

# CURRENT BOOKS

## FELLOWS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center*

**MACKINDER: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft**  
by W.H. Parker  
Oxford, 1982  
295 pp. \$34.95

The British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) is today best remembered for his "Heartland" theory: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the world." He is also recognized for coining "land-power," "man-power," and other terms now enjoying wide currency among policy-makers.

But Mackinder did much more than expand the lexicon of geopolitics. In addition to lecturing and writing extensively on geography, he served as a High Commissioner to Russia, a member of Parliament, and director of the London School of Economics. Impressive as Mackinder's career was, W. H. Parker, a former Oxford lecturer in geography, concentrates more on his subject's ideas and influence than on his life. Though Mackinder was an old-fashioned conservative in his politics, he possessed a powerful, future-oriented intellectual vision. Indeed, many of his notions have more relevance today than they did in his own time.

Some writers, including Parker, see the Heartland concept as the foundation of the American theory of Soviet "containment," though there is little evidence that the chief architect of containment, diplomat George F. Kennan, drew anything from Mackinder's work. Others clearly did. Mackinder's theory, distorted by German interpreters, was invoked by Hitler to justify his invasion of the Soviet Union, the vast interior of which corresponded to the Heartland. Richard Nixon, in his recent book, *The Real War* (1980), uses the concept to describe Soviet ambitions. Russians have always been puzzled, and a little alarmed, by Western strategists' preoccupation with their relatively inaccessible interior. As Mackinder himself originally envisioned it, the Heartland was simply that inner part of Eurasia having "no available waterways to the ocean"—a no-drainage zone. (He discerned a "second" Heartland in Africa, south of the Sahara.) Since the 1973 oil embargo, the strategic advantages of the Soviet interior—both its mineral wealth and its proximity to the resources of the Persian Gulf nations and of China—have become more apparent, thus giving more substance to Western fears.

Although usually considered a theorist of land-power, Mackinder, as a loyal son of the British Empire, was (like the American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan) a believer in "sea-power." Unless Great Britain were more efficiently linked to her overseas possessions, he argued, she would be overtaken by the emergent "continental empires": America, Russia, China. He realized, however, that imperial unity could be maintained only

by cooperation between England and its dependencies. Alert as a political geographer and social conservative to the virtues of local autonomy, he outspokenly favored partial devolution for the Empire and even for the British Isles themselves. In 1919, he proposed in Parliament a plan for subdividing England into three parts—London, agricultural England, and the industrial North—giving legislative powers to each, as well as to Scotland, Wales, and the two parts of Ireland. "Would my hon. Friend not go a little further and re-establish the Kingdom of Kent?" a critic mockingly inquired. Growing interest in administrative decentralization in Great Britain today makes Mackinder's scheme seem less fanciful.

Mackinder's fundamental concern, stated most fully in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), was to maintain the vitality of the British people. A country's manpower ("capital fixed in humanity") was its greatest asset. Nothing threatened Britain's manpower more, Mackinder foresaw, than massive unemployment, to which Britain's free-trading, specialized economy made her especially vulnerable. Though in theory profitable for any society, laissez-faire, he believed, would eventually impoverish imperial England, not by reducing its "wealth" but by undercutting its technical versatility and its adaptiveness. A united, educated citizenry, confident of its varied skills, was far more important than cheap imports. Therefore, although he had begun his career as a champion of free-trade imperialism, he quickly became a leader in the movement for tariff reform (i.e., protectionism). The trend of present-day liberal-internationalist thought interestingly parallels Mackinder's evolution.

The century's most famous geographer stands out as the embodiment of what he himself liked to call "outlook"—taking the long view. "I can see him now," recalled a former student, Sir Horace Wilson, "explaining the economic (and politico-economic) significance of the Urals, the Alps, or the Andes as if he were atop one of them—or was indeed a part of them."

—Alan K. Henrikson, '78

**BEHIND THE VEIL IN ARABIA:**

**Women in Oman**  
by Unni Wikan  
Johns Hopkins, 1982  
314 pp. \$23.50

Unni Wikan is a young Norwegian anthropologist whose first book was an extraordinary work called *Life Among the Poor in Cairo* (1980). In it, she described the family lives of a small group of people in one of the slums of the sprawling Egyptian capital, painting a bleak picture of continual quarreling and malice, gossip and violence, suspicion, emotional crudity, and hypocrisy, all in a crowded and filthy environment.

Wikan's latest study took her to Sohar, a town that could hardly be more different from Cairo. Located on the coast of Oman, near the mouth of the Persian Gulf, it has a population of only about 15,000. Its menfolk live mainly by migrant labor, the cultivation of date palms, and fishing. In sharp contrast to Cairo, the town is relatively homogeneous in terms of