
BACKGROUND BOOKS

SAUDI ARABIA

All Muslims look to that part of the Arab world which today calls itself Saudi Arabia—the only kingdom ever named for a family—as the birthplace and cradle of Islam. The prophet Muhammad was born c. A.D. 570 in Mecca, already a place of pilgrimage for the tribes called the “People of Allah” or the “Protected Neighbors of Allah.” He began preaching on the oneness of Allah—at a time when most Arabs were polytheists worshiping not only Allah but a pantheon of other deities.

Islam’s emergence in world history dates from Muhammad’s move to Medina in A.D. 622. En route to that city in the Hejaz, his men attacked a caravan under the protection of his kinsmen from Mecca, who thereupon dubbed him “divider” and sought, unsuccessfully, to overrun his Medina stronghold. The 1000-year period of wars, conquests, and conversions that saw Muhammad and the caliphs who succeeded him spreading Islam throughout the Mediterranean world and the continent and distant islands to the East had begun.

For the Westerner, the standard reference work on the Arabs and other Muslims is **The Cambridge History of Islam**, edited by P. M. Holt et al. (Cambridge, 1970, 2 vols., cloth; 1977, 4 vols., paper). This work, hailed by British and American scholars, is a target of a slashing new attack on studies of Islam by Westerners. In **Orientalism** (Pantheon, 1978), Edward W. Said, a Columbia University professor of comparative literature and winner of the first (1976) Lionel Trilling Award for

criticism, writes that “none of the innumerable Orientalist texts on Islam, including their summa, *The Cambridge History*,” can prepare the reader “for what has taken place since 1948 in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or the Yemens.”

This is true—despite the fact that much early French, German, and British Orientalism was based on observations in just these countries, especially Egypt (site of the first great Islamic university, Al-Azhar, founded A.D. 1006 in Cairo). And far more has been written in recent years about these Muslim nations, where Muhammad’s doctrine now appears to have been diluted, than about the long-isolated, more conservative Arabs of Saudi Arabia.

A few Western travelers did venture into the great desert interior of peninsular Arabia before its formal establishment as a nation in 1934. They included such exemplars of the archetypal British eccentric-explorer-writer-imperialist tradition as Charles Doughty, Richard Burton, Lady Hester Stanhope, Gertrude Bell, and others. Long before they had their turn, however, **Travels in Arabia the Desart** was published in London in 1718. Written in the 1690s by the Chevalier D’Arvieux soon after his return to France from many years in the East, it is an account of his service as a young French consular official. Laurence D’Arvieux learned Arabic, grew a beard, and negotiated a treaty to permit the Christian order of Barefoot Carmelites to resettle on Mt. Carmel (now in Israel). In what became standard practice for West-

ern visitors, he writes more about his own Arabian garb and the romance of the desert than about the Arabs, although the degree of civilization and courtesy he encountered in the tents of the amirs earned his astonished admiration.

"The sun made me an Arab," declared Charles M. Doughty, whose pioneering account of the Hejaz, **Travels in Arabia Deserta** (Cambridge, 1888), has appeared in many editions. An abridgement edited by Edward Garnett, **Passages from Arabia Deserta** remains available (Peter Smith reprint, 1978). Doughty's book is less notable for its content than for its historic influence on the Victorian archeologists, explorers, and missionaries whose imaginations he fired. For them, the empty sand wastes, exotic Bedouins, and oases of Arabia provided a setting against which the affairs of Empire were being played out, with a Kiplingesque White Man, not an Arab, in charge.

Sir Richard F. Burton, famed as a 19th-century traveler to India and other exotic lands, translated the harem tales known to most schoolchildren as *The Arabian Nights*. His original English text and notes on **The Thousand Nights and a Night** was privately printed for subscribers by London's Burton Club in 1905, a generation after Lady Burton's sanitized version "for household reading" (London: Waterlow, 1887) had achieved wide popularity. Among Sir Richard's many "true adventure" books, one describing Saudi cities is his sometimes fanciful, sometimes pedantic **Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah**, also edited by Lady Burton (London: Longman, 1857; Dover, 1964, 2 vols., paper).

The 20th century's best known

literary descendant of the Victorian Arabophiles was an Oxford graduate, Thomas Edward Lawrence, who first went to the Middle East on an archeological dig in 1913. Already it was clear that Turkey might side with Germany against England in the event of war. Young T. E. Lawrence was recruited by British intelligence to reconnoiter places where fighting might occur. He wore Arab dress, learned local dialects, sympathized with the tribal societies' desire for freedom from the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Soon after the outbreak of World War I, he was employed in Cairo as an intelligence officer. His dramatic role in the fierce hit-and-run fighting against the Turks, after the Arab Revolt of 1916 began, gave him his lifelong identification as "Lawrence of Arabia."

Much has been written about the man, including U.S. broadcaster-travelogist Lowell Thomas's highly colored, out-of-print **With Lawrence in Arabia** (London: Hutchinson, 1924, cloth; Popular Library, 1971, paper). Richard Aldington's debunking **Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry** (London: Collins, 1955; Greenwood reprint, 1976) helps to correct the record, although Aldington gives Lawrence less credit and credibility than is his due. Neither author notes the homosexuality that Lawrence hints at in his own powerful **Seven Pillars of Wisdom: a triumph** (London: Cape, 1935, cloth; Penguin, 1976, paper).

"I was sent to [the] Arabs as a stranger," Lawrence writes, "unable to think their thoughts or subscribe to their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England in her war. . . . In my case, the efforts for

these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes; they destroyed it all for me."

Another Britisher involved in the desert intrigues and battles of World War I was Harry St. John Bridger Philby, seconded by his government in 1917 as political officer to King Ibn Saud, rival of the Sherif of Mecca for control of the territory wrested from the Turks. Out of Philby's experiences came several books, notably his *Arabia of the Wahhabis* (London: 1927 and 1977; New Jersey, Frank Cass, 1977), part of a trilogy, *The Heart of Arabia*. His *Arabian Jubilee* (London: Hale, 1952) is a colorful celebration of Ibn Saud's achievements over half a century. Part genealogy, part military history, part desert lore, part political analysis, it closes with the king's brother Abdullah gently quoting the Prophet: "The last hour will not come upon the world until the Island of the Arabs is transformed into a land of meadows and rivers."

British writers continued to recount their own adventures as the Saudis moved toward modernity. Freya Stark wrote *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (London: Murray, 1936; Transatlantic reprint, 1972) about her attempt to follow the old incense road across southern Arabia (where frankincense and myrrh are still produced) to the Yemen; she failed to reach Shabwa, the ancient capital. Bertram Thomas described his 1930 crossing on camelback of the "Empty Quarter"—a half-million-square-mile desert in the south that stretches 900 miles from the frontier of Yemen to the foothills of Oman—in *Arabia Felix* (London: Cape, 1938).

But the literature on Saudi Arabia soon changed as the result of the discovery of oil, in 1931, in the neighboring British protectorate of Bahrain. Today most of what little is written about the Saudis is highly specialized—economic, political, or sociological.

One British journalist's book, *The Seven Sisters* by *London Observer* correspondent Anthony Sampson (Viking, 1975), analyzes the politics of oil, the role of the major companies in international diplomacy, and the 1973 crisis when OPEC solidarity showed the companies (and their world customers) that economic power had been snatched from them by the Arab governments.*

In passing, Sampson tells how St. John Philby, by the 1930s no longer a member of the Colonial Service but an anti-British Arabist who had embraced Islam, persuaded Ibn Saud to bring in an American geologist (who had already tried, unsuccessfully, to find new water sources) to prospect for oil. He found it in 1938.

Discovery (Beirut: Export Press, 1971), an Aramco-supported company history of the years 1933–45, by Wallace E. Stegner (better known as a short-story writer) provides additional background on the Americans who drilled the first wells and built the first pipeline in 120° heat—and on the wives who accompanied them to the old Red Sea port city of Jidda, which quickly became a frontier boom town.

Karl S. Twitchell, the Vermont

*A special issue of *Daedalus* (vol. 104, no. 4, 1975) provides perhaps the best country-by-country account of the 1973–74 Arab oil embargo; as Western governments failed to coordinate their responses, the major international oil companies quietly reallocated available supplies and averted a more serious crisis.

Yankee geologist who found the king's oil, later wrote **Saudi Arabia, with an Account of the Development of its Natural Resources** (Princeton, 1947; Greenwood reprint, 3rd ed., 1969). Twitchell's book briefly covers his own part in the oil drama, but is largely an enthusiastic account of agricultural development, small industries (pearling, boat building), and the Saudi government's hopes for extension of the nation's limited water supply despite Bedouin resistance to irrigation. Even the revised edition is now partly out of date, but academics still recommend it as one of the few good overviews available.

Another is the U.S. Foreign Area Studies **Area Handbook for Saudi Arabia** (Government Printing Office, 1977), dry but complete through 1976. **Saudi Arabia** by Mahmoud Samir Ahmed (Chase World Information Corporation, 1976), a volume in Chase Manhattan Bank's series on the Middle East and North Africa, is keyed to the needs of corporate executives. It provides the same kinds of basic information as the *Area Handbook* with more on financial opportunities (including the sale of professional and consulting services) and on transport, communication, and other expenditures under the nation's two five-year plans. One example: specific building costs and funding (3,228.4 SR millions, or roughly \$920 million) for the transformation of a small private college into the full-fledged King Abd al-Aziz University, with five campuses in

Jidda and two in Mecca, supplementing the University of Riyadh and the University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran.

Recent technical studies include **Saudi Arabian Development Strategy** by Donald A. Wells (American Enterprise Institute, 1976); **The Saudi Arabian Economy** by Ramon Knauerhase (Praeger, 1975); and **Saudi Arabia and Oil Diplomacy** (Praeger, 1976) by Sheikh Rustum Ali, a Bangladesh foreign service officer.

What modernity means to the tribes is the subject of **Bedouin Village, A Study of a Saudi Arabian People in Transition** by a Japanese sociologist, Motoko Katadura (Univ. of Tokyo, 1977). It was researched in the Wadi Fatima area in western Saudi Arabia—more liberal than the rest of the country. Author Katadura defines a village as any settlement where residents have built a mosque or a cemetery; it can range in size from as few as 5 tents or houses to as many as 600. Even before the massive post-1973 increase in oil revenues accelerated the process, she found former nomads and semi-nomads in the Wadi Fatima getting jobs as truck drivers and planting vegetables and melons for sale to markets as far away as Beirut. Their women, she discovered, traditionally enjoyed considerable independence (in one village, they initiated half of the divorces) that bodes well, she believes, for the Saudis' ability to cope with change ahead.

EDITOR'S NOTE. *Help in selecting these books was provided by John Duke Anthony, among other scholars, and by Peter Satriis of the Bankers Trust Company in New York.*