

BACKGROUND BOOKS

OMAN

"The people of Muscat seemed to me to be the cleanest, neatest, best-dressed, and most gentlemanly of all the Arabs that I had ever yet seen," recalled J. S. Buckingham, a British traveler, after a visit in 1816.

Buckingham's observations are preserved in historian J. B. Kelly's **Britain and the Persian Gulf** (Oxford, 1968), a survey of British involvement in the region from 1795 to 1880. As Kelly makes clear, Britain's ever-growing commercial and political interests in the Gulf ensured that Oman saw more than its share of British adventurers, diplomats, and journalists.

Men like James Welsted, an Indian Army officer in Oman in the early 19th century, and Samuel Miles, British political agent in Muscat (PAM) from 1872-76, brought British influence directly to bear on the Sultanate.

Welsted's **Travels in Arabia** (J. Murray, 1838), a classic description of Oman in the early 1800s, traces its author's route through the interior and along the coast. Miles, combining diplomacy with exploration, traveled widely as "PAM," recording his impressions of Omani history and culture in **Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf** (1919; Cass, 1966).

Such personal recollections abound, as do elegant coffee-table books. One of the latter is **Oman and Its Renaissance** (Stacey International, 1977) by former British envoy Donald Hawley. Thoroughly researched, Hawley's photographic survey of Oman depicts everything from the green palm gardens of the Batinah coastal plain to the six-hundred-foot dunes of the daunting Rub 'al-Khali desert. W. D. Peyton's **Old Oman** (Stacey International, 1983), a compendium of portraits and landscapes dated 1900-70, complements Hawley's book with an earlier look at Oman.

Readers in search of good general his-

stories of Oman, however, will have to look hard. Maverick U.S. oilman and amateur archaeologist Wendell Phillips provides one of the few in **Oman: A History** (Reynal, 1967). Highly colorful, somewhat idiosyncratic, Phillips's account draws on Arab sources to describe such intervals in Omani history as the "pirate wars" at the turn of the 19th century. "The most troublesome pirate captain," writes Phillips, "was one Rahma bin Jaubir, the very type of the 'Barbary pirate' of fiction: he had the capture of entire fleets to his credit, he gave no quarter... his body and face were a mass of disfiguring scars."

Buccaneering aside, tribes have always supplied the structure for Omani economic and social life, and **Tribes in Oman** (Peninsular, 1982) by J. R. L. Carter describes them. Carter, a former tribal liaison officer for Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), outlines one fundamental division that persists in modern-day Oman: "the old rivalry between the town or *hadr* tribes, and the desert or *bedu* tribes." The *bedu* like to tell a story about a townsman who, sleeping in the desert for the first time, thought that the stars were the Devil's eyes and died of fright.

Carter finds that, though they may deny it, townsfolk and nomads rely on each other in a patron-client relationship.

Interdependence has not always meant peaceful coexistence, as the Dhufar Rebellion (1963-75) proved. In polyglot Dhufar, under the sultan's direct administration only since 1880, "ferment had been a... pastime for hundreds of years," writes Brigadier John Akehurst in **We Won a War** (Russell, 1982), his chronicle of the assimilation of the isolated southern province.

Akehurst recalls the *firqat* (Jibali tribesmen recruited to fight for the sultan) and their enthusiasm for their new cause. When shown battle films, "chosen

mainly for their visual effect," the *firqat* would get so excited that they would fire their rifles at the screen.

Fortunately, northern Omanis no longer say, "If you see a snake and a Dhofari on your path, kill the Dhofari first," notes journalist Liesl Gratz in **The Omanis: Sentinels of the Gulf** (Longman, 1982). Gratz, in a rosy account of her own sojourns in contemporary Oman, argues that modernization has not yet destroyed the Omanis' traditional patterns of life.

In Suhar the oil boom has changed the lives of the inhabitants only slowly. Anthropologist Unni Wikan's **Behind the Veil in Arabia** (Johns Hopkins, 1982) pictures the enduring separation of the sexes: Suhar divides "into male and female spheres, roughly commensurate with the public and private domains." Outside the home, Suhari women wear the *burqa* (face mask) as "a secluding and beautifying device," to them no more a symbol of oppression than a blouse is to a Western woman.

Based on contacts with Suhari women inside their homes, Wikan's book also discusses the *xaniths*, transsexual male prostitutes who style themselves women and are accepted as such by both sexes.

As toleration of the *xaniths* suggests, the old and the new may not be the polar opposites that many Westerners assume. J. E. Peterson argues in **Oman in the Twentieth Century** (Barnes & Noble, 1978) that even now "the new face of the country's politics [is] firmly rooted in pre-1970 foundations." Oil executives, for example, often rely on prominent sheiks, traditional arbiters, to act as intermediaries between the company and its tribal workers.

Even so, since Qabus's coup, the Omani regime has been "trying very hard to put a modern image before its own people and the world," comments John Townsend, former British adviser to Qabus, in **Oman: The Making of a Modern State** (St. Martin's, 1977). Remarkably candid, the book has been banned in Oman because of its mixed review of Qabus's government.

To Townsend, one of the more glaring failures of Qabus's regime is its failure to organize a system of water conservation and management. Qabus's top advisers apparently believe that it "is only a question of drilling [wells] in the right place"; as a result, "indiscriminate drilling and pumping" have caused irreversible damage to valuable ground water resources.

What happens to the "new" Oman depends as much on events outside its borders as decisions made within them. The Gulf states, argue the editors of **The Persian Gulf States: A General Survey** (Johns Hopkins, 1980), can be viewed as "a unit, with a common geography, history, economics, and culture." But political scientist David Long, in **The Persian Gulf** (Westview, rev. ed., 1978), thinks that differences predominate, with religious (Sunni versus Shi'a), ethnic (Persian versus Arab), and political (Marxist versus monarchist) schisms dividing the region.

Autocratic, multi-ethnic Oman will certainly feel the pull of other Gulf ideologies. But in **Arabia, the Gulf and the West** (Basic, 1980), J. B. Kelly emphasizes that the Omanis, looking to their long history, "have a tranquil pride which sets them apart." They are likely to defy easy prediction: "What the future holds for Oman is Oman's secret."

—Jennifer L. Howard

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jennifer L. Howard is copy editor of the Wilson Quarterly. Some of the titles in this essay were suggested by Calvin H. Allen, Jr. For related titles, see WQ Background Books essays on Saudi Arabia (Winter '79) and Energy: 1945-1980 (Spring '81).