

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard A. Jr., Lobban, Robert S. Kramer, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, eds. *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*. Lanham and London: Scarecrow Press, 2002. cviii + 396 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-4100-0.

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Historical Dictionary, Contemporary Record

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In the lengthy career of this reviewer I have seldom read an uncritical review of historical reference works for the simple reasons that they are never sufficiently comprehensive, requiring challenging choices by the author, and can never satisfy the specialty and favorite topics of the reviewer. I therefore choose to limit my comments to general questions rather than the nitpicking commonly and often unfairly employed for works of reference. The *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan* has had a long and un-spectacular evolution. The first *Historical Dictionary* was published by John Voll in 1978 and was only no. 17 in the series of African dictionaries (now numbering some eighty-six in numerous editions) under the general editorship of Jon Woronoff for the Scarecrow Press. Perhaps being an early effort explains its hopeless inadequacies in errors, entries, and organization. Another decade later Voll updated his original dictionary with the assistance of Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban and Richard Lobban, published by Scarecrow in 1992 and now no. 53 in the growing list of African country historical dictionaries. Time usually improves, and this was no exception, but this edition largely ignored the fifty years of Anglo-Egyptian rule in the Sudan. Another decade has come to pass, and the Lobbans have produced a third edition with the help of Robert S. Kramer. Not surprisingly, it is quite different from the editions of the past, now out-of-print.

This is not so much an historical as a contemporary record that the editors make quite clear in their preface.

“We have also devoted considerable attention to the necessary up-dating of recent history since 1978, especially highlighting the renewal of the civil war in 1983, the institution of the Shari’a law in the same year, the fall of Nimeiri in 1985, and up to the al-Bashir government that has ruled from 1898 to the present” (p. xvi). This reviewer cannot quarrel with that admirable objective, but the reader should have no illusion that this is an historical dictionary. Perhaps to emphasize that this volume is concerned with recent times, the authors begin with Islam and the Sudan in the fourteenth century, leaving the Sudan in antiquity to Richard Lobban’s *Historical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval Nubia* (2003). Few would question this division of labor, but in fact the historical entries in this volume are largely concerned with the Sudan in the twentieth century. Scholarly cynics of the Sudan may criticize the dearth of entries for the previous five centuries of the Sudanese past, but they cannot complain they were not forewarned for the price of \$98.00.

The contents of this volume (no. 85) follow the basic format of the Scarecrow Press series of African historical dictionaries beginning with a map or, in this volume, ten maps of dubious quality and questionable relevance. This is curious, for Richard Lobban is both an avid collector of maps and a cartographer, but the maps on provincial borders, peoples of the Sudan, and of the Southern Sudan are crude, incomplete, and inaccurate. The remaining seven “historical” maps are reprints of nineteenth-century maps, interesting artifacts but of little help to a bewildered reader. Matters improve with

the next section: chronology. Given their contemporary interest in the Independent Sudan, it makes sense only to list the high points of the past including the Turkiya, Mahdiya, and Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (pp. xxxv-xlvi). The Independent Sudan, however, gets twenty-nine pages (pp. xlvi-lxxiv) that are recorded not just in years but in months. This is a very valuable contribution, for the past half century of the independent Sudan has been characterized by chaos and confusion so that this detailed chronology not only fulfills the contemporary mission of the authors, but is a valuable assist to any researcher on the recent Sudanese past.

Each historical volume in the series has an introduction to encapsulate the country's history. This section is organized into a perfunctory historical account, some twelve pages that embrace the Sudanese past from ancient times to independence in 1956 with useful separate accounts of geography and population. In keeping with the objective of the authors, the remainder is an account of the Post-Independence Sudan, including Islamist Rule (1989-) and a succinct account of the Sudan economy, but largely from a single source, T. Niblock, *Class and Power in the Sudan* (1987). Seventeen pages of illustrations follow which is unusual in historical dictionaries from Scarecrow Press and, although attractive, they are unnecessary and costly in an already expensive work of reference. The reader/researcher now comes to the heart of the matter: the dictionary.

From the personal experience of this reviewer, compiling an historical dictionary is a dangerous business in which you can never satisfy everyone, maintain factual precision over hundreds of entries, and defend your selection of entries against the pretentious demands of your reviewers as to why their favorite topic was not included.

There are 321 pages of entries whose selection has been quite rightly determined by the objectives of the authors. Consequently, there are relatively few entries concerning the Sudanese before the twentieth century. The Lobbans have corrected one of the principal criticisms of the second edition (no. 53, 1992) by including entries on some of the prominent British figures of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. The real strength of this dictionary is the numerous entries of prominent Sudanese, both northerners and southerners, and topics of the post-independence period and particularly since the renewal of the Sudan civil war in 1983. This is not an easy task, for it is often difficult to find accurate biographical information on contemporary individuals, particularly southern Sudanese whose birth and rearing are often obscure. Moreover, they have wisely included many topical subjects, in distinction to biographical, that will be useful to the many interested in the contemporary Sudan.

The *Dictionary* concludes with an appendix including lists of rulers since the Funj, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement, and in keeping with the Internet, Sudan-related web sites. Perhaps the single greatest strength of the Scarecrow Press historical dictionary series has been the bibliographies for each country, and this Sudan volume is no exception. There is no dearth of bibliographies on the Sudan, but the authors have been very helpful to the researcher by breaking the bibliography into topics—General, Cultural, Scientific, Social Anthropology, Historical, Political, Economic—with sub-headings under each category.

Certainly, all reference libraries as well as large general ones will require this volume, that is an improvement on its predecessors, and bibliophile scholars of the Sudan for their personal libraries despite the price.

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