Without Glory in Arabia - The British Retreat from Aden

By - Peter Hinchcliffe, John T Ducker & Maria Holt


Two spells of military service in Aden, 1965-66, and Oman, 1980-86, aided by countless visits to all the other Gulf States, confirmed that the ‘Calling of the Desert’ was truly ingrained in my system. This eventually led me to work for the Council for Arab British Understanding (CAABU) in recent years where I assisted Maria Holt – one of the co-authors of this 327 page book – by conducting a series of taped interviews with former Aden expatriates. This is the first of three reviews I will be writing on books that cover Aden’s diplomatic and military links with Britain over the last two centuries.

So – Without Glory in Arabia – I believe all AVA members’ knowledge of Aden will make this very detailed and comprehensive account of the years, months and days leading up to that inglorious departure in November 1967 very worthwhile reading. Much of the book is devoted to narratives obtained - either from taped interviews or personal entries by politicians, diplomats, servicemen, families, and most importantly with many invaluable reflections of the indigenous population – local Yemeni nationals. The content is wide ranging, truthful, detailed, and descriptive and covers many first-hand accounts of life in those twilight years - before and straight after the decision to leave was enacted.

No other review however can better the introduction in the book’s fly cover – to quote:-

“So, we left without glory but without disaster as highlighted by Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, the last High Commissioner of the Federation of South Arabia. In 1967, 139 years after their arrival in Aden, the British withdrew from the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Their departure was abrupt, messy and controversial.

Using important, previously unpublished material and original interviews with a range of individuals, both British and Yemeni, who lived through this defining period of colonial history, this book tells the story of the final few years of British rule in Aden and the neighbouring Eastern and Western Protectorates. Whilst some view British rule, on the whole, as beneficial to the local population, others insist that very little was achieved. Worse, Britain did not provide a structure of government constitution which met the conflicting needs of Aden and the Protectorate.

This illuminating book brilliantly sets the ‘scuttle’ – as the episode came to be known – in context with a thorough re-examination of the background against which the events of the 1960’s unfolded in this obscure backwater of the British Empire.”

The three authors are either highly accomplished diplomats or historians, all with long and deep rooted connections in Middle East politics.

For AVA readers it is very possible that you will have known one or more of the contributors of the articles or taped interviews, and memories will thus flood back. I would strongly recommend the book for the ‘coffee table’ to be picked up and read at will, in any order, a few pages here or there, or all at once – as your time allows.

Chris Morton (Major Retired, Malvern, Worcs)