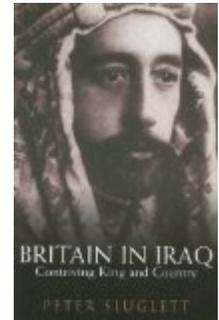


Peter Sluglett. *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 318 pp. \$24.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-14201-4.



Reviewed by Priya Satia

Published on H-Albion (February, 2008)

The current war in Iraq has had many ironic consequences, the least sordid being perhaps the belated interest in Iraq's history. As Peter Sluglett confesses in the opening pages of the reissue of his thirty-year-old classic, *Britain in Iraq*, his happiness about the book's new lease of life is severely undercut by his awareness of its unhappy cause. (One at once anticipates and dreads a similar resurrection of long-neglected works on Iranian history in the near future.) While the continued obscurity of important historical texts underscores the ignorance guiding the prosecution of American war and diplomacy in the Middle East, the irony lies as much in the pedagogue's self-defeatist awareness that if only such books had been read in the halls of power earlier, they would have remained neatly irrelevant to our wider political life.

That said, the timely reissue of Sluglett's book is an opportunity to comment on scholarship as much as politics, and that is, happily, a notably less pathetic story. Sluglett's original 1976 edition has long been the definitive text on the period of the British mandate in Iraq, from World War I to

1932. Initially published by the Ithaca Press for the Middle East Centre at St. Antony's College in Oxford, the book provides the most complete and meticulous narrative of the formation of mandate policy in the tight space framed by British imperial interests and the political survival of its local collaborators, the Baghdadi political clique centered on King Faysal. The book offers "an assessment of Anglo-Iraqi relations and of Britain's role in Iraqi affairs during the period of the British occupation and mandate" with a view to making sense of "developments in both pre- and post-revolutionary Iraq" (p. xv). It provides an engaging and lucid portrait of the complex negotiations, politics, and imperial bureaucracy at the heart of the story. The diplomatic and domestic political pressures on local officials, their supervisors, the multiple imperial centers--Sluglett keeps all the pieces in play. The ad hoc and contingent nature of this chapter of imperial history is pressed home, with the light touch of a humane and wise chronicler. Sluglett presents with clarity and patience the intricacies of the entangled questions of oil, borders, and state finances. Five chronological chapters detailing the evolution of mandate policy

are followed by three thematically focused chapters on land policy, defense, and education. Appendices on Shi'i politics and tenurial arrangements in the single province of Amara provide further close grain.

Sluglett's main argument is that the circumstances of the mandate locked Britain and the Sunni ruling clique into a relationship of interdependence that lasted through 1958. It is an instructive insight, and the book details the working of that relationship and the odd and mostly unfortunate dividends it paid in central matters of government, including defense, education, land revenue, minority rights, and so on. This argument remains in tension with another red thread running through the book: the British effort to devise institutions through which they could exercise power discreetly enough to convince Iraqis and the world of Iraq's independence despite Britain's actual control. The end of the mandate in 1932 was thus a momentous non-event in Sluglett's shrewd assessment, since little changed in substance until the revolution of 1958. In 1976, this was a revisionist view of a mandatory government that many were still holding up as an exemplary experiment in international development.

In 2007, however, the very coupling of the "interdependence" analytical framework with the book's anticolonial politics produces a peculiar schizophrenia: the crescendoing pathos of the theme of concealed imperial power at times sits awkwardly with a framework that implies a moral equivalence between the British and the Iraqi ruling cliques. It is a framework that tends to sweep as much history under the musty carpet of high politics as it airs in the fresh light of 1970s radicalism. What emerges is a picture of a venal, opportunistic cabal of Iraqi politicians challenging the entirely natural presumptions of the British imperial state. Take the depiction of King Faysal's position: early on, Sluglett explains that Faysal's problem was that he was dependent on Britain but had to "appear to oppose the most de-

meaning aspects of British control" (p. 42). However, this summarizing statement writes out a score of facts revealed on subsequent pages detailing Faysal's actual, and not merely politically calculated, criticism of British rule; his enduring confusion about the extent of his liberty; and his repeated efforts to interfere with what he increasingly recognized as British imperial designs on his adopted country. In other words, in many instances, he *really did* resist British demands and was not merely "forced ... into the position of having to seem to resist British demands" (p. 49). The interdependence argument makes the Iraqi government and British state appear equal partners in an illusion perpetrated on the rest of Iraq, while the facts of Sluglett's story suggest that the Iraqi government played politics with considerably greater faith than its British counterparts: when asked to visit Europe in 1927, Faysal assumed he was being summoned to finally receive the gift of full independence, but, in fact, the invitation was merely a ploy to get him out of Baghdad and arrest his interference with British objectives. A measure of the stress under which this inchoate monarchy was struggling is provided by the 1929 suicide of Prime Minister 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa'dun, gesturing at a decidedly more sinister politics of empire than "interdependence" can allow.

If, as Sluglett explains, Britain was obstinate about safeguarding its interests and the Iraqi government equally persistent about obtaining "'true' independence" (pp. 108, 119), these are certainly not ethically equivalent objectives. To admit as much is not to excuse the many crimes and failures of the Iraqi government but to attempt to better understand the kind of political context in which such failed, failing, or doomed-to-fail colonial and postcolonial states evolve. Stubbornness, however unproductive, can be admirable in some circumstances and indefensible in others. If the British were bent on preserving their imperial air route, oil fields, Royal Air Force training ground, prestige, and investments, there is surely cause to

consider the legitimacy of this objective vis-à-vis the Iraqi government's foolhardy attempts to appear independent of the empire that had created it and foster a real sense of "national solidarity" (pp. 63-64). It was not the Iraqi government's idiosyncratic "weaknesses" that caused it to fail but its very nature as the spawn of indirect rule (p. 64). In short, there is analytical room here for considering structural causes—collaboration, indirect rule, anticolonialism—rather than pointing at individual Iraqi politicians' taste for acquiring land and tax exemptions. (If anything, the British government's imposition of iniquitous and extractive financial obligations on Iraq, here painted as the "natural" pursuit of interests [p. 160], merits even greater condemnation on the counts of greed and venality.) The book's analysis of minority and defense policy, in particular, is marred by finger-pointing at an Iraqi government that seems frequently to be elided with the machinery of the Iraqi state, which it neither created nor controlled. In the end, if most Iraqis were losers, as Sluglett sympathetically concludes, the blame for their massive suffering surely does not lie equally on the shoulders of the ruling clique and the British; the one may have struggled vainly against leviathan, but the other *was* leviathan.

The book's organization tends to amplify the political dissonance produced by its analytical framework. In the blow-by-blow account of mandate policy in the first five chapters, the Iraqi position, like the British, is represented as a product of the naked calculation of political interest; but the brutality, exploitation, and injustices revealed in the final three thematic chapters on revenue policy, security, and education belie such evenhandedness. For instance, early references to the Iraqi government's revenue liabilities are cast in an entirely different light in the later chapters' depiction of the oppressive tax regime and violent methods of collection put in place by the British—although here, too, Sluglett emphasizes that this ugly end was the unintended consequence of misguided British policy rather than the inevitable re-

sult of destructive processes deliberately set in motion by a self-interested imperial state; if anyone was culpable, it was, again, the Iraqi government. Part of the problem lies in the obscurity of the moment in which those processes were put in motion—the wartime occupation. Although the book purports to start in 1914, the conquest of Iraq receives short shrift. But, in fact, the exacting taxation system, the ecological changes wrought by "development" of the river system, and the violent postwar rebellion (which barely appears until p. 147) were all shaped by the exigencies of war. A more defined portrait of that era might have helped readers, and Sluglett, make better sense of Iraqi attitudes toward the British presence. Indeed, it is only in one brief moment near the end of the chronological account that Sluglett mentions British fears of tribal rebellion dating from the 1920 experience as a guiding principle in policymaking, but, in fact, that fear is central to understanding the history of the entire decade.

In the end, from the supposedly objective analysis of interdependent political interests emerges a portrait skewed in a surprising direction for a book so clearly anticolonial in its political commitments: the sins of the British state are the sins of omission and unintended consequences; the sins of the Iraqi government are ... sins. The trouble is that the book's politics are at odds with its traditional methodology. This failing was not only understandable in 1976 but imparted an avant-garde feel to the entire enterprise, as did the old rough-hewn typeface. But, in 2007, the uncritical use of British sources to represent Iraqi perceptions jars—especially when it is done with a view to making an argument about interdependence that might have been agreeable enough to some contemporary British officials. One wishes the revised text might have excised the traces of an era less sensitive to the constraints of working from an imperial archive (however sympathetic to colonial peoples), such as uncritical reproduction of British assessments of endemic "intertribal skirmishing," a people " 'naturally lawless and

averse to paying taxes," and insincere Iraqi nationalism and Kurdish solidarity (pp. 152, 157).

For 1976, Sluglett did more than his share, and his book remains *the* indispensable, finely grained account of policy in mandatory Iraq. He gestured at a new type of imperialism in the making in Iraq, one that traded formal and even indirect control for something more discreetly menacing and that dispensed with the civilizing mission just when that mission had reached its apotheosis as the legitimate task of international institutions like the League of Nations. While outlining the contours of this new type of empire and the circumstances that made it possible, he stopped short of naming it or identifying it as the unfolding of a particular historical process. But, what Sluglett does leave us with is an indelible impression of the contingent nature of much of what occurred in Iraq, and it is this that keeps his a deeply human story, despite its focus on policy.

In the end, *Britain in Iraq* at once corrects the old tale of the altruistic mandate and exposes the limits of the genre of high political history, the methodological impasse it could not bridge as anticolonial politics began to leave their mark on the writing of history. A painstaking focus on policy tends to obscure the operation of power itself. Unveiling it requires a sense of the larger political context—the historical process at work—and an understanding of the evolution of state practice. All this tends to raise the broader question, Why *has* the history of the British Middle East focused so closely on the realm of high politics? Some of this is certainly the result of archival access and training. But, some of it is the product of the history itself: the hiving off of an exalted, elite realm of foreign policymaking in precisely the era that modern democracy came into its own and the Middle East became formally colonized by Europe.[1] In short, as the era of democratic nation-states came into its own, so too did a new style of imperialism that relied on the discreet diplomatic exchanges and collaboration of elites. To tell the history of

twentieth-century empires as a history of high politics is to remain locked within that history; it is time to step out and observe the cultural, economic, political, and social scaffolding of the seemingly equally cynical machinations of the diplomatic stratosphere.

Note

[1]. For more on this, see my *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Partha Chatterjee has recently made a similar argument with respect to twentieth-century imperialism in general in Partha Chatterjee, "The Black Hole of Empire" (presidential lecture, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA, November 7, 2007).

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Citation: Priya Satia. Review of Sluglett, Peter. *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

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