

ARABIA THRICE OVER LIGHTLY

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Body

THE KINGDOM By Robert Lacey. Illustrated. 631 pp. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. \$19.95.

THE HOUSE OF SAUD The Rise and Rule of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World. By David Holden and Richard Johns. Illustrated. 569 pp. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. \$19.95.

THE NEW ARABIANS By Peter Mansfield. Illustrated. 274 pp. Chicago: J.G. Ferguson Publishing Co. Distributed by Doubleday. \$14.95. Daniel Pipes reviews three books on Saudi Arabia

IN 1900, central Arabia was sparsely inhabited, unrelentingly poor and isolated. Useless to the Europeans, most of the peninsula escaped colonization and remained one of the very few regions of the world almost untouched by Western influences. Then, as everyone knows, came oil. The Saudis sold their first concession in 1923, and the first producing well was drilled in 1938; within a few years, annual revenues from petroleum topped \$1 million. The \$1 billion mark was passed in 1970, the \$100 billion mark in 1980. Life in Saudi Arabia was transformed by the effects of this income - spectacular fortunes, rapid economic development, the presence of foreign labor, international clout - perhaps more radically than life had been transformed anywhere else at any time in human experience.

The drama of the oil bonanza has almost obscured the history of political developments in central Arabia - a pity, for it is the story of a family that raised itself from oblivion to extraordinary power in two generations, and not by virtue of oil revenues alone. As their titles imply, both "The Kingdom" and "The House of Saud" focus on the ruling dynasty in Saudi Arabia, the Saud family, whose history goes back to 1744, when an ancestor joined forces with the leader of the Wahhabi religious movement. Together, Saudi organization and Wahhabi doctrines created two kingdoms, both of which were destroyed within a few decades. By the time Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd ar-Rahman ibn Faisal as-Saud (often known in the West as Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud) was a young man in the 1890's, his family had lost everything, even the ancestral home, Riyadh. In January 1902, he began his career of conquest by leading 60 men to reclaim Riyadh.

Both Mr. Lacey and Messrs. Holden and Johns take up the story there. From this small base, over a period of 32 years, Abd al-Aziz hammered together a vast desert empire, today's Kingdom of Saudia Arabia. He created a single state stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and then held on to it, something no one had ever done before. He excelled as a diplomat, and both books savor one aspect of his political flair that has enduring interest and importance: To a remarkable extent, he used marriage as a diplomatic instrument, making his own bed the focus of efforts to bind the territories he conquered. Taking maximum advantage of a Moslem man's right to have four wives at a time and to divorce them at will, he married some 300 women and had 45 recognized sons by at least 22 mothers. In Mr. Lacey's words, he built a kingdom "with a sword of steel and a sword of flesh."

Both books show how, by the time of his death in 1953, Abd al-Aziz was a relic from a distant age and how much the Saudi Government reflected this fact. Abd al-Aziz was the State, and his personal advisers and close relatives made up its administration. There were no Government functions other than royal assemblies, and palaces were the only state buildings. The king personally distributed the Government's funds, usually in lavish 1001-nights style,

Sam Westrop

ARABIA THRICE OVER LIGHTLY

from sacks of gold coins. Everything changed during the next decades. Mr. Lacey shows how a bureaucracy grew, committees replaced patrimonial rule, and massive social programs took the place of gold coins. Yet to this day, the broad lines of Saudi institutions and policies follow those established by Abd al-Aziz. Two examples: the most sensitive political and military positions in the kingdom are still occupied by royal family members, and the Saudi position in world affairs and their tradition of attempting to remain aloof from intra-Arab quarrels remain similar to what they were under Abd al-Aziz.

"THE KINGDOM" and "The House of Saud" cover the same topic, Saudi dynastic history from the capture of Riyadh in 1902 to the siege of Mecca in 1979. Both written by British journalists, the books are nearly identical in length and are addressed to the same general audience. Mr. Lacey, who has four books to his credit on the monarchs and aristocrats of Britain, came fresh to this topic. He lived for several years in Saudi Arabia, apparently talked to everyone who knows anything about the dynasty, went through the Foreign Office records in London and read through enough books and articles to fill an 18-page bibliography. Yet for all his effort, he has added little to our knowledge of the Saudi dynasty. He does supply some new information (notably concerning who did what to whom during the deposition of King Saud, Abd al-Aziz's son, in 1964), but for the most part he repeats well-worn anecdotes and events from such renowned writers on Saudi Arabia as T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell and Harry St. John Philby. Indeed, Mr. Lacey sticks so close to the standard version of Saudi history that much of this book repeats what is already available elsewhere - for example, in David Howarth's 1964 biography of Abd al-Aziz, "The Desert King."

Mr. Holden, chief foreign correspondent for The Sunday Times of London, began writing "The House of Saud" in late 1976 and got through a quarter of the book before being mysteriously murdered in Cairo in December 1977. Richard Johns of The Financial Times finished the book (except for one chapter on the 1979 Meccan siege, by James Buchan, also of The Financial Times). Mr. Holden's section, on Abd al-Aziz, is perfunctory, repeating the standard version found in Mr. Lacey's book. But Mr. Johns does a superior job, especially as he approaches the present, and particularly given how little we know about internal Saudi politics. In an understated way (only three pages of bibliography, no record of interviews), he provides the best and fullest journalistic account of Arabia during the past 15 years. He explains tensions in the royal family over the succession problem, its attitudes towards oil wealth, its diplomatic objectives and its vulnerabilities. As befits his position on a business newspaper, Mr. Johns does especially well in recounting the intricacies of oil negotiations through the 1970's.

MR. JOHNS makes an effort to treat the Saudi dynasty in an objective fashion, criticizing as well as praising. This is no longer standard practice, unfortunately, for oil money has had an insidious effect, prompting many authors to avoid writing anything that might offend the leaders of Arab states. Indeed, this is exactly the problem with Peter Mansfield's "The New Arabians."

Perhaps the best thing about this book is the author's forthright avowal of his sponsorship: "The idea for this book was suggested by Bechtel Power Corporation, the company which has played a key role in the extraordinary economic development of modern Arabia, and it was Bechtel which made it possible for me to write it." Mr. Mansfield does not strive for objectivity; "The New Arabians" is company propaganda, the sort of book Bechtel Corporation would find suitable for Christmas gifts.

THE author has been writing about the Middle East for a quarter century and knows the area well. If he were not writing an apologia, he could probably have produced a fine introduction to the Arabian states on the Persian Gulf, which is his attempt here. As it is, the tone of the book is irritatingly upbeat: Problems exist to be solved; even if leaders make mistakes, all ends well; the future is bright. The reader cannot help coming away from "The New Arabians" with a glow of good will and optimism.

Whenever possible, Mr. Mansfield pleases his sponsors. He uses the ingratiating term "Arab Gulf" for that body of water long known in English as the "Persian Gulf," because the Arab states prefer it (and who cares any more what the Iranians want). He calls Britain and the United States "responsible for Israel's existence," implying that, as a relic of the colonial age, Israel will vanish when protection from the great powers ends. Mr. Mansfield goes out of his way to justify nearly every act by the Saudi leadership, be it King Abd al-Aziz's sexual obsessions or his activities during World War II. His cheery justification of the oil states' refusal to grant citizenship to the resident foreigners

ARABIA THRICE OVER LIGHTLY

who built them up ("From the beginning, all the Gulf oil states showed their determination not to allow their national personality to be swamped by the new immigrants") neatly obscures the fact that foreign laborers earn lower wages, are ineligible for most social services, lack a political voice and are usually thrown out when too old to work.

Still, all these books, even Mr. Mansfield's, contain much information about Arabia; all of them are well written and timely. Yet something is missing; something is flawed in all of them. It may be that none of the five authors appears to know the Arabic language. Imagine Mr. Lacey's Arabian counterpart living in the United States for several years, researching a study on American politics without knowing English. Would this deficiency not irreparably undermine his work? Similarly, ignorance of Arabic means being restricted to very partial sources on Saudi dynastic history, it means having no access to the daily newspapers, and it relegates these writers to a limbo of vague incomprehension whenever they visit Arabia. Readable and interesting these books may be, but serious they are not.

Graphic

Illustrations: drawing

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