

Kingmakers: the Invention of the Modern Middle East

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The intention of this book is to 'retell' the history of the Middle East through 'the medium of individuals' (p. 18). But not any individuals, only those in the 'Middle East kingmaking business' (p. 158). None of the thirteen men, ten British and three American, and two women, both British, who feature most prominently in this nicely produced volume 'attained the summit of national power' (p. 18). Nevertheless, according to the co-authors, all were 'instrumental in building nations, defining borders, and selecting or helping to select local rulers' (p. 18).

What follows is a broad survey covering 120 years beginning with the arrival of Lord Cromer, Sir Evelyn Baring, the scion of the Baring banking family, in Cairo in 1883, as Queen Victoria's Plenipotentiary and Consul-General in Egypt. It ends with a chapter on former US deputy-secretary of defence, Paul Wolfowitz, who earns his place in this book for his role in instigating the ill-fated US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

What all those featured here share is 'an insatiable curiosity' (p. 133), 'polyglot talents' (p. 235), not to mention self belief, and a proclivity for self-promotion, though none were necessarily as popular or held in such high esteem by those they governed or those they served, as they were with themselves. When Cromer gave his farewell address, prior to leaving his post as Consul-General in Egypt in 1907 after 24 years, only 'three unsmiling Egyptians' (p. 52), turned out to hear 'Over-Baring', as he was nicknamed in his younger days in India.

Similarly, when news filtered out that Harry St. John Bridger Philby, a key western player in the consolidation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, had converted to Islam in Mecca, King Abdullah of Trans-

Jordan, with whom he had clashed while serving as the Hashemite king's chief British representative, reputedly commented 'Islam has gained little, Christianity has lost even less' (p.251).

As early as the first chapter on Earl Cromer's extended sojourn in Egypt certain themes emerge that return time and again throughout the book – the role of the media in influencing policy-making and perceptions in the Middle East; the Anglo-American alliance; the 'frequently divergent approaches to imperial rule' (p. 32) emanating from New Delhi and Cairo, the two British power centres in the Middle East for much of the period under discussion.

The Cromer chapter also sets a precedent for the welcome tendency of the authors to introduce us not only to the key individuals who merit their own chapters, but to a whole cast of secondary players, some of whom turn up time and again. So, for example, in the Cromer chapter we get a fascinating insight into Lord Curzon, Alfred Milner and the rest of the 'New Imperialists'. We also get an extended look at Charles George Gordon, described by the authors as 'an almost mythic Christian soldier of fortune' (p. 40), whose inglorious demise in Sudan only added to his reputation.

It says a lot about the kind of individuals who chose to dedicate their lives to the Imperial cause in the Middle East that there is no shortage of men and women who could challenge Gordon in terms of eccentricity, ambition and egoism. Sir Edmund Ironside, the youngest major general in the British army at 37, makes a brief appearance but is not easily forgotten. Nor is Cecil Rhodes, who along with a whole cast of lesser figures, is introduced to us in the chapter on Lord and Lady Lugard (Flora Shaw, the most famous and influential female journalist and commentator of the Victorian era, who along with Gertrude Bell is the only female 'kingmaker' covered in this book).

Given the quantity and quality of British officials who dealt with the Middle East in the period under examination, it was always going to be hard to decide who to include and who to leave out. We all have our own favourites, and I would have liked to have seen a chapter on the engaging and infuriating Sir Ronald Storrs, Oriental Secretary of the British Agency in Cairo between 1907 and 1917, and then the first military governor of Jerusalem, in the wake of Allenby's conquest of Palestine in late 1917. A man of many gifts, historical accuracy was not one of them. Indeed, it was the discrepancy between what Elie Kedourie read in Storrs' memoirs, *Orientalism*, and his own experience growing up in the Middle East which led him to switch his speciality to Middle Eastern studies and to write his great early work *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914–1921*.⁽¹⁾

Having said that, the authors are to be commended for including a chapter on Lord and Lady Lugard, not only because they are far less known now than many imperial figures who do not get their own chapter, but also because their careers and interests focused primarily on Africa, rather than the Middle East. For, as the authors correctly point out, Lugard's 'recipe for Indirect Rule' was very significant because its strategy of 'rent a sheik, buy an emir' was a 'template for future imperial adventure in the Middle East' (p.93).

The co-authors, Karl E. Meyer, a journalist and Shareen Blair Brysac a television news producer are seasoned collaborators, used to communicating big ideas to a non-specialist audience. These skills are apparent throughout much of this book. The writing is often excellent. Summing up the ambitions of Reza Khan, the founder of Iran's Pahlavi dynasty, we are told that he 'wanted it both ways: to preserve the feudal prerogatives of royalty while seeking the global prestige of being Persia's enlightened modernizer' (p. 317). Later in the book, they capture the waste, egomania and corruption of Reza's son and heir, Mohammad Reza Shah, in a short but illuminating description of the 'stupendous gala' (p. 341) hosted by the Shah to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire

The relationship between Philby and Abdullah of Jordan is captured nicely in the following: ‘a brief honeymoon, a long truce, and finally a Cold War’ (p. 246), while the description of Gertrude Bell’s ‘enthusiasms, her crushes, her air of “posh jubilation”’ (p. 159) and her ‘unhappy forays into male attachment’ (p. 167) leave us in no doubt that the personal life of Iraq’s Oriental secretary and the only female political officer in the British forces was far less successful than her professional one.

Through no fault of their own, the authors cannot compete with their subjects when it comes to flair and style. Almost all of those examined here seem to have been blessed with writing skills that equalled, and at times surpassed, their imperial ambitions. Take Sir Mark Sykes, who earns his own chapter on the grounds that he was the ‘godparent of modern Israel’ (p. 95), as well as the man who ‘came closest to being the stage manager of the postwar Middle East’ (p. 104). Sykes detested Bell and dismissed her as a ‘flat-chested, man-woman, globe trotting, rump-wagging, blithering ass’. Put downs just don’t come better than that.

Unfortunately, the Sykes chapter is one of the weakest in this work. We get a potted history of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Hussein-McMahon correspondence and the Balfour Declaration. We get a glimpse into Sykes’ dysfunctional family history and we get a conventional retelling of how Sykes, who died young in 1919, turned the Middle East upside down in a few short years.

Though the authors touch on it, it would have been far more interesting to have had a much deeper forensic examination of Sykes’ significance in influencing the history of Zionism, Israel and the Middle East compared to his senior Unionist colleagues – Bonar-Law, Balfour, Milner, Curzon, Lord Robert Cecil, and Lord Derby – all of whom sat in the coalition government formed in December 1916.

Instead the authors take the easy option and fast-forward to a 2006 *Washington Post* column by Richard Cohen arguing that ‘the greatest mistake Israel could make at the moment, is to forget that Israel itself is a mistake’. They then quote Edwin Montagu, Elizabeth Monroe and Colonel Edward House, President Wilson’s adviser, to show that Cohen’s claim is ‘scarcely a new contention’ (p.124). This is very superficial stuff indeed. It is ahistorical, throws no light on Sykes’s contribution to the ‘kingmaking’ business and doesn’t address why House, Montagu, or Monroe felt such antipathy towards Zionism, which the latter described as nothing more than a movement populated by a ‘flood of gunning tarzans and quivering refugees’.[\(2\)](#)

It comes as no surprise that of all those examined in this volume it is hardest to say anything new about T. E. Lawrence. As the authors tell us there are around 60 English language biographies of Lawrence and just under two million mentions of him on the World Wide Web as of late 2006, more than double the references to Haig, Kitchener and Allenby combined. As such, they wisely attempt to avoid rehashing what is widely known about Lawrence of Arabia, or the ‘Achilles of the Great War’ as they describe this ‘supporting actor who stole the show’ (p. 195). Instead they offer a ‘selective tour through this immense literature’ (p. 196) in order to address three questions. ‘Is his fame commensurate with his achievements’, how did the Lawrence legend acquire such ‘epic proportions’ and how can one explain his ‘ongoing allure in an age that devalues heroics?’ (p. 196).

What follows is an odd excursus into this ‘odd genius’ (p. 211). In their attempt to find a new way to tell the Lawrence story the authors devote much of the last section of the chapter to an examination of David Lean’s Lawrence movie starring Peter O’Toole to see if it ‘captured the essence’ (p. 219) of the man. Their overall conclusion falls a bit flat. ‘Put simply’, it seems that Lawrence appeals to the ‘populist devil in all of us, the rule-breaker and challenger of orthodoxy who compels the world to accept his own impudent self-valuation’ (p. 224).

If the Sykes and Lawrence chapters are the two least satisfactory from the historian’s perspective, then the two strongest are those on Lieutenant-General Sir Jon Bagot Glubb, or Glubb Pasha as he came to be known during his 26 years at the head of the Arab Legion between 1930 and 1956, and on Harry St. John Bridger Philby. The authors give ‘six reasons’ why Glubb deserves inclusion, including the fact that there is ‘no

better example of the professional soldier enamoured of the Bedouin nomad' (p. 265). While Philby, 'a fallen Britannic angel' (p. 228) earns inclusion because in his role in developing the nascent Saudi state he was the 'Western Kingmaker who left the deepest strategic imprint on the Middle East' (p. 230). It is hard to argue with either of these claims, but more importantly in both of these chapters the authors do a fine job in evoking the antagonisms, ambitions and humiliations (both imagined and real) that drove these two men.

The man responsible for sending Philby off to Arabia to meet Ibn Saud for the first time was Sir Arnold Wilson. He gets his own chapter on the grounds that he is the 'forgotten territorial begetter of today's Iraq' (p. 128). The authors find Wilson a bit of a bore. But they also acknowledge that this 'dedicated, stiff-necked imperial dinosaur' (p. 153) was a man of strong character and they chart clearly how he took a stand against what he considered to be the mistakes of his peers involved in Middle East 'kingmaking' including the 'dismal politicians' in London, Gertrude Bell, his colleague in Iraq, and Lawrence, whose myth Wilson never bought into.

A member of parliament during the inter-war years, Wilson's character was clear for all to see at the outbreak of World War Two when he volunteered as an RAF tail gunner at the age of 56 because he refused to 'live behind the rampart of the bodies of a million corpses'. He died for his principles over Dunkirk soon after.

Analogy is not the best kind of history but it has its uses and throughout this book the authors are always on the look out for parallels and lessons that can link the story they are telling to today's world. The 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on the US 'provides an apt epitaph for the life and deeds of Harry St. John Philby and the Kingdom he helped create' (p. 258). Lawrence's contribution on 'Irregular Warfare' to the 1929 edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* has an 'obvious resonance with America's travails in Iraq' (p. 199), while Judith Miller of *The New York Times* was 'playing the role of Flora Shaw' (p. 405) in building up the invasion of Iraq in the US media.

Unfortunately, they don't delve further into any of this. Similarly, in looking into Sir Mark Sykes and his lurid family history, the authors tell us that 'our own foraging suggests that the story is consistent' (p. 100). But we aren't informed what this foraging consisted of or what information was divined from it in either the text or the endnotes.

The final three chapters deal with American 'kingmakers' in the region – Kermit (Kim) Roosevelt, Miles Copeland and Paul Wolfowitz. Roosevelt, the grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, was a leading US player in early Cold War espionage in the Middle East, and the chapter on him provides the framework for a standard re-telling of the Mossadeq revolution in Iran and the successful Anglo-American overthrow of the Iranian nationalist leader (in Operation Ajax).

Roosevelt basked in the success of Operation Ajax, earning among other accolades, a bedside meeting with a sickly Winston Churchill in London, where the old man told him that if he had 'been a few years younger' he would have loved to work in Tehran under Roosevelt. This chapter captures well how the US very quickly stepped into Britain's shoes as the major western player in the region in the decade after the Second World War. There wasn't much the weary British could do about it and so they, in turn, grudgingly adapted to their own new role as junior partner in the region, handing Roosevelt, for example, a 'network of Mossadeq haters and Anglophiles' (p. 331) in Iran when they ceded the lead western role in that country to the US.

The chapter on Miles Copeland, described by the authors as 'the CIA's original political operative' at a time when 'political action' (p. 351) was a euphemism for covert operations, goes further by showing how the US adapted to their own new role overseeing the 'kingmaking' business. For example, whereas his British predecessors had gone after Emirs, Kings and tribal chiefs, Copeland focused his efforts on cultivating soldiers, journalists and businessmen across the region.

Copeland later recalled this as equivalent to 'innocent kids with new toys – and a licence to steal' (p. 349).

But in truth there was nothing childlike about what men like Copeland were empowered to do by their legendary spymasters Wild Bill Donovan, Allen Dulles and James Jesus Angleton, who though only gaining a brief mention here is probably the most fascinating, complex and influential figure in the history of Cold War espionage.

The final chapter takes us from the heady and almost forgotten world of Beirut hotel bars during the Cold War to the Pentagon in the wake of 9/11. This chapter on Paul Wolfowitz makes some good points, especially in regard to how he was influenced in his view of the power of democracy by witnessing first hand the transition from autocracy to democracy in the Philippines, Indonesia and Romania. But, for the most part, this chapter does what dozens, if not hundreds, of articles and books have done before – offer a superficial trawl through neo-con waters. We hear about his Jewish origins, his dad’s support for Zionism, his time spent studying under Albert Wohlstetter and Leo Strauss, his relationship with the Arab feminist Shaha Ali Riza and Iraqi exiles, as well as a whole host of major and minor American figures including Allan Bloom, Norman Podheretz, William Kristol and Abram Shulsky. What conclusion do they come to after going down this well-trodden path? ‘It was not a failure of will but a failure of imagination that caused failure in Iraq’ (p. 384).

Perhaps they are correct, but one can also make the opposite argument. The decision of the Bush administration to go to war in Iraq was the result of imagination, even revolutionary thinking. Deeply dissatisfied with the achievements of over half a century of US Middle East policy, which looked to do nothing more than bolster the status quo by propping up corrupt and cruel regimes across the region, men like Wolfowitz chose to break with the past and bet on the power of an idea – democracy. It was the failure of will, in particular the will to ensure that there was concrete planning for post-war Iraq, that resulted in the subsequent chaos.

But this aside, the Wolfowitz chapter adds nothing to this story of Middle East ‘kingmakers’. Like another recent book published by Norton, Michael Oren’s study of America and the Middle East, *Power Faith and Fantasy* (3), this would have been a better book, though not necessarily a bigger seller, if the authors had ended their study long before 9/11 or the invasion of Iraq. By adding on a superficial contemporary concluding chapter this otherwise engaging and, at times, captivating book loses much of its symmetry and, as John Buchan liked to remind his friend Winston Churchill, good history, like good architecture, needs symmetry.

Notes

1. Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914–1921* (London, 1956). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Elizabeth Monroe, ‘Review of Thieves in the Night’, *The Bell*, Vol. XIII, No. 4 January 1947, pp.71-75. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. M. Oren, *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present*, New York, London, W.W. Norton, 2007. The first six parts of Oren’s book present a detailed, and entertaining and informative account of US relations with the Middle East in all its aspects from mid-eighteenth century until the outbreak of World War Two. The final section which deals with American involvement in the region over the last 60 years is disjointed survey of American in Middle East in the contemporary period. One will find little more (and sometimes less) than the standard narrative account. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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