

Roger Hardy. *The Poisoned Well: Empire and Its Legacy in the Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 280 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-062320-3.

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The back flap of Roger Hardy's *The Poisoned Well: Empire and Its Legacy in the Middle East* informs us that he "worked for more than twenty years as a Middle East analyst with the BBC World Service." More modestly, the author admits in his introduction that "the origins of this book go back to the early 1990s when, as a journalist with the BBC World Service, I made a radio series called 'The Making of the Middle East; there were eventually ten programmes" (p. 3). What we have here is a highly narrativized text, which should prove helpful to H-Diplo list subscribers who teach introductory "History of the Modern Middle East" courses.

This text offers what others do not. A generation of our predecessors assigned Marshall Hodgson's 1977 *The Venture of Islam* (as well as other works, all published posthumously) to those enrolled in their introductory courses. Hodgson's insights had a certain wry charm: in *Rethinking World History* (1993), he wrote: "in the sixteenth century of our era, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim" (p. 97). Many professors note that introductory-level students found this level of whimsy to be challenging; one senior colleague recounted it was "a disaster, to assign a reading from that particular text on a warm spring afternoon, while the sound of lawnmowers

wafted in through open windows" (personal communication).

More recently, some instructors assign one of the editions William Cleveland's *A History of the Modern Middle East* (1968) to students enrolled in similar courses. Among those of us who choose to assign Cleveland, some struggle with this particular text's solid *étatisme* (at the expense of social history, histories of the postcolony, etc.). In contrast, Hardy's *The Poisoned Well* promises instructors a level of historiographic engagement, and students the promise of an easy read—with emplotment, overlapping chronology, and close readings of primary sources interspersed throughout the text. Although Hardy's chronological footprint is somewhat narrower than Cleveland's (which begins with the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* period); that said, his geographic scope is more inclusive than Cleveland's (which neglects North Africa west of Egypt). While Hardy manages to avoid those in-text references to historiography that annoy undergraduates (and some graduate students as well), it is clear that this is the work of someone who has been reading broadly for a sustained period of time.

Hardy's introduction establishes a chronology (World War I to the present), thematic ("the crises and conflicts of today's Middle East are rooted in the colonial past," p. 1), and geographic inclusion

(he uses the Arab League's "Gulf to the ocean" geography, against persistent calls for unification that characterize Arab nationalism). In the introduction, Hardy introduces his "country-by-country" approach, which acknowledges differences in political processes across the region. As Hardy writes, "statehood might be achieved through contraction (Turkey) or through expansion (Saudi Arabia); it might involve greater violence (Algeria) or be largely peaceful (Jordan); it might be a straight fight between an indigenous people and a colonial power (as in Egypt)—or involve a third party with demands of its own (the *colons* in Algeria, the Zionist settlers in Palestine)" (p. 3).

The ten chapters that follow the introduction overlap chronologically. Chapter 1 addresses a period of the history of republican Turkey stretching from 1919 until 1938, with flashbacks to the nineteenth-century *tanzimat*. Chapter 2 begins in 1926 and follows the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and ARAMCO through to 1945. Chapter 3 opens with Shukri al-Quwatly's letter to Winston Churchill (1945) and ends with the French military withdrawal from Beirut, addressing the League of Nations mandates and uprisings against them through a series of flashbacks. Chapter 4 opens with Allenby's entrance into Jerusalem in 1917 and closes with Cunningham's departure from that same city in 1948. Chapter 5 begins with a 1921 meeting between Abdullah (of the Hashemite family) and Winston Churchill (UK colonial secretary), ending with Abdullah's assassination in 1951.

Each of these chapters draws on primary sources, particularly personal stories. References to Halidé Edib's biography unify chapter 1, and excerpts from the writings of Dutch consul in Jeddah Daniel van der Meulen are found throughout chapter 2. Chapter 3 features travel notes from Bennett Doty (born in Alabama, served the French Foreign Legion in Syria) and Alice Poulleau (French writer and painter, also in Syria). Chapter 4 follows Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Jabra Ibrahim

Jabra (among others), as formation of the State of Israel dispersed Palestinian communities. In chapter 5, Abdullah's biography is twinned with that of John Glubb.

Since the chapters overlap one another in chronology, they can readily be taught out of sequence, interspersed with outside materials. Chapter 6 addresses the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and Iranian efforts to nationalize it in 1953; chapter 7 returns to the pre-World War I period to acknowledge the Dinshawai massacre in Egypt, traces the 1919 revolution and constitutional movement, and concludes with the 1956 Suez war. Chapter 8 follows the July 14, 1958, revolution in Iraq, with a chronology of the Hashemite monarchy since World War I relayed in a series of flashbacks. Chapter 9 traces the French occupation of Algeria from 1830 until national liberation in 1962. Finally, chapter 10 acknowledges Aden as "the first Arab territory the British acquired, and virtually the last it relinquished" (p. 183).

Regarding each chapter's analytic standard, I read "Revolution on the Tigris" closely, since my own expertise regards Hashemite Iraq. Chapter 8 is not cliché-free: according to Hardy, Iraq's population was a "complex tapestry" (pp. 49 and 145). Individuals identified by name on the first five pages include (in alphabetical order) Abdullah, Arnold Wilson, Dick Doughty-Wylie, Faisal, Gertrude Bell (*khatoun*, yes; allegations regarding suicide, no), Hajji Naji, Isaac Bell, Jafar al-Askari, Lamia Gailani, Nuri al-Said, Percy Cox, Sati al-Husri, Stanley Maud, Sultan Abdul-Hamid, and Wallace Lyon—a tellingly Anglophone crowd. According to Hardy, the Anglo-Iraq war of 1941 was "a close-run thing" (p. 157); "the Suez crisis of 1956 marked the beginning of the end of British hegemony in the Middle East" (p. 161). The Hashemite union, joining Iraq with Jordan (1958), does not merit mention. Neither "Abdul Karim Qassem" (under any recognizable transliteration) nor "Abdul Salam Amer" appears in the index.

In general, Hardy isn't plowing ground that Cleveland has not already trod. Hardy's chapter 8 closely tracks Cleveland's chapter 16. Where Hardy wrote "complex tapestry," Cleveland wrote "complex composition"; both texts fail to mention the Hashemite union between Iraq and Jordan. "Abdul Salam Amer" does not appear in either index. There are exceptions. In keeping with his thematic ("crises and conflicts rooted in the colonial past"), Hardy has built on Cleveland's text by acknowledging the significance of the Anglo-Iraq war (1941) and the Suez crisis (1956) to that 14 Tammuz revolution. That said, the materialist analysis present in Cleveland's text (sharecropping tenants, uneven distribution of landholdings, social reform) leaves no trace in Hardy's chapter.

Hardy acknowledges several universities that hosted him as a visiting researcher or provided other forms of support for this project: the University of Oxford, the Centre for International Studies and St Antony's College, King's College, the London School of Economics, and the School of Oriental and African Studies. Oxford University Press is to be congratulated for picking this title up for their list from Hurst Publishers (originally released during 2014). The press produced this book lavishly, with 33 black-and-white illustrations as well as 269 pages of back matter consisting of an epilogue, endnotes, acknowledgements, a bibliography, a list of *dramatis personae*, and an index.

As it happens, we are in the midst of renewed appreciation for the scope of Hodgson's vision, as evinced by a contemplative appreciation in the pages of the *New York Times*, Steve Tamari's article in *New Global Studies*, and Bruce Lawrence's assertion that "Marshall Hodgson was both a genius and a visionary." [1] While several scholars credit *Venture of Islam* with "an initiation into the complex and diverse contours of a sprawling medieval civilization," it remains to be seen whether *The Poisoned Well* is the work of "a genius and a

visionary," as well as whether it will enjoy a similar impact on a next generation. [2]

Notes

[1]. Lydia Kiesling, "Letter of Recommendation: The Life of Marshall Hodgson," *New York Times*, October 6, 2016; Steve Tamari, "The Venture of Marshall Hodgson: Visionary Historian of Islam and the World," *New Global Studies* 9, no. 1 (2015): 73-87; and Bruce Lawrence, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 11, 2014.

[2]. Elizabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan, eds., *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

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