present threat to the maritime peace came from the Wahhabis whose militancy had largely been responsible for the piracy of the Jowasim that led to the first direct involvement of the British in the affairs of the Persian Gulf. Limited to the range of a naval bombardment Britain nevertheless managed to contain the Wahhabi threat by a judicious mixture of threat and appeasement—encouraging the maritime States on occasion to pay *zakat* to the Wahhabis—combined with representations to the Egyptians and Turks who exerted nominal or effective control over the Wahhabi Amirs for much of the century.

The other power on the Arabian mainland was Oman. As its title implies there is a fundamental territorial dichotomy in the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman. When the peoples of its mountainous interior are united they are capable of maintaining direct authority over their strategic and commercially important coastal provinces and Oman then enjoys the power and wealth deriving from its traditional role as a major maritime

power in the Indian Ocean. It was with such a unified country that the French and British sought to make treaty arrangements during the period with which Dr. Kelly starts his historical narrative. It would be impossible in such a short space to discuss the development of British relations with Oman covered by this book but, by the end of the nineteenth century, Dr. Kelly concludes, 'Oman . . . had fallen from its once powerful and prosperous place as the leading mercantile and maritime power in the Gulf, and was now putting up the shutters against the outside world'.

With Oman, Britain was dealing with a national entity that was both a land as well as a maritime power. Obsessed by the determination to end the slave trade from Oman's East African territories, and concerned only with Oman's role as a maritime power, the British were largely responsible not only for the formal divorce of Oman from her African empire under the dubious judgment of the Canning Award but also for the estrangement of the Al Bu Sa'id Sultans in Muscat from their subjects in the interior. Although the British Home Government was motivated by high-minded zeal it was unfortunate that British officials in the Gulf and Zanzibar showed a considerable lack of insight in understanding Oman's problems. Had men of the quality of Col. E. C. Ross been appointed to the Gulf in the 1860's perhaps the mishandling of the Imām 'Azzān b. Qays, the unhappy results of which are still being felt today, might have been averted. Col. Pelly never appears to have been able to distinguish between Wahhābism and Ibādism and even Dr. Kelly, who is nothing if not sympathetic to the Omanis, dismisses Sa'id b. Khalfān al-Khalīlī the leading Ibāḍī 'ālim who sponsored 'Azzān, as a fanatic.

It is in dealing with Oman that the danger of entirely relying on the British official sources becomes apparent. Whilst the net result of Britain's dealings with the shaikhdoms of the Persian Gulf proper is creditable and led to results profitable to both parties, in the case of Oman Britain was the unwitting instrument in destroying a nation whose economy and political organization was out of tune with the ideology of nineteenth century Christian Europe. The British interpretation of events is therefore unlikely to be completely impartial and whilst Dr. Kelly has made every effort to be fair the very sources with which he deals have coloured his approach. Oman has an extremely involved history and its sense of national unity along with its social and political organization has developed from a background that can only be understood through a serious study of the extensive local source material. This in no way implies a criticism of Dr. Kelly's remarkable research. It merely indicates that whilst there is probably little to add from the British sources to the period covered by his book, there is scope for further research to understand exactly what the impact of British policy in the nineteenth century has meant for Oman.

For those who have a real interest in the countries of the Persian Gulf Dr. Kelly's book is essential. Some may feel that its author goes too far in dotting his i's and crossing his t's, but we must be grateful that despite the detailed approach to the complexities of this highly important period of Gulf history, he has been able to write a coherent story that is eminently readable.

J. C. WILKINSON

RIVER PLAINS, SEA COASTS AND COASTAL INLETS

RIVER PLAINS AND SEA COASTS. By RICHARD J. RUSSELL. *University of California Press; London: Cambridge University Press, 1967. 173 pages; text-figures, plates. 83s*

ESTUARIES. Ed. by GEORGE H. LAUFF. Publication No. 83, Amer. Assoc. Advanc. Sci. *Washington: 1967. 757 pages; maps, text-figures, plates. £14 15s*

A review which covers two books of such very unequal size may well lack cohesion. However, on closer examination it will be seen that the smaller book may in some ways serve as an introduction to the greater. It is also relevant that the author of the smaller was also a contributor to the Conference on Estuaries.