

Travellers in Arabia: British Explorers in Saudi Arabia
Edited by Eid Al Yahya; Stacey International, London/Al Turath Riyadh;
2006; 130pp.

Book Review
By Alan Munro

This handsomely produced volume was inspired by an exhibition of early photography of what is today the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, together with a series of lectures, which was held at the Saudi Arabian embassy in London in 2004. The book's editor, Eid Al Yahya, who has been studying for a doctorate at Exeter University, has brought together the talks given by three British personalities who have shared a deep familiarity with the Kingdom, its leadership and its people, as well as its geography.

Together these introductory essays, contributed by a diplomat, the late St. John Armitage; a biographer, H.V. Winstone; and an arabist academic, Leslie McLoughlin, relate the rich heritage of Britain's early fascination with Arabia and its culture from the mid-19th century and through the hundred years that followed. They present an absorbing story of adventurous travel, of hospitality and hardship, and of political intrigue too, as Britain and other western powers sought alliances within this isolated region that was destined soon to emerge as a crucial player on the international stage.

The editor's declared purpose however is to tell the story of Arabia and its early contacts with Britain in visual terms, through a carefully researched selection from the vivid sketches and pioneer photography produced by these early travellers, often in primitive circumstances. There are helpful biographical notes on each voyager, beginning with Palgrave and Doughty in the 1860's and 70's, the authors of monumental travel journals, followed by the lively watercolours from Lady Anne Blunt's intrepid journey across the dunes of the Nefud to the Al Rashid fortress of Ha'il in search of Arab bloodstock. Next came the series of (often conflicting) diplomatic and military missions undertaken by Leachman and Cheesman to King Abdul Aziz in Riyadh and by Lawrence to the Emir Faisal in the Hejaz, as well as by the redoubtable Gertrude Bell to Ha'il, amid the oriental sideshows of the First World War. These were the first visitors to bring with them the era of the camera, thus providing the splendid archive of historic images of Arabia and its traditional society, reproduced in this volume. The photographs taken by Captain Shakespear of King Abdul Aziz and members of his family, and of the Al Saud cohorts riding out to battle are cherished in the Kingdom today.

Other travellers helped to fill in the pictorial record during the 1920's and 30's, notably Harry (Abdullah) Philby, the controversial yet much esteemed British adviser to King Abdul Aziz, whose travels first brought the southern provinces as well as Mecca and Jedda under the lens, and the railway surveyor, Major Holt. The collection includes rare snapshots of Riyadh and of Jedda's old 'balad', taken during diplomatic forays by Gerald de Gaury and Sir George Rendel. The pictorial chronicle ends with a record of the romantic challenge of exploration presented by the Empty Quarter. The first European to cross these wastes, in the company of local bedouin, was Bertram Thomas in 1932 (to the chagrin of Philby who found himself beaten to the post). They were followed by the two spectacular journeys of Wilfred Thesiger in 1946 and '48, through Oman and Saudi Arabia to Abu Dhabi. Good maps show clearly the itineraries of each traveller.

This is a book for the table rather than the pocket. With its rich photography and background of notes and essays it provides a vivid and contrasting record of the scene across the Kingdom prior to impact of oil, seen through the eyes of British travellers and their cumbersome cameras. There is a record of the origins of those important links which continue to bring Saudi Arabia and Britain so close today.