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It would be impossible to publish a contemporary account of the Arab in the desert, but it was still possible in 1949, when Harold R. P. Dickson first published this volume, now reprinted for libraries by Routledge. Born in Beirut in 1881, Dickson served as a British political agent after 1920 in Bahrain, Iran, and Kuwait, later working for the Kuwait Oil Company and living in Kuwait until his death in 1959. His personal experience among both Bedouins and townsmen rivals that of his 19th century counterparts, as illustrated by the rich ethnographic detail in this text. *The Arab of the Desert* provides more than a glimpse into Gulf society before oil wealth forever changed the cultural and physical landscape of the region. It provides a descriptive account by an author who confessed his shortcomings as a writer. Possessing neither the literary prowess of Doughty nor the controversial style of Burton, Dickson nonetheless penned an altogether invaluable volume. Here, the reader will find an account of virtually every aspect of traditional heritage, a heritage that is now being reinvented through an oil-wealth lens but that has long since passed away in reality.

Dickson was literally nursed on the Middle East, both as a child in Beirut and through his lifelong residence in the region. His book reflects his unstinting admiration for Kuwait's Shaykh Mubarak Al Sabah, characterized as "pre-eminent among Arabia's rulers" and the Saudi king Abdul Aziz, whom Dickson cites as "one of the most remarkable personalities living today" (p. 33). The book was dedicated to the then-current ruler of Kuwait, Shaykh Ahmad Al Jabir Al Sabah, who is praised as a "staunch supporter of Great Britain" (p. 5). The range of topics is encyclopedic, as one might expect of a text of over 664 pages, which includes numerous illustrations, photographs, appendices, a glossary, and an index. It appears that most, if not all, the information was personally collected by Dickson and his wife, Violet, both of whom were fluent in Arabic; there is no bibliography, nor is there comparison to what other British enthusiasts wrote.

The narrative is above all personal, recounting people met and places visited. Although not trained as an anthropologist, Dickson practiced participant observation. "My descriptions of such things as the daily round of a Bedawin family, and how they water their camels, horses, sheep, etc., are therefore based on actual experience," he writes (p. 29). "I would watch their doings for days at a time, and supplement my observations by perpetually asking questions" (p. 29). The arrangement of the 45 chapters is haphazard, but the text covers just about every aspect of Bedouin life in Kuwait in the 1920s and 1930s before development changed the lives of Bedouins forever. The first part of the book starts with descriptions of the pastoral nomadic cycle, the tent and its furnishings, the social and family system, issues of "Arab [honour]," and a short section on the Islamic faith. Dickson admires Bedouin "piety and resignation to the will of God" (p. 182), but he provides few details on Bedouin beliefs apart from noting how punctilious they are in their five daily prayers. He also describes the local beliefs in witchcraft and superstitions.

Part Two starts with food and hospitality. "The poor Badawin," he writes, "and the great majority of Badawin are poor, get one meal a day consisting of dates and camel's milk, with a very occasional dish of plain rice or a piece of bread" (p. 189). He describes the main types of dishes for townspeople and the "better-class semi-nomad tribesman," providing the names and expressions used. The Bedawin he knew did not smoke, which he attributes to the Wahhabi influence. The serendipity in the narrative can be seen in a discussion of town prostitutes

immediately after an account of the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are expected to make at least once. "In Kuwait," he notes, "the prostitute quarter is in the southern and south-westerly part of the town, facing the desert, and of course it is only talked about with bated breath" (p. 244). There is a wealth of folklore recorded in the text, including proverbs, stories, and riddles. Dickson even met a cousin of one of the explorer Philby's desert guides, who related how once, Philby was incensed that a camel would not give him milk. Oddly, Dickson does not record any Bedouin poetry, which he surely must have heard, apart from a few women's songs.

There is much gossip in his account, including a story about Shaykh Mubarak of Kuwait and his servant, who was known to have amorous affairs. As long as these "peccadilloes" were discreet, "Mubarak, like most Arabs, forgave a man who, to use the English expression, 'got drunk like a gentleman'" (p. 310). But when the servant was caught in *flagrante delicto* with a fisherman's wife, Mubarak was livid at the shame the servant brought on him and promptly blew the man's brains out. The Bedouin that Dickson knew considered raiding to be "the breath of life," and Dickson suggested that preventing them from raiding would make them "the most melancholy of men" (p. 341). There is a detailed account of Bedouin war making, including the Ikhwan attacks, which "unpardonably butchered numbers of women and children" (p. 348). At the time of his writing, Dickson thought that such violent extremism had been brought under control by Ibn Saud and that the old Arab chivalry had been reasserted. Not surprisingly, a large section of the book is devoted to camels and horses, as well as falconry. Dickson does not ignore the economy of the Kuwaiti coast, describing pearl diving and fishing. The chapter on boat building illustrates the various kinds of local dhows and how they are made.

The reader should not avoid the 33 appendices, which are a hodgepodge of items about tribal names, the Ramadan feast, elite camels, insects, jerboas, fish, sailing boats, obituaries, tattoo markings, and even Himyaritic inscriptions. A shaykh of the Mutair tribe once told Dickson about three desert plants that when smoked in a pipe could combat syphilis (p. 611). There is even a note about the way to confine ants to a nest by using Solomon's magic circle, although food had to be given to the imprisoned ants twice a day. The glossary is quite extensive, although it can be confusing if the reader does not know Arabic due to the simplistic transliteration. At times, the translations are bizarre, such as translating 'Alim' as "priest"; translations also can be quite specific, such as "line of hair behind horse's ear" for "Fattalah." There are illustrations of objects throughout the text, along with several pages of photographs, appearing just before the index, of camel litters and jewelry.

All in all, Dickson's text is as much a commentary on a specific British attitude in an area at the edge of British colonial interests as it is a documentation of Bedouin life. This is very much a first-person text, with the author present throughout. It illustrates the Kuwait Dickson had the luck to see and enjoy, in which Bedouins lived pristinely and close to nature. We learn that he "could never fancy locusts much" although his wife and daughter "revelled in them" (p. 454). This text is not "Orientalist"—in the sense that Edward Said suggested, in which West is privileged over the East. Rather, *The Arab of the Desert* is simply an account of life in the desert presented through the admiring eyes of an English passerby who clearly appreciated what he encountered. In this sense, this text successfully provides a glimpse of what is no longer observable.

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